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Conceptualisation of Forest Tourism: The Kočevsko Case Study

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This paper presents the definition of forest tourism and three varieties of forest tourism activities. An empirical study was conducted to examine the perception of forest tourism and forest activities in the case study of the Kočevsko forest in Slovenia. The triangulation approach consisted of a survey among Slovenian tourists, interviews with tourism stakeholders, and content analysis of promotional elements of the Kočevsko destination. The data showed that tourists find forest destinations interesting, safe, unspoiled, and suitable for young people and families. They describe forest tourism with the words 'bear', 'forest', and 'nature'. The respondents mostly prefer outdoor forest activities, wildlife observation slightly less, and lastly the relaxation options. The knowledge gained could help forest destinations to develop their products and adopt the appropriate customer approach.

Keywords: forest tourism, nature-based tourism, destination management, wildlife, outdoor recreation, forest relaxation



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Introduction

While urban tourism is forecasted to grow (Aall & Koens, 2019), nature is still an essential part of the tourism offer. And one of the most appealing features of nature is the forest and its wildlife (Kuvan, 2005). According to the recent Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations report, forests 'cover 31 per cent of the Earth's land surface (4.06 billion ha), but the area is shrinking, with 420 million ha of forest lost through deforestation between 1990 and 2020' (FAO, 2022). Forests are the most biologically diverse ecosystems on land, home to more than 80% of the terrestrial species of animals, plants, and insects. They significantly reduce the risk of natural disasters, including floods, droughts, landslides, and other extreme events. Around 1.6 billion people – including more than 2,000 indigenous cultures – depend on forests for their livelihood (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.).

There are also many tourism benefits from being a nature destination. As a tourism attraction, forests receive approximately 8 billion nature-based tourism visits annually, generating income from direct expenditure, providing tourism jobs (especially for women, youth, and other vulnerable groups) and recreation opportunities, improving health, regulating air quality, and protecting biodiversity (Song et al., 2020; FAO, 2022).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, addresses an urgent call for action by all countries, with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG goal number 15, 'Life on land', aims to protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of ecosystems and sustainably manage forests, while SDG goal number 3, 'Good health and well-being', speaks about ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages (United Nations, Department of Economic and

Social Affairs, n.d.). Therefore, we believe that forest tourism is a suitable response to these SDGs, since it aspires to protect nature and help people improve their health. Hence, the first aim of this research is to represent forest tourism as a sustainable and beneficial activity. Secondly, forest tourism, as such, is under-presented in the literature. While there is a growing interest in forest tourism research, the absolute number of scientific articles remains small (Santoso et al., 2024). Consequently, our second aim is to present the definition of forest tourism and three varieties of forest tourism activities.

We introduce forest tourism in the case of Kočevsko – a forestry region in Slovenia. Kočevsko offers various types of tourism, such as nature-based, sustainable, and boutique travel, and visitors associate it with relaxation, retreat, and self-connection, as demonstrated below by the results of this research. The Tourism Development Strategy for Kočevsko 2020–2025 defines the destination's DNA, which is based on the experience of the forest through a comprehensive, sustainable, and high-quality tourism offer (Uran Maravić, 2020). The Slovenian Tourism Strategy 2022–2028 highlights that forests cover 63% of the country's territory, and five Slovenian properties, including the primaeval forests of Krokav and Snežnik (in the Kočevsko region), are listed as UNESCO World Heritage sites. The Slovenian Tourism Strategy (Ministrstvo za gospodarski razvoj in tehnologijo Republike Slovenije, 2022) identifies forests as a strength that needs to be preserved and strengthened. However, the term 'forest tourism' is not used throughout the strategy, which makes this paper particularly important.

The paper is organised as follows. The second section is the literature review and definition elaboration; the third section presents the case study area Kočevsko; the fourth section describes the methodology and data used in the paper; and the empirical results and analysis are reported in the fifth section. The final chapter provides conclusions.

Forest Tourism

The theory presents many different types of tourism that relate to nature. Nature-based tourism is a wide

category which includes tourism activities that use various natural areas (3S seaside activities, national parks visits, cruises) (Slocum et al., 2020). Other authors describe nature-based tourism as 'all forms of tourism that use natural resources and foster understanding and conservation of the natural environment' (Hughes et al., 2018, p. 449) or 'activities that people do while on holiday and which focus on engagement with nature and usually include an overnight stay' (Ahtikoski et al., 2011, p. 2). This is similar to ecotourism, which, on the other hand, is regarded as a more sustainable nature-based activity that has a low impact on nature or even contributes to the protection of the habitats and well-being of local communities (Wickramasinghe, 2012; Slocum et al., 2020, Farkic et al., 2025). Other types include wildlife tourism (where tourists interact with wildlife in nature) and adventure tourism (includes elements of risk and intense physical activities) (Hughes et al., 2018).

Nature-based tourism in forests appeared alongside the decline in forestry and has become a new source of income and a significant tourism offer in different destinations (Konu, 2015; Ahtikoski et al., 2011; Schweinsberg et al., 2012). If we focus more narrowly on forest tourism, it can be defined as a type of tourism that takes place in the forest and offers forest tourism activities such as wildlife watching, adrenalin sports and recreation, and relaxation. Its key resource and attraction are the forests used for recreation, which serve as a vital factor in a tourism destination's competitiveness (Kuvan, 2005). Forests can be classified into 6 levels (developed areas, parklands, forest plantations, semi-natural forests, natural forests, and wilderness) based on the level of human intervention and the forests' own biophysical characteristics (Aasre et al., 2016).

Nature-based tourism especially attracts families with children (Bostedt & Mattsson, 1995); however, healthy and active baby boomers also prefer to participate in moderate to strenuous outdoor activities (Wilson et al., 2017). One study focused on young adult immigrants, where five recreational types in non-urban outdoor recreation emerged: 'Nature lovers' mainly engaged in outdoor recreation, 'Social animals' focused on social activity, 'Activity lovers' highlighted

health and sport motives, ‘Group-based quiet seekers’ visited nature in groups, and ‘Individual quiet seekers’ came alone (Kloek et al., 2015). If people seek peace and quiet in the forest, they are more likely to avoid encountering other people and divert from their designated path; nonetheless, they do not dislike meeting timid wildlife like roe deer (Skov-Petersen et al., 2021). Consequently, an equilibrium between the accessibility of the forest for families and the concentration of tourists is appropriate (Bostedt & Mattsson, 1995).

Forest Tourism Activities

There are various forest tourism activities that tourists can engage in. One of the most valuable natural tourism assets is certainly wildlife – flora and fauna. Wildlife tourism can be characterised as tourism where visitors meet wild animals and are in a setting of wild flora (Folmer et al., 2016). Tourists can encounter emotional experiences, learn about nature, and become aware of nature protection. Thus, we recognise four central types of wildlife interpretation (encounter without interpretation, interpretation based on knowledge, on responsibility, and on emotional content), where any type of interpretation is better than none (Šumrada et al., 2022). The wildlife encounter can range from consumptive motivation (e.g. fishing, hunting), admiration and awe (e.g. whale watching, bear photography, bird feeding) to non-consumptive benefits of tamed animals (e.g. dog sledging) (Conti, 2019). The interest in visiting mega-fauna (especially bigger mammals), mega-flora (trees and forests), and smaller flora (orchids or wildflowers) is increasing (Folmer et al., 2016). In addition, wildlife-based community tourism in protected areas can contribute to biodiversity conservation and community livelihood improvement (Stone & Nyaupane, 2018). Money for forest preservation can be collected through payments for ecosystem services (ES), environmental mortgages, funding, licensing, fees, and donations (Whitelaw et al., 2014). The voluntary contributions of visitors are a consequence of the tourists’ opportunity to see wildlife and the conservation efforts at first-hand, which can prompt visitors to donate money for wildlife protection because of their stronger identity with nature (Hehir et al., 2022).

Forests are also very suitable environments for outdoor recreation in all seasons (Ahtikoski et al., 2011) and are the most typical settings for outdoor recreation (Conti, 2019). Recreation can range from the highly active and adventurous (for example, mountain biking, cross-country skiing) through the intermediate level (for example, swimming in lakes and rivers or snowshoeing) to more relaxed and easier (for example, jogging or walking), depending on the visitors’ motives. On one hand, the motives include risk-taking and physical fitness, while on the other hand, they can be enjoying nature, rest, or escapism (Tyrväinen et al., 2008). Outdoor recreation was especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic, when tourists used it for physical and mental relaxation and to avoid crowded places (Weng et al., 2023). Forest recreation and sport can take place in a setting designed for these purposes and which has adequate equipment and infrastructure; hence, it is monetised, which can also affect the demand (Fredman et al., 2012). However, some barriers restrict access to forests for recreational users, such as hunting or forest-management works (Janeczko et al., 2020).

The third section of forest activities is directed towards relaxation. The current trend is forest bathing, following the Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku*, which represents a mindful, immersive tourist experience and contributes to well-being, happiness, fulfilment and better health (Farkic et al., 2021). Forest bathing is a structured, mediated slow forest walk that enables tourists to embrace nature and be aware of the environment (Kil et al., 2021). While spending time in the forest, visitors can breathe forest air, exercise, spend time with friends without electronic devices (digital detox) and activate all the senses. Other relaxing and leisure activities are forest selfness, reflexology, naturopathic elements, apitherapy, and picking forest fruits and herbs – all these are a positive contribution to clinical therapies, especially for respiratory diseases, mental illnesses, psychosomatic ailments, headaches and others (Cvikl & Pajk, 2015; Zhao & An, 2021; Cvikl, 2022). A greater understanding of the therapeutic potential of the profound use of nature can contribute to the reduction of all sorts of modern diseases and preventively strengthens human

physical and mental health (Schuh & Immich, 2019; Marselle et al., 2021). The forest is a source of energy, a place that restores and heals. Together with the trees, which represent its fundamental element, it allows for relaxation from noise and urbanisation. Sounds from the forest, such as rustling leaves, trees, and streams, have a therapeutic effect (Bouchardon, 2000; Mlakar Močilnik & Pirnat, 2010). There is also a tendency to intensify forest-based health tourism (wellness tourism in forests) due to the many positive effects of forests (Li & Wen, 2023). All in all, we can regard forest tourism as slow tourism that highlights freedom, self-reliance and independence, personal transformation, authenticity, the discovery of new dimensions of the self and new places, accomplishments, and stepping out of one's comfort zone (Conti, 2019).

Perception of a Forest Tourism Destination

Various studies (Tyrväinen et al., 2008; Hegetschweiler et al., 2022) have shown that people prefer managed forests without decayed wood, debris, or overgrown bushes, with moderate visibility and walkability and uneven-aged structure of trees; however, traces of human activity should not be extremely visible. This kind of outlook is more appealing to forest visitors, while they also perceive managed forests as a safer environment than wild forests (Tyrväinen et al., 2008). Forest visitors also prefer the presence of flowers, berry bushes and colourful leaves, which all contribute to the aesthetic value of the forest (Hegetschweiler et al., 2022).

In a study of forest perceptions, Karanikola et al. (2017) discovered that forest visitors used the environment mostly to meet friends and have leisure time with family, while only a few respondents visited the park for isolation and meditation. Another study showed that exercise and nature were the most important motivation elements, while relaxation and social motivations came last (Aasetre et al., 2016). These studies also asked about the satisfaction with different forest attributes like basic recreation infrastructure and its quality, forest park infrastructure and children's safety, in order to observe the perception of a forest destination (Karanikola et al., 2017; Aasetre et al., 2016).

To develop (forest) tourism, local support is also needed; hence, residents have to perceive the positive impacts of tourism development (Munanura & Kline, 2022). In one study, residents and tourism managers were asked about their perception of an emerging forest destination. While tourism managers supported the development of forest tourism, residents saw higher value in protecting the forest and not using it for tourism purposes (Kuvan & Akan, 2012). Meanwhile, Zhang et al. (2020) suggested that locals should be included in the management of protected areas and, therefore, even more environmentally aware, perceiving tourism's economic and environmental benefits.

Critical Perspective of Forest Tourism

While forest tourism has many positive effects and consequences on people, animals and nature overall, tourism in the forest could also be a threat. Tourism is prone to (over)consumption of natural resources (for example, deforestation for the purposes of land acquisition for accommodation or wood for building materials) and produces waste (for example, litter after picnic activities) (Kuvan, 2005). Tourism can also endanger wildlife and biodiversity, with tourists intruding on natural habitats (for example, ecosystem degradation, trodden cycling or hiking paths, scaring animals) and contributing to emissions of CO₂ (Gössling, 2018). And since forest tourism is gaining popularity, bigger masses of tourists can lead to over-tourism. In addition, as mentioned in the previous chapter, local residents do not always agree with tourism development, which can lead to conflicts with the community.

However, forest tourism is regarded as more environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable than traditional primary forest industries (Schweinsberg et al., 2012). Forest activities, which we described above, are especially regarded as sustainable and aim to encourage nature-friendly behaviour. Wildlife tourism can raise awareness about species and induce more conscious actions. It has great potential for engaging families with young children, who are perceptive of nature-protection messages and can act accordingly when they grow up. Recreation and relaxation are also non-invasive if destination managers



Figure 1 Study Area Kočevsko

Notes Left: Republic of Slovenia on the map of Europe, right: Kočevsko on the map of Slovenia. Adapted from Datawrapper (<https://www.datawrapper.de/>).

moderate the number of visitors and their influences. With the use of zoning, dedicated paths, guidelines, and similar measures, tourists could have a smaller impact on nature. Zhang et al. (2025) suggested that forest protection policies should prioritise protecting forest ecosystems and ensuring the sustainable use of forest resources. At the same time, they suggest that infrastructure and innovative tourism products should be improved to maintain the attractiveness and enhance the tourist experience of forest tourism. Moreover, local cultural features could be included in the tourism offer.

All in all, the forest as a natural resource is open to tourists and residents. Therefore, both groups cohabit in the forest and enjoy its benefits. Local government and destination management should recognise this value and include different stakeholders in the forest planning process (Pavlakovič Farrell & Koščak, 2024). Collaboration, inclusion, and local participation are the keys to mutual understanding and the achievement of the goal of protecting and improving the forest.

This study aims to explore key aspects of forest tourism in the Kočevsko region, guided by research questions. First, we investigate *how forest tourism is conceptualised and experienced in the region*, examining both theoretical understanding and visitor perspectives. Second, we assess *how adrenalin-driven the*

tourism offer is in forest destinations, focusing on the variety and intensity of activities available. Third, we explore *how people regard nature as a relaxation option*, considering its perceived benefits for wellbeing. Throughout the paper, we seek to provide answers to these questions by linking theoretical frameworks with empirical observations, thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of the forest tourism experience and its multiple dimensions.

Study Area Kočevsko

The destination of Kočevsko combines the areas of the municipalities of Osilnica, Kostel, and Kočevje, which is the economic, cultural, touristic and educational centre of the region (Uran Maravič, 2020; Javni zavod za turizem in kulturo Kočevje, n.d.-b). Kočevje is also the largest municipality in the Republic of Slovenia. Among the most important economic branches of the municipality of Kočevje are forestry and the wood processing industry (Uran Maravič, 2020). The study area can be seen in Figure 1.

Among the most important tourism products of the municipality of Kočevje are hiking (13 mountain trails, 4 themed trails, 5 learning trails, 1 energy trail, the hiking event Walking in the Bear's Footsteps), cycling (maintained bike trails, MTB Trail Center Kočevje and events: Navkeber na Strmo Reber, Po-

furajmo Kočevsko, Enduro4fun, XC Kočevje and MTB cycling camps), tracking and observation of wild animals (brown bear, grey wolf, lynx), the 'Škrilj' bunker (a shelter built during the Cold War 80 metres below the surface, designed to allow stays of up to 100 days), survival in nature (under the supervision of experienced instructors) and riding (getting to know nature on horses) (Uran Maravič, 2020). Kočevsko also offers some products that can be classified in the category of selfness, for example, apitherapy.

Kočevsko focuses more on the domestic market and less on the foreign market. The primary tourists are those who love nature and like to spend their free time in it (Uran Maravič, 2020). Other stakeholders in Kočevsko are the Municipality of Kočevje, the Public Institute for Culture and Tourism Kočevje (Kočevsko Institute), the municipality of Kostel and the Municipality of Osilnica. The Public Institute for Culture and Tourism Kočevje has the most important role as the destination management organisation. The other stakeholders are tourism providers, the local population, and local companies (Uran Maravič, 2020).

There is no direct motorway connection to Kočevsko. However, it is accessible via regional road 106 from the direction of Ljubljana (Slovenia's capital), which is 60 km away. The distance from other Slovenian towns is 50 km on the road from Novo mesto and 70 km from Postojna. The municipality of Kočevje is also 30 km on the road from the state border with the Republic of Croatia, 90 km from the main Slovenian airport (Brnik), 136 km from the main Croatian airport (Zagreb), and 252 km from a major Italian airport (Venice, Marco Polo). Kočevje also has a daily public bus connection to Ljubljana and Novo mesto. A regular passenger train line between Ljubljana and Kočevje was renovated and reopened in January 2021 (Uran Maravič, 2020; Javni zavod za turizem in kulturo Kočevje, n.d.-a).

Methodology

The study aimed to understand the respondents' opinions, perceptions and attitudes towards the image of Kočevsko in Slovenia and, hence, form a background for future forest tourism theory. Triangulation was

used in this study to better understand the whole concept of forest tourism and the case study destination. Therefore, we conducted interviews with local stakeholders and a survey with (potential) forest tourists and concluded with a content analysis of promotional material from the destination. Consequently, three major research questions were formulated based on the literature review conducted earlier:

Research question 1: How is forest tourism conceptualised and experienced in the Kočevsko region?

Research question 2: How adrenalin-driven is the tourism offer in forest destinations?

Research question 3: How do people regard nature as a relaxation option?

The combination of all types of research is purposeful, as it provides insight into the same research problem from different perspectives. On one hand, through interviews with stakeholders in Kočevsko, we gained valuable quantitative data from the people who deal with tourists and tourism businesses on a daily basis. On the other hand, by questioning potential visitors, we explored their interests in the destination, their motivations for visiting, their activity preferences, and their current perception of the destination before or after they have visited it. The third method of content analysis showed how the destination perceives itself and presents itself through the promotion material. The survey results offer broad quantitative insights, while the interviews and content analysis add depth and contextual understanding.

The Survey

In the survey, we searched for an appropriate sample of respondents who would express their opinions about Kočevsko; therefore, a quantitative online survey was the first research method. To conduct a survey, a convenience sampling method was chosen for this research (a snowballing sample). The respondents were selected based on a non-probability sampling method. An online survey was sent out to the e-mail addresses of family and friends, and we asked them to send it to their friends. The survey was also published in several Facebook groups. The data was collected

Table 1 Content Analysis of Marketing Elements

	Destination Kočevsko
Brand logo	Wild. But Nice., Secret Forest of Slovenia, Green & Safe, Slovenia Green Destination Gold
Activities	Hiking, cycling, horse riding, fishing, water adventures, sailing, SUP, diving
Tourist products	Shinrin-Yoku Forest Baths, Western Riding, Wilderness School, Bear Watching, 2-Day Bear Watching, Western Horseback Riding, Guided Shinrin-Yoku Forest Baths, Castle Picnic, MATT Brewery Visit
Accommodations	Hostel Bearlog, Hotel Jasnica, Hotel Kovač, apartments and tourist farms
Social networks, website	Kočevsko – website, fb page, Instagram page

using an Internet survey form (in Ika Arnes tool) in May 2022, and the survey was conducted in Slovenia. Participants were at least 18 years old; among them were participants who had already visited Kočevsko and some who had not.

The survey questionnaire consisted of 13 questions and 28 variables and used open and closed questions. These questions referred to the opinion of the respondents about the destination, and the activities and tourism products at the destination. In the foreground were products that were related to outdoor activities and in connection with the forest and animals. Participants were also asked to indicate their degree of importance on a five-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree) and what characteristics they find important for certain phenomena. The questions were written according to the following criteria: relevant, clear, brief, inoffensive, unbiased and specific.

Before data collection procedures began, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with college research for one month before the survey took place to assess the content validity and clarity of the questions, with modifications made accordingly. At the end of the questionnaire, there were several demographic variables related to gender, age and country of origin.

A total of 110 fully answered questions and usable questionnaires were collected. However, more questionnaires were partially filled in, which is why some questions have a different final number. The final size sample of the study was $n = 110$, which resulted in a 29% response rate. The data gathered was analysed with the statistical tools of Microsoft Excel 2013.

Interviews

Four interviews with providers of various tourist services in Kočevsko were conducted. Interviews were conducted in person at the destination in May 2022. The interviewees selected were recognised as the most important in this area in the field of Tourism. Among the interviewees were the director of the Kočevsko Institute, the head person of the Tourism Sector at the Kočevsko Institute, a tourism guide at the Kočevsko Institute, an employee of the MTB trail centre Kočevje, and a local beekeeper. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately one hour with 14 questions (with four core topics), where interviewees were asked about their work situation in forest tourism and possibilities for its development, their collaboration with different stakeholders and their perception of tourists' attitudes towards forest tourism activities. The questions asked were specific and related to their tourism activity. Interview transcripts were made and stored in a research database.

Qualitative analysis of interviews was conducted using a method of coding where we focused on three major categories of codes (perception of a forest destination, adventurous activities in a forest destination, and relaxation in a forest destination). In the interview transcripts, connections, recurring words, phrases, and shared opinions of the interviewees were identified, then interpreted and visually presented. In this specific case, we used the so-called framework of open coding (Babbie 2007; Easterby-Smith et al., 2005; Stirling 2001), which allows for the classification and labelling of concepts during the process of qualitative data analysis. As researchers, we have the opportunity to assign codes derived from the research (Roblek,

Table 2 Descriptive Characteristics of the Participants

Demographic Data	N	Percentage
Gender		
Male	16	15%
Female	92	84%
I do not want to answer	2	1%
Age		
	Average	Standard deviation
	29.2	11.86
Country		
Slovenia	96	87%
Croatia	6	5%
Bosna and Herzegovina	6	5%
Other	2	2%
Previous visit to Kočevje		
Yes	67	39 %
No	104	61 %

2007) and the questions based on which we gathered the obtained data. The interviews provided important data about local providers' actions and opinions on forest tourism. Additionally, the interviews aimed to check whether the employees and holders of these specific activities shared their opinions with the respondents in the survey.

Content Analysis of Marketing Elements

Content analysis of the website Kočevsko (<https://www.kocevsko.com/en/>) destination social media (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube) and promotional material (for example, leaflets) was made in May 2022. We grouped the important themes and examined the content that refers to each specific group. Following this, codes were assigned to understand the promotional material content better. We focused primarily on the tourism products advertised by the destination, and those offering animal tours and forest-related activities were highlighted. Brand logos, activities and products on the destination can be seen in Table 1.

Results

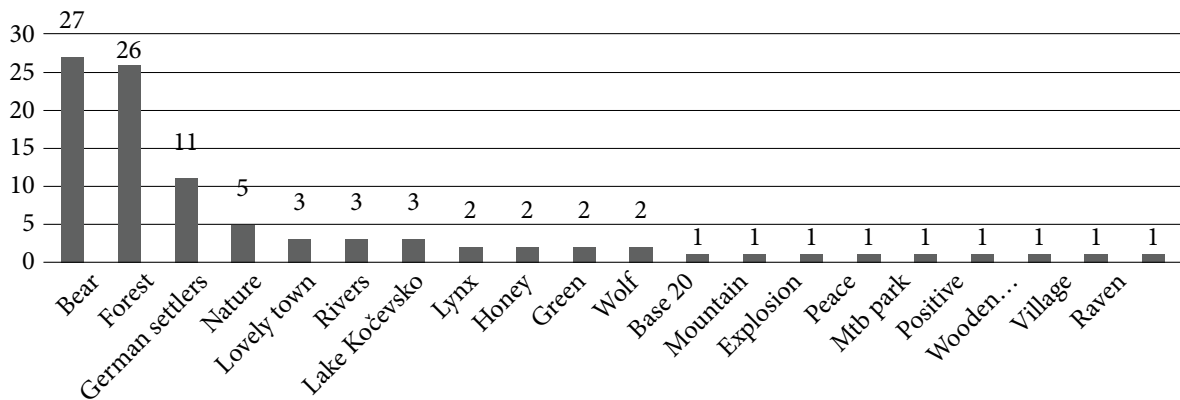
Table 2 shows the demographic profile of the respondents by gender, age and country of origin. The number of male respondents (15%) was lower than that of

female respondents (84%). Most of the respondents were from Slovenia (96; 87%), but there were also respondents from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and other countries. The average age of the respondents was 29.2 years old.

Perception of a Forest Destination

We were interested in what participants think of when they hear the word 'Kočevsko'. It was an open question, and 115 participants answered. There were 95 words in total, which we were able to divide into 20 codes (graph 1). The codes were: Bear, Forest, Nature, German settlers, Lovely town, Rivers, Lynx, Lake Kočevsko, Honey, Green, Wolf, Base 20, Mountain, Explosion, Peace, MTB park, Positive, Wooden products, Village, and Raven. German settlers are known as Gottscheers of the Kočevje region (a.k.a. Gottschee) of Slovenia, formerly Gottschee County. Until the Second World War, their main language of communication was Gottscheerish, a Bavarian dialect of German (Moric, 2020).

With the program WordClouds, we drew a word cloud, where the words are written in order of size according to the number of times they were repeated in the answers. The bigger the word, the more it was repeated. Figure 2 shows a word cloud of all 20



Graph 1 Codes About Destination Kočevsko

codes that appeared in the responses. The largest are the words ‘bear’, which was found 27 times in the analysis, and ‘forest’, which the analysis found 26 times. The code ‘nature’ was found 11 times. Figure 3 shows 9 codes related to nature and wildlife. These are Bear, Forest, Nature, River, Lynx, Honey, Green, Wolf and Raven. It can be seen from the graph that the codes ‘bear’ and ‘forest’ stand out, which indicates that these are two words that represent destination when people hear the word ‘Kočevsko’.

In the next question, we were interested in which word participants think of when they hear the word

‘Kočevsko’. The nine words available were: Forest, Wolf, Secret war zone, Underdevelopment, Bear, Honey from Kočevje, Lynx, Largest fir tree, and Distance. Altogether, 154 participants answered. Most of the respondents believe that Kočevsko is best described by the word ‘Forest’ (73; 47%), followed by the word ‘Bear’ (43; 28%), while among the other offered words, they did not chose words such as ‘Wolf’, ‘Lynx’ and ‘Largest fir tree’ (0, 0%) at all (as can be seen from Graph 2).

We wanted to determine if the respondents consider Kočevsko as an interesting destination. Alto-



Figure 2 Word Cloud of all 20 Codes

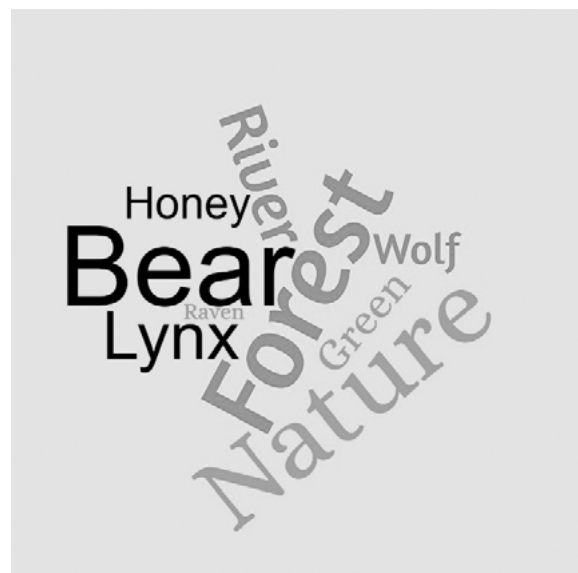
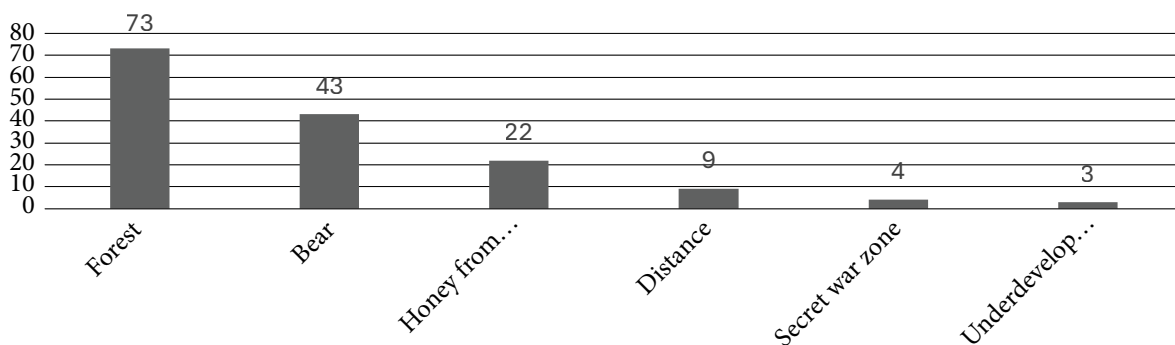
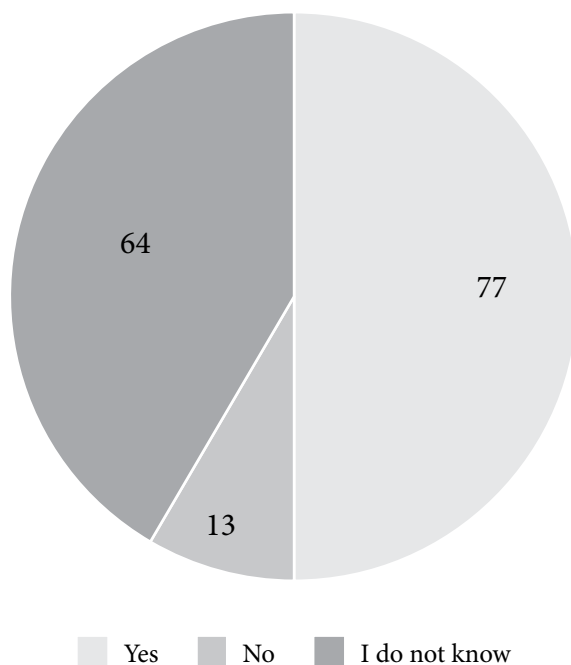


Figure 3 Codes Related to Nature and Wildlife



Graph Words About Kočevsko



Graph 3 Kočevsko as an Interesting Destination

gether, 154 participants answered. As can be seen from Graph 3, 77 respondents (50%) think that Kočevsko is an interesting destination, 13 (8%) think it is not, and 64 (42%) respondents do not know.

The respondents were asked to express their opinion about Kočevsko on a Likert scale from 1–5, where 1 means completely disagree and 5 means agree entirely. Altogether, 119 respondents answered this question. As can be seen from Table 3, the first claim was that Kočevsko is an economically and socially developed

destination. Most respondents, 44 (40%), neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. The next claim was that Kočevsko is (in terms of transport) an accessible destination. The response here was similar; most of the respondents, 40 (34%), neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. The next claim was that Kočevsko offers several different accommodation options. Most respondents, 45 (38%), neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. The fifth claim was that Kočevsko is a suitable destination for a multi-day trip (1–3 days). Most respondents, 51 (43%), agreed with the statement. The next claim was that Kočevsko offers unspoilt nature. Most respondents, 57 (48%), completely agreed with the statement. The seventh claim was that Kočevsko is a suitable destination for young people. Most respondents, 53 (45%), agreed with the statement. The next claim was the same, only for families. Most respondents, 58 (49%), agreed with the statement. The ninth claim was that Kočevsko is a destination that offers an insight into the military history of Slovenia (World War II, independence). Most respondents, 59 (50%), agreed with the statement. The last claim was ‘I would feel safe in Kočevsko’. Most respondents, 43 (36%), agreed with the statement.

With the promotional slogan ‘WILD. BUT NICE,’ the destination of Kočevsko wants to present itself to the market and inform potential visitors that it can offer unspoilt nature that is suitable for carrying out various activities. They reach their target markets with the help of an umbrella promotion carried out by the Slovenian Tourist Board (STB). Based on the qualifications of the guides (knowledge of foreign languages),

Table 3 Opinions about the Destination Kočevsko

	1	2	3	4	5	Average
Kočevsko is an economically and socially developed destination (N = 119).	11 9%	22 18%	48 40%	34 29%	4 3%	3.0
Kočevsko is (in terms of transport) an accessible destination (N = 119).	8 7%	23 19%	40 34%	39 33%	9 8%	3.2
Kočevsko offers several different accommodation options (N = 119).	3 3%	17 14%	45 38%	43 36%	11 9%	3.4
Kočevsko is a suitable destination for a multi-day trip (1–3 days) (N = 119).	4 3%	15 13%	32 27%	51 43%	17 14%	3.5
Kočevsko offers unspoilt nature (N = 119).	3 3%	3 3%	11 9%	45 38%	57 48%	4.3
Kočevsko is a suitable destination for young people (N = 119).	4 3%	13 11%	30 25%	53 45%	19 16%	3.6
Kočevsko offers activities for families (N = 119).	3 3%	8 7%	29 24%	58 49%	21 18%	3.7
Kočevsko is a destination that offers an insight into the military history of Slovenia (World War II, independence) (N = 119).	2 2%	7 6%	31 26%	59 50%	20 17%	3.7
I would feel safe in Kočevsko (N = 119).	5 4%	14 12%	29 24%	43 36%	28 24%	3.6

they mainly target the German, Austrian and Croatian markets. The destination is developing boutique tourism for a smaller number of visitors, so the prices of tourism products are slightly higher. For the time being, the locals support the development of tourism. Still, they are against the development of mass tourism, as they fear that the mass arrival of tourists would devalue the importance of the destination. During the coronavirus epidemic, Kočevsko recorded a higher number of visitors, as most tourism products were carried out in nature for a smaller number of people. In recent years, more visits by domestic visitors have been recorded due to the pandemic closure of borders and restrictions on crossing them.

Wildlife Tourism

We wanted to get the opinion of the respondents about the tourism offer in nature in the destination of Kočevsko. They were asked to express their opinion on a Likert scale from 1–5, where 1 means completely disagree and 5 means agree entirely. Altogether, 115 respondents answered this question (as can be seen from Table 4). The first claim was ‘I am very inter-

ested in watching bears in their natural habitat’. Most respondents, 37 (32%), completely agreed with the statement. The next one was ‘Observing the primeval forest through VR glasses seems interesting to me’. Most respondents, 49 (43%), agreed with the statement. The last one was ‘Animal watching is an interesting tourism product that would make me visit the destination’. Most respondents, 48 (42%), agreed with the statement.

Watching bears in nature is one of the innovative tourism products that can be found in this area. We were interested in how many respondents had already observed a live bear. Most of the respondents, 122 (79%), have not yet observed a bear in its natural habitat, while 32 (21%) answered that they have.

The slogan of the Kočevsko destination is ‘WILD. BUT NICE.’ The logo is the word ‘Kočevsko’, which has a coniferous tree inside the letter O. Analysis showed that the website offers tourism products such as bear watching, wildlife photography and Night under the Stars. The Commission of the Slovenian Tourist Board recognised the experience of observing and getting to know a bear in its habitat as unique and included it in

Table 4 Tourist Offer in Nature at the Destination Kočevsko

	1	2	3	4	5	Average
I am very interested in bear watching in their natural habitat (N = 115).	7 6%	14 12%	21 18%	36 31%	37 32%	3.7
Observing the primeval forest through VR glasses seems interesting to me (N = 115).	4 3%	9 8%	18 16%	49 43%	35 30%	3.9
Animal watching is an interesting tourist product that would make me come to the destination (N = 115).	2 2%	12 10%	18 16%	48 42%	35 30%	3.9

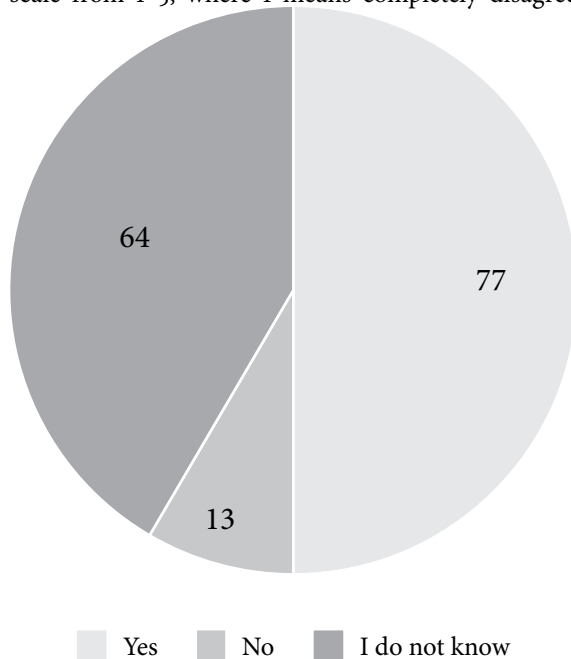
the family of 5-star experiences, Slovenia Unique Experiences (Javni zavod za turizem in kulturo Kočevje, n.d.-c.).

Adventure Tourism

We wanted to collect information on how many times per year the respondents go on a hike while travelling. Altogether, 111 respondents answered this question. Most of them, 41 (37%), answered that they hike 2–4 times every year. Next, we wanted to get the opinion of the respondents about the sports tourism offer. They were asked to express their opinion on a Likert scale from 1–5, where 1 means completely disagree

and 5 means agree entirely. Altogether, 111 respondents answered this question (as can be seen from Table 5). The first claim was: ‘Mountain biking is a very interesting outdoor activity’. Most respondents, 57 (51%), agreed with the statement. The second one was ‘I think Kočevsko Lake is suitable for practising water sports’. Most respondents, 47 (42%), agreed with the statement. The third claim was ‘The destination of Kočevsko offers opportunities for outdoor activities (cycling, hiking, etc.)’. Most respondents, 55 (46%), agreed with the statement.

Information about adventure tourism in the forest was also collected through interviews. The interviewee was the provider of the MTB bike park, which has been operating since 2016 and currently offers 11 routes, while a new route is introduced almost every year. They help cyclists up the hill with a van that takes them to the start of the track. The park’s profits are used to restore and buy new infrastructure. The space where the park is located was initially intended for sports activities. The interlocutor pointed out that other parks have a problem with obtaining consent from the owners. There is no such problem here, as 98% of the entire park is state or municipality-owned, which helps when obtaining permission for the construction of sports infrastructure. A critical component is cooperation with local providers who are involved in the entire product. The involvement of the local population is manifested in the fact that local residents are the builders and maintainers of the tracks, food and drink providers, transport providers and race organisers. Cooperation with cycling associations has also been established. As for forest conservation, they have a forest inspector several times a year. Together with the path maintainer, they check that everything



Graph 4 Observed a Live Bear

Table 5 Question about the Sport Tourist Offer

	1	2	3	4	5	Average
Mountain biking is a very interesting outdoor activity (<i>N</i> = 111).	5 5%	11 10%	20 18%	57 51%	18 16%	3.6
I think Kočevsko lake is suitable for practicing water sports (<i>N</i> = 111).	5 5%	6 5%	34 31%	47 42%	19 17%	3.6
The destination Kočevsko offers opportunities for outdoor activities (cycling, hiking...) (<i>N</i> = 119).	2 2%	5 4%	14 12%	55 46%	43 36%	4.1

Table 6 Opinion of Respondents About Relaxation at the Destination

	1	2	3	4	5	Average
Kočevsko offers quality honey (<i>N</i> = 110).	0 0%	3 3%	21 19%	52 47%	34 31%	4.1
I would participate in apitherapy (preserving health with the help of bee products) (<i>N</i> = 110).	4 4%	13 12%	17 15%	51 46%	25 23%	3.7
I can find my peace in the Kočevsko forests (<i>N</i> = 110).	4 4%	3 3%	25 23%	38 35%	40 36%	4.0
In Kočevsko there is sufficient offer for selfness (forest bath, yoga, meditation...) (<i>N</i> = 110).	2 2%	10 9%	31 28%	45 41%	22 20%	3.7

is in accordance with nature conservation and that the impact on the forest is as minimal as possible. They strive to have almost no impact on the forest ecosystem itself. They do not cut down new trees but make a new path where there can be no degradation. The analysis showed that the locals accept them and will continue striving for a common language.

Relaxation in Nature

We wanted to gather the opinion of the respondents about relaxation in nature. They were asked to express their opinion on a Likert scale from 1–5, where 1 means completely disagree and 5 means agree entirely. Altogether, 110 respondents answered this question (as can be seen from Table 6). The first claim was 'Kočevsko offers quality honey'. Most respondents, 52 (47%), agreed with the statement. The next one was 'I would participate in apitherapy (preserving health with the help of bee products)'. Most respondents, 51 (46%), agreed with the statement. The third one was 'I could find my peace in the Kočevsko forests'. Most respondents, 40 (36%), completely agreed with the statement. The last one was 'In Kočevsko, there is enough to offer for selfness (forest bath, yoga, medi-

tation)'. Most respondents, 45 (41%), agreed with the statement.

Regarding relaxation in nature, an interview was conducted with the director of the Kočevsko Institute and the head of the tourism sector at the Kočevsko Institute. In the destination of Kočevsko, they are aware of their potential for the development of selfness, but currently, they do not yet have many implemented products in this area. As part of tourism products that include activities in nature, they carry out some activities that can be classified under the umbrella of selfness. At the request of the group, the guides adapt the guided tour through the forest and include elements of mindfulness. While walking through the forest, the guides encourage visitors to feel the world around them, smell plants with different textures and identify them, hug trees, observe the crowns of trees and listen to different sounds – the sound of wind, leaves, animals, etc.

Kočevsko Institute and the local people know about successful practices from abroad and are aware of the potential. Years ago, there were ideas about the implementation of such products by a student of well-being who had a cabin in the forest at her disposal, but

the actual realisation of the idea did not happen. In cooperation with a local beekeeper, they plan to develop a tourism product in connection with apitherapy. Visitors would be able to overcome their fear of bees by staying directly next to the apiary and observing the bees in a safe way, thus getting closer to them and reducing the fear of bees over time. The interview with the honey grower also confirmed the positive effects of apitherapy, as well as the possibility offered by the provider to spend the night in this accommodation.

Discussion

During the research, we found answers to the research questions that were set at the beginning.

Research question 1: How is forest tourism conceptualised and experienced in the Kočevsko region?

The analysis showed that almost 40% of the respondents had already visited Kočevsko, and even more of them (50%) found the destination interesting and pleasant. They also stated that this destination offers unspoilt nature. The most recognisable words selected for this forest destination were 'bear' and 'forest'. In addition, other associations connected to nature were highlighted. As nature and forests are the main assets of the destination, this is also the reason why the local tourist board uses green colours, trees and forests in their promotional materials. And it is also why the bulk of tourism offers are based on nature and forests.

Research question 2: How adrenalin-driven is the tourism offer in forest destinations?

As seen from the survey and interviews, Kočevsko is and is regarded as a very active destination. There are many opportunities for outdoor activities (cycling, hiking, water sports, etc.), and visitors are recognising the destination as appropriate for these activities. Mountain biking is an especially developed tourism product, as was confirmed through the interviews. In addition, there are new and specialised adventure products, like animal watching. The respondents of the survey confirmed its attractiveness, yet only 21% of the respondents had already participated in the bear-watching adventure.

Research question 3: How do people regard nature as a relaxation option?

On the other hand, the opposite of adrenaline and sport is relaxation, which can also be an important factor when visiting a destination. The respondents of the survey regard forest destinations as peaceful and relaxing. Many also expressed high intention to hike while travelling; therefore, hiking in the forest can be a part of a healthy lifestyle. Almost half of the respondents (46%) would participate in apitherapy (preserving health with the help of bee products). Selfness such as forest baths, yoga and meditation can be part of Kočevje tourism products. As noticed from the interviews, the destination management organisation has already considered these options and regards them as a suitable investment in the future.

Conclusion

As we can see from the research, visitors of a forest destination highly value outdoor activities and wildlife observation, as well as relaxation in nature. Hence, in the long run, existing tourism products based on learning about nature and only including some elements of selfness will not satisfy tourists who want an authentic experience of nature and themselves. Destinations should consider the possibility of additional training of existing guides with the primary purpose of learning about selfness, the wildlife population and adventurous activities skills.

As shown in the research, visitors express demand for all activities. However, the case study of Kočevsko does not offer enough selfness tourism products. Due to the high proportion of forests, Kočevsko has excellent potential for developing forest selfness. Therefore, it is advisable to create new tourism products as part of selfness and use them to appeal to already existing target groups – individuals who live sustainably, appreciate nature and are ready to pay more for such experiences. We believe that the development of forest selfness would not threaten the carrying capacity of the destination because of the target group, which behaves responsibly towards the environment, and because products like these also emphasise the connection with nature and do not disturb it.

Forest destinations are regarded as interesting and appealing to young people and families. This shows the potential of tourism development in a natural en-

vironment, more precisely, a forest. In this article, we have conceptualised the phenomenon of forest tourism. It can be defined as a type of tourism that takes place in the forest and offers forest tourism activities such as wildlife observation, outdoor activities, and relaxation. In addition, forest tourism is also sustainable, since it teaches visitors to respect nature and inspires them to protect it. Moreover, it helps visitors to improve their health through outdoor activities and relaxation. The benefits of forest tourism can be used in many destinations and enrich the visitor's experience.

In the literature review, we also presented the drawbacks of forest tourism. Although it is regarded as sustainable, it can have damaging consequences for nature, animals, and even locals. These can come from the exceeded carrying capacity of the forest or from unintended actions of the tourists. One of the possible solutions is good destination management, which selects target segments of sustainable visitors who are aware of their impact on the forest. Second, destination management and local government could look after nature by implementing policies and introducing visitor management. Possible misunderstandings with local residents can be addressed by implementing practices of local participation in the decision-making process.

Recent research highlights the multiple benefits of forest tourism, emphasising its potential to support mental well-being, promote sustainable visitor behaviour, and require careful destination management. Visitors engaging in outdoor activities, wildlife observation, and relaxation in nature experience significant psychological benefits, including reduced stress and improved mood (Shin et al., 2009; Muro et al., 2023). Moreover, forest therapy programmes, whether self-guided or led by trained guides, enhance these benefits and provide opportunities for visitors to connect deeply with nature and themselves, supporting the concept of 'forest selfness' (Kim & Shin, 2021).

To meet the growing demand for authentic nature experiences, destinations such as Kočevsko could develop specialised forest tourism products that integrate elements of mindfulness, environmental education, and adventure skills. Implementing evi-

dence-based visitor management strategies, guided by carrying capacity analyses, is essential to ensure sustainability and prevent ecological degradation (Jamin & Rahmafritria, 2022). By combining these approaches, forest destinations can enhance visitor satisfaction, foster responsible environmental behaviour, and maximise the therapeutic and recreational potential of forest tourism.

There are some limitations to the study. The study presented forest tourism only at a destination in Slovenia; it would be interesting to examine other forest destinations worldwide. In addition, the survey sample used was limited to a few countries. However, in future research, bigger samples could be explored. Future research can also focus on activities of all three varieties of forest tourism activities and examine their potential to develop further.

Based on the results obtained, most people find forest destinations interesting and would be happy to see a bear in its natural habitat. Thus, we are convinced that forest tourism has great potential, especially in a digital world where individuals are looking for the opposite – peace, rest, and unspoilt and wild nature.

Suggestions for Further Research

Based on the results obtained, we are content that the majority of people find Kočevsko an interesting destination and would be happy to see a bear in its natural habitat. But when the family decides where to go on a trip on Saturday morning, they still prefer to go to the coast or mountains. For further research, we suggest that an analysis should be made of similar destinations that are already developing forest tourism – a survey on how forest tourism is practised elsewhere in Europe (good practice examples). We are convinced that forest tourism has great potential and, in a world of digitalisation, individuals are looking for peace, rest and nature.

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From Views to Potential Behaviours: The Role of Travel Vlogs and Digital Nudging in Croatian Coastal Tourism

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This study investigates how travel vloggers potentially influence tourist behaviour through digital nudging, focusing on four Croatian coastal cities: Dubrovnik, Split, Zadar, and Šibenik. Using qualitative thematic analysis of a purposive sample of English-language YouTube travel vlogs, the research addresses three questions: (1) the types of problems vloggers encounter at the destination, (2) the advice they offer and how it may function as digital nudging, and (3) their motivations for content creation. Findings show that vloggers frequently report issues such as overcrowding, noise, and high prices, often framing these as experiential warnings. Their advice, ranging from strategies to avoid crowds to promoting cultural awareness, could function as informal behavioural guidance. Identified nudging techniques include simplification, framing, priming, loss aversion, and the messenger effect. Vloggers are motivated by audience growth and channel promotion, financial incentives, and informative intent. The study contributes to the growing field of digital nudging by highlighting the potential role of vloggers as informal behavioural influencers in tourism. It bridges behavioural science, tourism studies, and digital media research, showing how peer-generated content on digital platforms could subtly shape tourist behaviour. Practically, the findings suggest that collaboration with vloggers could offer destination management organizations (DMOs) and tourism professionals a scalable, cost-effective method to promote sustainable and culturally sensitive travel behaviours. By embedding incentives in authentic, understandable content, destinations may indirectly address challenges such as overtourism and environmental degradation.

Keywords: digital nudging, tourism, social media vlogs, tourist behaviour

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Introduction

In recent years, travel vlogs have become an important source of information and inspiration for potential tourists. The popularity of travel vlogs is largely due to their presentation of real-life experiences and personal stories in video format, which provides greater value compared to traditional text-

based blogs (Griffith & Papacharissi, 2010). Unlike traditional guidebooks or even static websites, vlogs provide dynamic narratives that blend entertainment, personal experience, and practical advice. Consequently, travel vlogs have become widely popular across all generations on platforms like YouTube (Henderson, 2018).

Research indicates that travel vlogs positively influence viewers' intention to travel by providing detailed information about destinations and facilitating informed decision-making (Lodha & Philip, 2019; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Studying the art and practice of travel vlogging also offers valuable insights into tourist behaviour, communication patterns, and destination management (He et al., 2021).

Vloggers influence decision-making through cognitive, emotional, and epistemic factors (Abad & Borbon, 2021), while shaping the online perception of destinations through content, visual images and responses of the watchers (Peralta, 2019). Therefore, travel vlogs have emerged as a highly influential form of user-generated content, offering immersive, visually rich, and often personalized representations of destinations.

YouTube travel vloggers are often perceived as trustworthy, attractive, and knowledgeable, which further strengthens their impact on viewers' travel-related behaviours (Mittal & Kaur, 2020). As a result, it can be concluded that travel vloggers are not just content creators, but also credible sources of information with the power to shape the perceptions, behaviours, and decision-making processes of potential tourists.

Research Gap

Although prior studies have established the influence of vlogs on tourist behaviour, the role of digital nudging within travel vlogs remains underexplored, particularly in the context of tourism. Furthermore, recent research highlights that social media can help alleviate overtourism and undertourism by encouraging visits to lesser-known areas (Šormaz & Ruoss, 2023). In this context, digital nudging embedded in vlogger content emerges as a potentially powerful mechanism: by subtly directing attention toward alternative times, places, or behaviours, vloggers potentially contribute to mitigating overtourism while enhancing tourist experiences.

This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating how subtle persuasive techniques (such as recommendations) are used and can potentially function as digital nudges in travel vlog content. By focusing on travel vlogs related to Croatian coastal cities, the

research provides a contextualized analysis that combines digital media studies with behavioural insights from the nudging framework.

Through thematic content analysis, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how travel vlogs can serve not only as a form of digital storytelling, but also as possible behavioural influence tools. Ultimately, the findings aim to inform tourism marketing strategy makers and promote more responsible travel behaviour.

Research context: Croatian coastal cities (Dubrovnik, Zadar, Split, Šibenik)

This study focuses on four prominent Croatian coastal cities – Dubrovnik, Split, Zadar and Šibenik – which are very popular tourist destinations, especially among international visitors. The cities offer a blend of historic architecture, UNESCO-listed sites, coastal landscapes and vibrant cultural life, making them particularly attractive to both casual and experienced travellers. Ćorluka et al. (2018) highlight that Croatia faces a pronounced degree of tourism seasonality, with tourist activity remaining heavily concentrated in peak periods year after year. The OECD (2025) further notes that rising visitor numbers drive up living costs and reduce housing availability, partly through the influence of the platform economy, while simultaneously putting pressure on public services such as transport and road infrastructure, resulting in overcrowding and disruptions to residents' daily lives. Within this context, the impact of travel vlogs could be examined not only as an informational tool but also as a potential tool for behavioural intervention.

Research Aim and Objectives

The main aim of this research is to identify the presence of digital nudges in travel vlog content and to discuss their potential influence on tourist behaviour, providing an exploratory foundation for future empirical studies.

The study also seeks to understand how vloggers represent tourist experiences regarding problems they encounter in the destination, offer advice, and engage with their audiences across various motivations. Accordingly, this study addresses these specific objectives:

- To identify recurring problems in tourist experiences as portrayed in travel vlogs.
- To get insight into the recommendations vloggers offer to their audiences regarding behaviour or practical advice.
- To examine the presence and function of digital nudges within travel vlogs.
- To investigate the vloggers' motivations for creating content related to Croatian coastal cities.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ1: How do travel vloggers portray the problems they encounter in their travel experiences in Dubrovnik, Split, Zadar, and Šibenik?
- RQ2: What types of advice do vloggers give to tourists, and how may these function as digital nudges?
- RQ3: What motivations drive vloggers to produce travel content in these cities?

Relevance of Studying Digital Nudges in Tourism

Digital nudges, defined as the use of user-interface design elements to guide behaviour in digital choice environments (Maedche, 2017), are increasingly studied in behavioural science. Yet, their application in tourism remains limited, particularly in informal settings such as travel vlogs. Choice architecture emphasizes that how options are presented can shape decisions (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008), and the choice architect is responsible for organizing the context in which people make decisions (Thaler et al., 2013).

Persuasion in communication studies generally refers to intentional efforts to influence attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours while preserving choice (Stiff & Mongeau, 2016; Hamm & Dunbar, 2006; Perloff, 1993; Bettinghaus & Cody, 1987). Travel vlogs can be situated within this tradition, as they provide narratives, recommendations, and personal experiences aimed at shaping audience perceptions of destinations. Nudging, however, differs in that it subtly modifies the decision-making environment so that certain behav-

aviours become easier, more salient, or more attractive without eliminating other options (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). In this sense, nudges can be understood as a specific form of influence embedded in the structuring of choices rather than in overt argumentation.

While traditional digital nudging research typically focuses on formal choice architectures embedded in interfaces, this study adopts a broader interpretation. In travel vlogs, the choice environment is shaped through narrative framing, repeated recommendations, and illustrative examples rather than menus or defaults. For instance, simplification, usually applied in interface design, occurs when vloggers suggest bundle passes or carrying cash to streamline travel planning. Such advice reduces cognitive effort, supports local infrastructure, and could encourage sustainable or culturally sensitive behaviour. In this sense, vloggers act as informal choice architects (shaping the informational context), and persuasive content operates analogously by guiding attention, highlighting trade-offs, and subtly normalizing certain behaviours. This perspective underscores that the boundaries between persuasion, marketing, and nudging are porous, and positions travel vlogs as an underexplored setting where these mechanisms intersect. Understanding these digital nudges offers valuable insight into how digital media can potentially contribute to more responsible tourism practices, especially in destinations experiencing high tourism pressure.

Criticism of Nudging

Despite its popularity, nudging has faced substantial criticism. Ethically, it is often seen as paternalistic or manipulative, particularly when users remain unaware of the interventions shaping their choices (Ewert, 2020; Hansen & Jespersen, 2013). Critics argue that it undermines autonomy (Blumenthal-Barby, 2013) by exploiting cognitive biases and heuristics (Grill, 2013; Reiss, 2013; Bovens, 2009). Questions of effectiveness and scope also remain: Loewenstein and Chatter (2017) caution that nudging is not necessarily the most effective policy tool, while Hansen (2016) points to its blurred conceptual boundaries with manipulation. These debates are even more salient in digital environments, where information systems deliberate-

ly designed to influence behaviour raise heightened concerns about transparency and ethics (Oz, 1992).

Literature Review

Digital Media and Tourism Behaviour

Social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok have emerged as essential channels for accessing in-depth information about tourist destinations (Javed et al., 2020), influencing their travel-related decisions (de Amorim et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2022; Islam, 2021; Magano & Cunha, 2020). Through curated destination images and informative travel content, these platforms significantly shape travel behaviours (Khan et al., 2022).

YouTube, the world's largest video-sharing platform, combines entertainment, information, and social connection (Khan, 2017) and enables users to actively seek and manage video content (Cheng et al., 2020; Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017). Travel vlogs, produced by influencers, travellers, or Destination Marketing Organizations, combine narration and visuals to deliver vivid and authentic portrayals of travel experiences (Xu et al., 2021), and help audiences gain a clearer sense of the destination (Xu et al., 2021; Peralta, 2019). People depend on them to gather information about travel destinations and other tourism and travel-related aspects (Volo, 2010; Buhalis & Law, 2008).

Studies confirm that travel vlogs stimulate visit intentions by providing information (Islam et al., 2024), enhance understanding of tourist preferences (Dai et al., 2022; He et al., 2021), and contribute to tourism development (Chakravarty et al., 2021). Their effectiveness, however, depends on content quality and perceived credibility, which strongly shape viewers' willingness to accept and act upon the information presented (Islam et al., 2024; Jog & Alcasoas, 2023; Silaban et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2020).

Nudging: Application in Online Environments

Originating in behavioural economics and psychology, nudging refers to subtle interventions that influence decisions without restricting freedom of choice or altering economic incentives (Hansen, 2016; Thal-

er & Sunstein, 2008). The core principle is that these interventions must remain easy and inexpensive to avoid, ensuring that freedom of choice is preserved (Riedlsperger, 2024; Zhao & Cheng, 2024). Spiliakos (2017) highlights that nudging challenges the assumption that humans always make decisions in their best interest and reveals how to 'nudge' individuals to more beneficial outcomes for them and society.

With the increasing digitization of everyday life, the concept has evolved into what is now referred to as digital nudging, defined as guiding user behaviour through design elements in digital choice environments (Schneider et al., 2016). Meske and Potthoff (2017) describe digital nudging as the subtle application of design features, information, and interactive elements to steer user behaviour in digital environments while preserving individuals' freedom of choice. Studies consistently show that nudging (traditional and digital) modifies behaviour in predictable ways (Meske & Potthoff, 2017; Mirsch et al., 2017; Weinmann et al., 2016; Hansen, 2016; Hausman & Welch, 2010; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).

Digital nudges can take multiple forms, such as simplification, framing, salience, social norms, etc. Among these, social norm nudges illustrate how people are influenced by what others do (Nahmias, 2019), either through the assumption that others are better informed or through the desire to conform (Riedlsperger, 2024). In digital contexts, digital nudging has the potential to reshape what is seen as socially acceptable behaviour (Dhar et al., 2017). For instance, Charry and Tessitore (2021) demonstrated that social media accounts with a large follower base can effectively encourage healthier food choices, with follower count itself acting as a persuasive social cue.

In tourism contexts, these insights suggest that YouTube vloggers may act as powerful digital nudgers. By combining authenticity, relatability, and wide reach, they can not only inspire visits and shape destination perceptions but also could promote socially responsible behaviours, positioning influencers as potentially valuable allies for the promotion of sustainable tourism practices, and the communication of appropriate behavioural norms.

Nudging Typologies and Applications

Nudging has been theorized through multiple frameworks. Thaler and Sunstein (2008) outlined six core principles of choice architecture (incentives, mappings, defaults, feedback, expecting errors, and structuring complex choices), while Beshears and Gino (2015) grouped nudges into three mechanisms: triggering System 1, engaging System 2, or bypassing both. Hansen and Jespersen's (2013) dual-dimensional model adds an ethical layer, distinguishing interventions by transparency and cognitive mode.

Other scholars have refined the typology by identifying more specific categories. For example, Acquisti et al. (2017) highlighted information, defaults, incentives, reversibility, and timing as central dimensions of digital interventions. Bhatt and Seetharaman (2023) synthesized the literature into eleven digital nudging archetypes, including defaults, social reference points, informational provisions, translation and mapping of information, salience through ease and convenience, giving feedback, warnings, and reminders, deceptive visualizations, priming and empathy, leveraging commitment, incentives, and just-in-time prompts. Their review also underlines that nudges rarely operate through a single bias; rather, they involve an interplay of cognitive mechanisms (Bhatt & Seetharaman, 2023; Mirsch et al., 2017).

Valta and Maier (2025) provide a comprehensive framework for categorizing digital nudging. They distinguish five application domains: societal, health, privacy, revenue, and work-related nudges, each reflecting a different sphere where subtle digital cues shape user behaviour. In addition, they identify ten specific techniques commonly used in digital environments: framing, status quo bias, social norms, messenger effects, priming, loss aversion, hyperbolic discounting, anchoring, simplification, and decoupling. This typology is particularly useful because it integrates both the contexts in which nudges operate and the concrete mechanisms through which they function, offering a systematic basis for analysing digital persuasion in practice.

In tourism, nudging research increasingly links to sustainability (Ni et al., 2025; Farshbafiyān Hosseinizhad et al., 2025, Jayaraj & Chandrakala, 2024; Yachin

et al. 2024; Mauro et al., 2024; Meske et al., 2024; Olya et al., 2024). Digital nudging has been widely examined in areas such as policymaking (Benartzi et al., 2017), healthcare (King et al., 2013), pro-environmental behaviour (Byerly et al., 2018), administrative law (Alemanno & Spina, 2014), education (Damgaard & Nielsen, 2018; Pugatch & Wilson, 2018; Benhassine et al., 2015), and consumer behaviour (Hoenink et al., 2020; Petit et al., 2018; Marchiori et al., 2017). Yet, direct investigations of digital nudging in the context of travel vlogs remain scarce.

Destination Image, Vloggers Credibility and Nudging

Destination image, understood as travellers' perceptions of a place that shape their travel plans (Jalilvand et al., 2012), remains a central concept in tourism research. In today's competitive market, building a distinctive and trustworthy image is crucial for attracting visitors (Huete-Alcocer & Hernandez-Rojas, 2022). With the rise of digital media, this process increasingly unfolds online, where user-generated content (UGC) such as vlogs is often perceived as more reliable than traditional promotional materials (Iordanova & Stainton, 2019; Akehurst, 2009; Agarwal et al., 2008; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008; Johnson & Kayne, 2003).

Research shows that vlogs shape destination image by influencing perceptions and stimulating travel intentions through audience engagement (Laurance et al., 2023). Their visually appealing content, engaging storytelling, and positive narratives foster stronger emotional connections and more favourable evaluations of destinations (Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2023; Zuo et al., 2023). Emotional attachment and social attractiveness factors conveyed in vlog content often weigh more heavily in decision making than purely rational information (Chen & Yang, 2023).

The effectiveness of vlogs, however, is closely tied to source credibility. Vloggers act as independent third-party communicators shaping users' attitudes and perceptions of destinations (Freberg et al., 2011), whose credibility is based on sincerity, professionalism, and attractiveness (Eisend, 2006). Prior studies confirm that credible speakers are more likely to be trusted (Xiao et al., 2018; Wheelless et al., 2011;

Hovland & Weiss, 1951), with source credibility identified as the strongest driver of audience engagement (Cheng et al., 2020). Furthermore, fandom-based identification can enhance this effect (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

The existing literature points to potential interdependencies between destination image, source credibility, and nudging. This study interprets them as forming a mutually reinforcing triad that has the potential to guide tourist decision-making, whereby nudging attempts in vlog content may be more effective when supported by a positive destination image and a trustworthy communicator – an assumption that warrants further empirical investigation.

Overtourism

Overtourism is increasingly recognized not only as an issue of tourist quantity but also as one deeply tied to the quality and type of tourism and how it is managed. The World Tourism Organization (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) et al., 2018) defines overtourism as a phenomenon where tourism exerts an excessive negative impact on locals' perceived quality of life or the quality of tourists' experiences. However, as Lindberg et al. (1997) emphasized, it is not just the number of tourists that matters: factors like visitor behaviour, length of stay, and the kind of tourism practiced play an equally significant role.

To expand on this, Koens et al. (2018) describe overtourism through concrete manifestations: overcrowded public spaces and disrespectful tourist behaviour (e.g. noise, disruptive 'beer bikes'), but there is also the transformation of urban amenities to cater to tourists rather than locals. These changes include the 'touristification' of shops and services, strain on housing due to platforms like Airbnb, reduced purchasing power for locals, and visible environmental degradation – from pollution to overburdened waste and water systems (Benner, 2020; González-Pérez, 2020; Panayiotopoulos & Pisano, 2019; Koens et al., 2018; Martín Martín et al., 2018; Milano, 2018; Seraphin et al., 2018; Freytag & Glatter, 2017; Gebhardt, 2017).

Particularly problematic are the cultural frictions it causes; residents report that tourism disrupts shared cultural values and leads to unpleasant social interac-

tions (Genç & Duman, 2019). Complaints from locals about Airbnb-related disturbances, such as excessive noise (mainly because of tourists' drunken behaviour) and perceived declines in neighbourhood safety, are also increasingly common (Gurran & Phibbs, 2017). Additionally, aesthetic deterioration due to overdevelopment, like the relentless construction of hotels and restaurants (especially in coastal areas), further erodes the visual and ecological integrity of destinations (Genç & Duman, 2019). These developments significantly reduce local quality of life, highlighting the urgent need to balance sustainable tourism with resident well-being.

Research Methodology

Research Approach

This study employed thematic analysis to explore the issues emerging in tourist destinations, as highlighted in YouTube vlog videos by travel vloggers. In addition, the study examined the specific factors vloggers emphasize to their audiences when discussing these destinations.

Data Collection

To collect textual data, YouTube videos were identified using the search terms 'vlog' in combination with selected city names (e.g. 'vlog Dubrovnik', 'vlog Zadar', 'vlog Šibenik', 'vlog Split'). Purposive sampling was used to select the videos. The inclusion criteria for video selection were as follows: the video must be publicly available on YouTube; presented in English; published between April 16, 2024, and April 16, 2025; categorized as a video (not a live stream or shorts); have over 15,000 views; include spoken dialogue or narration; and primarily focus on the city itself, rather than on unrelated meanings of the city name (e.g. the term 'split' may refer to a non-geographical concept in English). A total of 22 videos met the inclusion criteria; however, one video was excluded due to duplication, resulting in a final sample of 21 videos for analysis. Although the final number of videos was determined by the inclusion criteria, it is important to note that during the coding and thematization process, the final videos did not yield new themes but rather reinforced those already identified (e.g. repeated references to

Table 1 Number of Reference Points, Interpretative Codes and Themes Identified

Elements	Research Question 1	Research Question 2	Research Question 3	Total
Reference points	94	21	35	150
Interpretative codes	10	6	4	
Themes	6	3	3	

overcrowding). This suggests that thematic saturation was reached, confirming the adequacy of the sample size for the exploratory aims of this study.

The videos were transcribed, and the resulting transcripts (in Microsoft Word format) were imported into QDA Miner Lite software for coding and analysis. In cases where the video content covered multiple cities, only the segments relevant to the cities included in the analysis were transcribed and analysed. The primary objective of using this software was to identify word frequencies and patterns related to perceived problems in the destinations, as described by the vloggers. Thematic analysis (TA) was used to systematically identify, organize, and interpret key themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). TA was selected as it allows for a detailed and nuanced understanding of a phenomenon and is well-suited for analysing data derived from diverse sources, including literature, interviews, focus groups, and social media content (Berbekova et al., 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In this study, thematic analysis was conducted separately for each of the three research questions in order to maintain clarity and analytical focus. A total of 150 reference points were identified across all three questions. Reference points refer to individual segments of vlog transcripts that were relevant to the research questions. These reference points were then grouped into interpretative codes for each research question, which represent recurring meanings across similar references and provide a deeper understanding of the data in context. Finally, these interpretative codes were organized into overarching themes that captured broader patterns of meaning relevant to each research objective. For instance, the following open codes: 'Mass tourists there. Literally as soon as we got close to the Old Town, [...] it was just full of different tour groups'; 'So this place is tourist over-

load as expected. I actually read somewhere that for every resident there's 36 tourists there, it's supposed to be one of the most touristy places in the world'; and 'There are tonnes of people here' were grouped into an interpretative code referring to tourist density, which was then assigned to the broader theme of Overcrowding. In total, the analysis resulted in 6 themes for RQ1, 3 themes for RQ2, and 3 themes for RQ3. The number of reference points, interpretative codes and themes identified per research question is shown in Table 1.

This structured, question-specific approach to coding and thematization ensured that the data analysis remained closely aligned with the aims of the study. It also provided a detailed and nuanced understanding of participants' experiences as they relate to each research objective.

To enhance methodological transparency and minimize researcher bias, several reflexive practices were employed throughout the analysis. First, the themes were revisited multiple times, regrouped, and renamed where necessary to ensure that they accurately represented the underlying data and that no relevant aspects were overlooked. Second, the coding process was periodically paused and resumed in order to allow for fresh consideration of the material, a practice that supported intra-coder reliability. Although intercoder reliability was not applied, the analysis was informed and cross-checked against established frameworks in the literature on digital nudging, thereby strengthening the validity of the interpretations. Finally, reflexive notes were kept during the analysis to record emerging thoughts, potential biases, and alternative explanations, which were then revisited during the thematization process.

Results

To contextualize potential perspective bias, data were collected on 15 channels producing 21 analysed videos. Subscriber counts ranged from 5.8K to 590K (median 101K), with most channels in the mid-range (50K–200K) but an average (≈ 221 K) skewed by a few large accounts. Videos averaged 117K views (median 62K), showing substantial visibility even for smaller channels. Most creators were from Anglophone countries (US, Canada, UK), offering predominantly international perspectives on Croatian destinations, with some representation from regions such as the UAE, India, and South Africa. Content was mainly produced by mixed-gender couples, shaping the narrative style, while sponsorships were inconsistently disclosed. With the exception of two, all creators were travel-focused vloggers, reinforcing their credibility within the tourism domain.

The findings derived from the analysis provide insight into three key areas: the problems encountered in the destination from the perspective of the vloggers, the recommendations they offer regarding behaviour or practical advice for visitors, and the underlying motivations for publishing the videos.

RQ1 – Problems Encountered in the Destination

Climate and Weather Conditions

The collected narratives repeatedly emphasize discomfort related to high temperatures, with expressions such as ‘boiling hot July Croatian sun’, ‘almost 40 degrees’, and ‘an absolute scorcher’ highlighting the physical strain caused by the intense heat.

Vloggers often found sightseeing and physical activities to be exhausting or even inadvisable due to the lack of shade and extreme temperatures: ‘there’s zero shade on the whole walk’, and ‘the walls that you’re walking on are boiling hot’. Many suggested time-based visiting strategies, such as visiting ‘early in the morning or right before sunset’ to avoid midday temperatures.

Interestingly, while most comments referred to oppressive heat, a note of unexpected coldness was also recorded (‘I did not expect that the weather would be this cold’).

Comfort

The theme of comfort emerged primarily in relation to the physical environment on the beach. Vloggers described the discomfort associated with the rocky and pebbly nature of Croatian beaches (‘this is like giant pebbles that hurt’).

Although such discomforts are often presented with a touch of humour or tolerance, they nevertheless suggest that the natural environment – while beautiful – does not always meet typical tourist expectations of beach comfort.

Cost and Value for Money

A recurring theme in vloggers’ experiences is the perception of high prices, often presented as surprisingly high and/or excessive, especially Dubrovnik, which was mentioned the most, compared to other Croatian cities or nearby Balkan destinations. Many vloggers described the city as ‘extremely expensive’, ‘not one of the most affordable cities in the region’, and even ‘the most expensive city I visited in Croatia’.

Key areas where costs were considered high include attractions (e.g. €35 per person to walk the city walls), kayak rentals and cable cars, food and drinks, and accommodation, particularly within or near the Old Town.

Despite this, some vloggers still justified the higher prices by referencing the uniqueness of the experience, stating it was ‘100% worth it’ or that ‘you can’t really do anything about it because it’s a must-do’. Others advised visiting in the off-season to avoid peak prices and crowds.

One vlogger mentioned the risk of scams and buying from shady places. In the vlog, the vlogger mentions the high costs of services which are believed to have led them to seek out more affordable alternatives, resulting in them falling victim to fraud. This illustrates how the perception of high prices can push visitors towards unofficial ticket channels, increasing their exposure to fraud, further reinforcing the narrative of poor value for money or the vulnerability of tourists in a high-cost environment.

Infrastructure Challenges and Accessibility

Visitors frequently encounter challenges related to infrastructure and accessibility, particularly when arriving by car or travelling with luggage. One of the most commonly reported issues is limited parking availability, especially during the peak summer season, when lots near the Old Town become quickly saturated and parking prices are high. As one vlogger noted, 'parking can be an issue... they fill up quickly and are not cheap.'

These difficulties are compounded by the fact that Old Towns are not open to traffic, which creates certain accessibility challenges. Travellers often have to carry luggage across cobblestone pavements and up numerous steps, which can be physically demanding, especially for older visitors, families, or people with disabilities:

Given there are no cars within the city walls, if you're travelling with luggage, it can be exhausting hauling your baggage up and down steps and across cobblestone streets.

These conditions certainly highlight the need for better logistical planning, and potentially additional services, such as assistance with luggage and clearer information about alternative parking and accessibility solutions.

Overcrowding

A dominant theme that emerges from the vloggers' experiences is the problem of overcrowding, especially during the peak summer months. Tourists consistently describe (in particular) Dubrovnik and other Croatian destinations such as Split as 'extremely busy', 'full to the brim', and 'tourist overload'.

Crowding is especially intense in the Old Town, popular attractions, beaches and port areas, particularly when cruise ships dock, bringing thousands of tourists at once. Others adjusted their travel schedules to avoid the busiest times – opting for early mornings or late evenings – although many found that 'everyone had the same idea.' However, it is noticeable that overtourism significantly affects the enjoyment of the experience, leading some to advise limiting visits to

short stays ('48 hours are enough') or considering travelling out of season.

Additionally, the issue of noise, particularly at night, has been attributed to the presence of large numbers of tourists engaging in nightlife activities. This indicates that noise is not perceived as an isolated problem, but rather as a consequence of overtourism and inadequate regulation of tourist behaviour in residential or historical areas.

Service Availability

Vloggers' feedback indicates that service availability can be inconsistent, particularly during high season. While the cities are well-equipped with a variety of tourist-oriented services, travellers report issues with limited accessibility, unexpected closures, or insufficient capacity.

For example, one vlogger noted, 'we expected there to be seating and a spot to have lunch, but they closed the lunch area, so we got two small beers for five euros each.'

RQ2 – Recommendation and Advice

Avoiding Crowds and Managing Seasonality

Vloggers frequently emphasized the importance of avoiding peak season when visiting subjected cities. One vlogger noted, 'Try to avoid going in peak season like us, as it is a beautiful city and we would highly recommend a visit.' Many advised travelling in late spring or early fall, when the weather is still pleasant, but crowds are less: 'The best time to visit Dubrovnik is late spring or early fall... the weather is mild, and the crowds are much smaller than during the peak summer season.'

Timing is also key – a number of vloggers recommended visiting the city's popular attractions early in the morning or late in the afternoon to avoid the heat and crowds: 'You definitely want to walk the walls by 10am at the latest because after that thousands of people come off the cruise ships... and it will be absolutely packed.' Another stated, 'Entering the walls about an hour before close is a great way to experience fewer crowds and walk the walls without Dubrovnik's oppressive heat.'

Additionally, travelling off-season is considered more cost-effective:

Check the prices according to the time of the year. So, the cable car out of season is only 14 euros return. So, half the blooming price.

Even October was mentioned as an ideal time:

Good for us and not too many travellers right now. So, I think October can be a really good time to travel.

Finally, some vloggers highlighted 'secret' local tips, such as 'semi-hidden swim spots just outside the walls' as alternatives to crowded main beaches.

Cultural Awareness and Behavioural Expectations

Many vloggers emphasize the importance of respecting local customs, traditions, and public rules when visiting culturally rich destinations like Dubrovnik or Split. These reminders often come in the form of practical advice in their travel vlogs and can be seen as subtle digital nudges that will shape the behaviour of tourists (who will be watching the vlog) without directly imposing rules.

For instance, one vlogger explains:

They're very strict here with rules like don't wear bikinis. You must always be wearing a t-shirt... and you can't drink in public. There are apparently like 500-euro fines if you do any of those things wrong.

Another adds:

One thing you can't do is sit down anywhere in Split and eat food on the floor... maybe walking and eating is okay.

Additionally, several vloggers encourage environmentally conscious behaviour:

Make sure to minimize the impact on the city's ecosystems. Dispose of trash properly, avoid littering, and follow designated trails when exploring outdoor areas.

Practical Travel Tips

The majority of the vloggers' comments and practical tips specifically focus on Dubrovnik, as it was often described as one of the most expensive cities they had

visited. Many vloggers shared practical tips to maximize value for money and convenience when travelling to Dubrovnik. The most common recommendation was a Dubrovnik pass, which offers excellent value for money, avoiding long ticket queues, and has unlimited access to public transportation (which is especially useful for drivers who find driving in European cities challenging):

One huge tip, though, is to buy the Dubrovnik Pass online which costs the same 35 euros per person but includes way more like public transportation and a lot of other museums and attractions...

Buying this pass online also allows you to skip the long lines at the ticket office so you can go right in without waiting.

Exploring any European city in a rental car is not a good idea. So, it always makes sense that you get yourself these city cards, with which you can save a lot of money.

Another practical piece of advice was related to payment methods: 'Make sure that you carry some cash with you as they do not accept cards.'

This highlights the importance of being prepared for limited card acceptance in certain areas.

RQ3 – Motivation for Vlogging

Audience Growth and Channel Promotion

One of the most prominent motivations for creating travel vlogs is to promote vloggers' own channels and build a long-term audience. Throughout the dataset, there is a repetitive pattern of calls to action such as 'don't forget to subscribe', 'like this video', and 'check out our other videos'. These phrases are often positioned at the beginning and end of the video or strategically embedded before content transitions.

If you're interested in following along as we travel to 50 countries around the world then hit subscribe...

Please give this video a like, subscribe to my channel and make sure to check out my many other travel videos...

Be sure to check out our 'Top things to do in Dubrovnik' video...

So hit that like button and we'll walk you through the top things you need to do and see when you visit Dubrovnik...

We'll be releasing a complete food tour... so be sure to subscribe so you don't miss that.

The consistent repetition of these promotional elements highlights that a core motivation for many travel vloggers is not only to share information or experiences, but to grow their channel's visibility, influence, and monetization potential.

Commercial and Financial Incentives

In addition to building an audience and engagement, many vloggers clearly demonstrate a financial motivation behind their travel content. This is most evident through sponsorships and brand partnerships, which are explicitly stated in the videos:

Quick pause as we say thanks to the sponsor of today's video, Get Your Guide.

We're going to talk about the sponsor of this video, Olafly, which is an e-sim provider throughout the world.

That's why I'm so excited to introduce the sponsor of this video, Airlo.

These mid-video or pre-content shout-outs follow a typical influencer marketing format, where a short promotional segment is inserted either before entering a main attraction or during a scene transition. The use of phrases like 'we're excited to introduce' or 'today's partner' often comes with discount codes or affiliate links, suggesting a dual motivation: to inform and to make money.

Informative Intent

In addition to financial benefits, a significant number of vloggers demonstrate a clear intention to educate and inform their viewers. This motivation is often explicitly stated, in the form of promises of helpful tips and local insights aimed at helping viewers plan their own trips:

Stay tuned for some special travel tips to help you make the most of your visit.

Stick around to the end for some special travel tips that will help you make the most of your visit.

Dubrovnik, the world's most famous walled city. In this travel guide, we'll cover money-saving tips, how to beat the crowds, and how to experience Dubrovnik like a local.

How to reach the best viewpoints, insider tips on how to beat the crowds, how to sit on the original iron throne, and so much more.

These statements position the vlogger not only as a promoter, but also as an informal guide. Through this approach, vloggers build trust and authority within their community, which contributes to long-term follower loyalty. In addition, this informative component of the content often overlaps with digital 'nudges' – vloggers guide viewers towards better behaviours (e.g. avoiding crowds, cultural respect, sustainability), thus transforming the informative purpose into a tool for guiding tourists' behaviour.

Discussion

Problems Encountered in the Destination

According to existing literature, overtourism has adverse effects not only on the well-being of local residents but also on the quality of tourists' experiences (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) et al., 2018). Common concerns include noise, overcrowding (Koens et al., 2018), disruption of cultural values, and environmental degradation (Genç & Duman, 2019). The findings of this study confirm and contextualize these impacts within Croatian coastal destinations, as travel vloggers frequently report on excessive crowds, noise, and logistical difficulties such as limited parking and congested streets.

Vloggers also highlight significant seasonal price fluctuations, noting that prices in peak season can be up to twice as high compared to the off-season. This observation reflects not only a diminished experience for tourists but also a tangible economic impact on the local population, particularly in terms of purchasing power. While some discomforts mentioned in the vlogs (such as extreme heat or pebble beaches) are not directly linked to overtourism, vloggers still provide guidance on how to mitigate these issues. For instance,

they recommend visiting sites during early morning or evening hours, or travelling in the shoulder season, suggesting a role in shaping tourist behaviour.

Recommendation and Advice

In addition to showcasing their personal travel experiences, vloggers frequently provide practical recommendations (RQ2), such as the optimal times to visit specific locations in order to avoid extreme heat or large crowds. These suggestions are typically presented in the form of peer-to-peer advice and are shared through personal experiences, which enhances the persuasive power of the message due to its relatable and informal tone. While this supports existing literature on the influence of digital content in shaping tourist decisions, it also adds contextual depth by illustrating how vlogs could serve as informal, behaviour-guiding tools specifically tailored to the Croatian coastal destinations.

Moreover, many vloggers advocate for time-sensitive visits or off-season travel, implicitly suggesting behaviour change through informal digital nudging techniques. These findings extend the overtourism discourse by demonstrating how vloggers could act as intermediaries between tourist expectations and their on-site experiences, helping viewers navigate or avoid negative aspects of overcrowded destinations through adaptive strategies. This points to the potential for designing nudge strategies through travel content creators. By presenting responsible behaviour as practical and socially expected, vloggers can support destination management efforts while potentially encouraging travellers to adopt more responsible practices in the destination.

Vloggers frequently embed subtle digital nudges within their narratives, employing techniques such as framing (e.g. 'it's worth the price'), social norm cues (e.g. 'everyone comes early'), and anchoring (e.g. '€35 is a lot, but...'). These cues may shape viewers' perceptions of cost, comfort, and strategies for managing crowds, thereby potentially influencing how audiences interpret and evaluate travel choices. In this way, vloggers can be seen as guiding audience decision-making environments without overt or coercive persuasion. This study contributes to the literature by

empirically identifying and analysing these informal, embedded nudges within travel vlogs – an emerging but underexplored form of digital influence in the tourism context.

Digital Nudges in Vlogger Content: Potential Influence on Tourist Behaviour through Advice

This study provides empirical insight into how travel vlogs function as potential digital nudging tools within the context of Croatian coastal tourism; the analysed vlogs include behavioural cues that may consistently encourage more responsible and contextually informed tourist behaviour. Within the analysed vlog content, the study revealed the presence of several types of digital nudges: simplification, framing, priming, loss aversion, and the messenger effect.

In the analysed vlogs, vloggers regularly suggested visits outside of peak hours, strategic planning, and the avoidance of congested areas. These recommendations can be interpreted as temporal nudges, particularly priming and simplification techniques, which have the potential to influence tourist decision-making in ways that could reduce discomfort for visitors while contributing to a more balanced distribution of flows at the destination.

In addition to practical guidance, vloggers embed cultural and behavioural nudges into their narratives. By sharing local rules (e.g. dress codes, public drinking restrictions) and encouraging environmentally conscious behaviours (e.g. proper waste disposal), they may help reinforce social norms through relatable storytelling. These soft prompts could foster compliance without feeling overly directed or controlled, in line with normative nudging principles.

Further examples include simplification and framing nudges, such as suggesting tourists buy the Dubrovnik Pass or carry cash for easier transactions. These cues not only simplify planning but also potentially support the destination's infrastructure by encouraging pre-paid services and reducing congestion at popular attractions.

Another relevant dimension is the messenger effect. Vloggers themselves could act as persuasive messengers due to their perceived credibility, authenticity, and experience. Viewers tend to adopt recommen-

dations from trusted sources – statements like ‘make sure you carry cash’ convey informal authority, and may increase the acceptance of suggested practices.

Additionally, vloggers employ loss aversion nudges, highlighting potential fines (e.g. €500 fines for drinking in public or walking shirtless) or missed opportunities due to poor planning (‘absolutely packed after 10am’). These examples demonstrate how vloggers can potentially steer behaviour by emphasizing the costs of undesirable actions, a key mechanism in behavioural economics.

Theoretically, these findings align with Meske and Potthoff’s (2017) view of digital nudging as the subtle use of design, information, and interaction elements to guide user behaviour without limiting freedom of choice. In this sense, travel vlogs can be seen as informal choice architectures, where vloggers’ narratives and audience engagement function as interaction elements that enrich the informational context of tourism and potentially encourage more balanced and responsible practices. In several cases, multiple potential nudging techniques appeared simultaneously within the same vlog segment, reinforcing one another. This observation is consistent with prior research emphasizing that nudges rarely operate through a single cognitive bias but instead reflect the interplay of several mechanisms (Bhatt & Seetharaman, 2023; Mirsch et al., 2017). The study also reinforces the typology proposed by Valta and Maier, with observed nudges falling predominantly within the social and economic domains. This underscores the dual function of travel vlogs: while primarily designed for entertainment and information, they may also potentially serve to shape behaviour in ways that are socially and economically beneficial.

This study does not assess actual audience responses but instead identifies elements that could act as potential digital nudges. Claims about behavioural impact are therefore hypothetical and require testing through experimental or survey-based research. Some techniques overlap with broader persuasive strategies, underscoring the blurred boundaries between persuasion and nudging. Still, viewing vlog content through a nudging lens offers a useful starting point for understanding how subtle cues in digi-

tal travel content may shape tourist decision-making environments.

Motivation for Vlogging

Many vloggers present content that blends critical commentary with promotional messaging, often justifying high prices or discomforts with phrases like ‘totally worth it’. Their motivations appear to be two-fold: providing value to viewers while maintaining credibility and engagement. This dual role, as both informants and influencers, positions vloggers as hybrid agents who both narrate and potentially nudge.

Monetization also plays a substantial role in content creation, with vloggers fulfilling obligations to their sponsors. While digital nudging in this context may be more of a by-product than a primary intent, the potential behavioural influence remains significant. In this sense, vloggers emerge as accidental behavioural architects, shaping tourism patterns indirectly through their content, even when their primary goal is revenue generation or audience engagement.

Conclusion

This study examined how travel vloggers can potentially influence tourist behaviour through digital nudging, focusing on four Croatian coastal cities: Dubrovnik, Split, Zadar, and Šibenik. The primary aim was identify the presence of digital nudges in travel vlog content and to discuss their potential influence on tourist behaviour, with particular attention to the use of subtle behavioural cues. In addition, the research investigated how vloggers present destination-related challenges and what motivates them to create travel content.

Using a purposive sample of YouTube vlogs, a qualitative analysis revealed several recurring themes in response to the three core research questions. Regarding RQ1, vloggers frequently reported on key issues affecting tourist experiences, including overcrowding, noise, limited parking, traffic congestion, and high prices. These challenges were often communicated as cautionary advice for prospective visitors, grounded in personal experience.

RQ2 addressed the types of advice vloggers offer and how this advice could function as digital nudg-

es. Three broad categories emerged: (1) strategies for avoiding crowds and managing seasonality, (2) practical travel tips such as using city passes or carrying cash, and (3) behavioural expectations regarding local customs and regulations. Across all three areas, vloggers acted as informal digital influencers, potentially shaping tourist behaviour through a variety of nudging techniques. These included priming, simplification, framing, loss aversion, and the messenger effect, all of which may contribute to subtle but effective behavioural guidance.

Finally, RQ3 explored vlogger motivations, identifying three dominant drivers: (1) audience growth and content visibility, (2) commercial and financial incentives, often through sponsorships, and (3) a sincere informative intent aimed at helping viewers plan more enjoyable and responsible trips.

Overall, the study highlights the dual role of travel vloggers as both entertainers and informal behavioural influencers. Their content not only reflects tourist experiences but also could subtly guide behaviour. This offers opportunities for ways to manage tourist behaviour that are consistent with the goals of sustainable and responsible tourism.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of digital nudging in the tourism context by addressing a previously underexplored area: the role of travel vloggers as informal behavioural influencers. The findings suggest how digital environments, even outside formal institutional settings, can provide cues and exert potential influence on behaviour through subtle, non-coercive interventions.

In addition, the study aligns with the typology of nudging domains proposed by Valta and Maier (2025), illustrating how tourism-related nudges may fall within the domains of social influence and economic behaviour. Vlog content, though primarily created for entertainment or promotional purposes, could therefore be interpreted as a vehicle for social norm transmission and value framing in travel decisions. In doing so, this research fills a significant gap in the literature by bridging behavioural science, tourism studies, and digital media analysis. It underscores the

importance of integrating informal, peer-based communication channels into theories of behavioural influence, especially in high-mobility, experience-driven sectors such as tourism.

Practical Implications

This study highlights opportunities for DMOS, tourism marketing professionals, and policymakers to strategically collaborate with vloggers in promoting sustainable tourist behaviour. By embedding digital nudging techniques in influencer content, destinations could leverage vloggers' credibility and peer influence to address issues such as overtourism, congestion, and cultural insensitivity. For Croatian tourism in particular, several actionable insights emerge:

- **Simplification:** Promoting tools like integrated passes or bundled tickets could potentially reduce planning complexity while dispersing flows across both iconic and lesser-known sites, therefore reducing congestion.
- **Framing:** Presenting off-peak visits as 'exclusive experiences' or overcrowding as a negative may help shift behaviour toward more sustainable patterns.
- **Priming:** Associating less visited attractions with authenticity may encourage exploration beyond hotspots.
- **Loss aversion:** Emphasising what tourists risk missing (e.g. quiet mornings in the Old Town, avoiding queues) could motivate more responsible timing and choices.
- **Messenger effect:** Vloggers' credibility makes them potentially effective communicators of sensitive issues such as cultural respect, environmental awareness, or behaviour in heritage zones.

Altogether, DMOS could move beyond traditional influencer marketing by engaging vloggers not only as promoters but as partners in potentially shaping more sustainable tourist practices.

Limitations

Despite the valuable insights provided, this study is not without limitations. The analysis focused on a spe-

cific geographic and thematic scope (selected Croatian coastal cities), which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other types of destinations or cultural contexts. Additionally, only English-language vlogs were analysed, potentially excluding locally oriented digital narratives and culturally specific communication styles. The selection also favoured videos with higher view counts, possibly introducing a bias toward more commercial or polished content that may not fully reflect the diversity of traveller perspectives.

Moreover, the study primarily relied on qualitative interpretation, which, while rich in depth, may be influenced by researcher subjectivity. This study does not measure actual behavioural changes; it only identifies elements that could function as potential digital nudges. The absence of audience reception data, such as comments, shares, or behavioural tracking, also limits conclusions about how viewers actually interpret and act upon the nudges presented. Finally, the dynamic and rapidly evolving nature of digital content means that findings may be time-sensitive and subject to shifts in influencer practices, platform algorithms, or tourism trends.

Suggestions for Future Research

The findings open avenues for other further research. Comparative studies across platforms (e.g. TikTok, Instagram) or cultural contexts could reveal how digital nudging techniques are adapted and perceived by different audiences. Additionally, research in other types of destinations, such as rural, urban, or non-coastal regions, could help test the transferability of insights derived from Croatian coastal settings.

Future work may also employ surveys and experiments to measure the behavioural outcomes triggered by vlog content. Such approaches would strengthen causal claims and deepen the understanding of how digital nudges influence actual tourist decisions.

Furthermore, addressing the limitations of the present study – such as language bias, selection of high-visibility content, and lack of audience response data – would enhance the generalizability of findings. Incorporating multi-language content and a broader range of content creators could offer a more detailed view of digital nudging in tourism.

Ultimately, future research should aim to bridge the gap between digital storytelling and policy design, exploring how collaborations between content creators and DMOS can strategically promote sustainable, responsible tourism.

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Application of the New Visit Intention Model for Gastronomy Tourism: An Empirical Study in Vietnam

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The study aims to address research gaps in Vietnam's gastronomy tourism by developing and validating a new visit intention model based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). The model incorporates the concepts of gastronomic destination image and novelty-seeking to gain a comprehensive understanding of domestic tourists' intention to visit Ho Chi Minh City, a leading gastronomic destination in Vietnam. Primary data were collected from 417 domestic tourists through a questionnaire survey conducted in Ho Chi Minh City from April to August 2023. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed to test the proposed model and examine the relationships among novelty seeking, gastronomic image, attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and visit intention. The findings indicate that novelty-seeking, gastronomic image, and the core TPB constructs play a crucial role in explaining the intention to visit a gastronomic destination. The model explains 71.2% of the variance in visit intention, with domestic tourists' visit intention being strongly influenced by the desire for novel culinary experiences and the attractiveness of Ho Chi Minh City's gastronomic image. This study reaffirms the applicability of the extended TPB framework in explaining visit intention toward gastronomy destinations. The significant findings provide empirical evidence from Vietnam, clarifying how novelty-seeking and gastronomic image strengthen visit intention. The study also provides practical guidance for local authorities and tourism marketers to enhance Ho Chi Minh City's competitiveness and support sustainable tourism development goals (SDG 11).

Keywords: gastronomic image, novelty seeking, TPB model, visit intention, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 11), Ho Chi Minh City



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Introduction

Ho Chi Minh City is recognized as Vietnam's largest city and a significant economic, political, and so-

cio-cultural centre, serving as the country's primary gateway and a key tourism hub. As one of the busiest and most dynamic destinations in the country,

this city fosters a unique culture, promotes social exchange, and engages in global economic trade with international partners. Tourism is a key contributor to the local economy, particularly in the food and beverage sector. Revenues from accommodation and dining services reached VND 607 trillion, accounting for a 36.3% increase compared to 2022 (General Statistics Office, 2023), while accommodation revenue increased by 42.1%, and catering revenue rose by 35.7%. The total tourism revenue reached VND 61 trillion, representing an 82.6% increase. In the first quarter of 2024, the Department of Tourism in Ho Chi Minh City (2024) reported that domestic tourist arrivals exceeded 2.9 million, representing a 1% increase from the same period in 2023, and achieving 6.6% of the annual target. These figures highlight the significance of domestic tourists in driving the growth of the domestic tourism industry in Ho Chi Minh City, particularly in the food and beverage sector.

Recently, food tourism has garnered increasing scholarly attention (Park & Widyanta, 2022) and is recognized as a key motivator for travel (Li & Su, 2022). Gastronomy tourism is considered one of the most modern and effective strategies for developing tourism destinations (Balderas-Cejudo et al., 2019). Singh et al. (2024) emphasize the significant role of gastronomy tourism in attracting tourists, particularly in influencing travellers' decisions and behaviour intentions (Soltani et al., 2021). Specifically, tourists increasingly seek novelty and authentic experiences, reflecting the growing importance of traditional local culture in gastronomy tourism (Singh et al., 2024). In gastronomy, novelty seeking plays a crucial role in a comprehensive understanding of tourist behaviour, which positively impacts tourist attitudes, the image of gastronomy tourism, and tourist behaviour intention (Aydin et al., 2022; Li & Su, 2022). Therefore, understanding how novelty seeking influences domestic tourist behaviour in gastronomy tourism is crucial for developing effective marketing strategies for food tourism.

In addition, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), developed by Ajzen (1991), is recognized as a more effective explanation of tourists' intentions to choose gastronomy destinations (Sutiadiningsih et al.,

2023). However, recent studies suggest that TPB can be strengthened by adding additional constructs relevant to the food tourism context, such as those suggested by Angelakis et al. (2023) and Jiang et al. (2022). Angelakis et al. (2023) further argue that visit intention toward gastronomy could be better explained by integrating the characteristics of food tourism into the TPB framework. Consistent with this direction, recent international research has extended the theory of planned behaviour by incorporating additional constructs, such as novelty seeking, to enhance the predictive power of visit intention (Mohammadian Pouri et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). At the same time, prior research also emphasizes that destination image significantly influences tourist behaviour intention across diverse contexts (Abbasi et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2024). Collectively, this evidence supports the appropriateness of integrating novelty seeking and gastronomic image into the TPB framework to provide a more comprehensive understanding of visit intention in gastronomy tourism. Despite this, the empirical evidence on gastronomy tourism in Vietnam, particularly for domestic tourists, remains underexplored. Prior studies in Vietnam have noted that empirical research on food tourism remains limited and underdeveloped (Toan et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2018). Therefore, this study aims to address these research gaps by expanding the Theory of Planned Behaviour and integrating the concepts of gastronomic destination image and novelty-seeking to gain a comprehensive understanding of domestic tourist behaviour in gastronomy tourism in Ho Chi Minh City.

Specifically, the study aims: (1) to explore the interplay between attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behaviour control, and visit intentions toward gastronomy tourism destinations, (2) to assess a new framework that extended TPB model incorporates novelty seeking, and the image of gastronomy, (3) to identify the impact of gastronomic image and novelty seeking on tourists' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, and (4) to provide comprehensive insights into domestic tourist behaviour. The study contributes to the extant literature by applying an extension of the Theory of Planned Behaviour, incorporating novelty and gastronomic im-

age to explain visit intention. It also provides practical insights for tourism stakeholders to develop effective tourism marketing strategies, thereby strengthening the image of gastronomy tourism, attracting more domestic and international tourists, and ultimately supporting sustainable tourism development goals in Ho Chi Minh City.

Literature Review

Novelty Seeking

Novelty-seeking is a strong conceptual foundation for understanding destination choice behaviour (Wang et al., 2024). It is often defined as a tourist's curiosity and desire to explore novel or unique experiences (Fitri, 2021; Ji et al., 2016), particularly in the context of food tourism. Novelty seeking is also a primary motivation for travelling to gastronomic destinations (Aydin et al., 2022; Chang et al., 2018; Li & Su, 2022), particularly in pursuit of unique gastronomic experiences (Thipsingh et al., 2022). Li and Su (2022), Mun et al. (2018), and Pujiastuti (2020) further emphasized the strong relationship between novelty-seeking and attitudes toward visiting intentions, contributing to a deeper understanding of visiting intentions at gastronomic destinations. Novelty seeking has a positive and indirect influence on intention to travel via attitude (Borhan et al., 2019).

However, studies on the relationship between novelty-seeking and domestic tourists' perceived behavioural control and subjective norms in gastronomy tourism exhibit inconsistencies (Bayramov, 2022; Madha et al., 2016). Specifically, in some studies, novelty seeking showed no significant relationship with perceived behavioural control (Bayramov, 2022; Borhan et al., 2019). In contrast, Bayramov (2021) and Li et al. (2025) reported a significant relationship between novelty seeking and perceived behavioural control. In addition, novelty seeking did not correlate significantly with the subjective norm, according to Borhan et al. (2019) and Madha et al. (2016). Given these inconsistencies, Chang et al. (2018) suggested that further research should investigate how novelty-seeking impacts visit intention behaviour.

In addition, Aydin et al. (2022) found a positive correlation between the image of gastronomic desti-

nations and novelty-seeking; similarly, according to Pujiastuti (2020), destination image has a positive impact on novelty-seeking. In contrast, Assaker et al. (2011) found that destination image did not affect novelty-seeking. These different results underscore the need to further investigate the relationship between novelty-seeking, perceived behavioural control, and destination image within the extended Theory of Planned Behaviour. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1⁺: Novelty-seeking positively impacts tourist attitudes.

H2⁺: Novelty-seeking positively impacts gastronomy image.

H3⁺: Novelty-seeking positively impacts perceived behavioural control.

Gastronomy Tourism and Gastronomy Image

Gastronomy Tourism

Haddad et al. (2019) and Leong et al. (2017) noted that gastronomy tourism, culinary tourism, and food tourism are terms that have been used interchangeably to describe food-related special interest tourism activities, reflecting the relationship between tourism, food, and beverages. In this context, Thio et al. (2022) described tourists who seek unique culinary experiences and wish to explore and enjoy local food culture while travelling. Although these terms overlap, prior studies suggest that they should be distinguished conceptually (Kim & Ellis, 2015). Specifically, food tourism includes food-tasting activities offered by food producers and organizers at destinations (Berbel-Pineda et al., 2019; Haddad et al., 2019; Mora et al., 2021), while culinary tourism refers to the experience of exploring local gastronomy and sampling regional foods and drinks at destinations (Ghanem, 2019; Kivela & Crotts, 2005).

More broadly, gastronomy refers to a destination's culinary culture and food-related experiences, constituting a trip's experiential aspect (Haddad et al., 2019). According to the World Tourism Organization (2019), gastronomic tourism connects tourist experiences with local culinary culture, allowing visitors to enjoy local culinary events. López-Guzmán et al. (2019) also em-

phasized that gastronomic tourism encompasses a tourist product, destination attraction, food-related experiences, or cultural events. In this sense, gastronomic tourism is an alternative form of tourism that offers novel experiences in gastronomic activities (García-Pérez & Castillo-Ortiz, 2024; Kargiglioğlu & Aksoy, 2020). Importantly, gastronomy tourism reinforces local identities and cultural heritage, which aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11), Sustainable Cities and Communities (Padyala & Kallu, 2025)

Batat (2021) and Seyitoğlu and Ivanov (2020) emphasized the significant role of gastronomy tourism in establishing the destination's competitive advantages to attract and retain existing tourists (Batat, 2021; Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2020). In this regard, gastronomy tourism is one of the key motivators for tourists, alongside cultural and nature-based attractions (Bebel-Pineda et al., 2019; Chang & Mak, 2018; Vuković & Terzić, 2020). Accordingly, gastronomy tourism is crucial for building destination marketing strategies and alternative tourism products (Durmaz et al., 2022). Furthermore, Wang and Jie (2013) underscored that gastronomy tourism encompasses not only food and beverages but also gastronomy-related events, such as food culture festivals and farm visits. The gastronomy image plays a critical role in shaping tourists' attitudes and visit intention when visiting a gastronomy destination, aligning with the findings of Sánchez-Cañizares and López-Guzmán (2012), who emphasized that gastronomy tourism can also serve as a key motivator, encouraging tourists to return to destinations to explore and enjoy local cuisine.

Gastronomic Image

Tourists' attitudes are positively influenced by the image of a gastronomic destination, which refers to tourists' impressions of gastronomic products and culture (Keskin & Sezen, 2022). Conceptually, the gastronomic image encompasses the cognitive beliefs, emotions, and impressions associated with food, drinks, culinary activities, gastronomy culture, and restaurants (Eren & Çelik, 2017; Eren, 2018). In this sense, the image of a gastronomy destination is recognized as a multidimensional construct, encompassing both cognitive (rational) and affective (emotional) evaluations

(Chang & Mak, 2018). Previous studies have proposed a three-dimensional framework of food images, encompassing food and cuisine images, dining and restaurant images, and food-related tourism activities (Ab Karim & Chi, 2010). Beerli and Martín (2004) emphasized that these dimensions contribute to the overall destination image.

At the same time, several studies argue that gastronomic or food images can also be viewed as a holistic dimension of the overall destination image (Zain et al., 2018). This perspective emphasizes a holistic impression of gastronomy and food culture (Lin et al., 2022). Consistent with this holistic approach, the study focuses on the overall gastronomic image perceived by domestic visitors to Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Yang et al. (2021) report that food or gastronomic images have a positive impact on tourist attitudes toward gastronomy and subjective norms. Similarly, Ozdemir et al. (2015) discovered positive causal relationships between food image, behaviour, attitude toward gastronomy tourism, and intention to visit gastronomy destinations. Based on the above discussions, the following hypotheses have been suggested in this study:

H4+: The gastronomic image of a destination is positively related to attitude.

H5+: The gastronomic image of a destination is positively related to subjective norms.

In addition, prior studies suggested that the overall gastronomy image also significantly impacts attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, directly and indirectly affecting visit intentions to a gastronomy destination (Park et al., 2017). Anantamongkolkul (2021) and Hashemi et al. (2023) supported the idea that a positive food image has a positive impact on visit intention, while Bayramov (2022) argued that food image, or gastronomy tourism image, plays a prominent role in predicting visit intention when integrating into the extended TPB model. Based on the discussions above, the following proposed hypotheses are presented in this study:

H6:* The gastronomic image of a destination is positively related to perceived behavioural control.

H7⁺: The gastronomic image of a destination is positively related to visit intention.

Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), and the Extended Theory of Planned Behaviour

The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) model was first developed by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) to comprehensively predict behavioural intentions within a certain degree of volitional control. However, Madden et al. (1992) concluded that the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is considered an alternative model that better predicts behavioural intentions than the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) by adequately explaining behavioural intentions under only partial volitional control, due to the additional perceived behavioural control construct in the TPB (Ajzen, 1985). Numerous empirical studies have provided evidence that tourist behaviour intention is influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Su et al., 2020). Thus, three significant determinants in the original TPB model are attitudes toward specific situations, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, which significantly impact tourist behaviour intentions independently and play a prominent role in explaining complex tourist behaviour (Issariyakulkarn, 2019).

Empirical research supports the applicability of TPB across various situations, settings, and tourism fields related to gastronomy – including traditional food consumption behaviour (Hsu et al., 2018), food festivals (Horng et al., 2013), gastronomic heritage tourism (Botti et al., 2015) halal foods (Haddad et al., 2019), local food consumption (Zhang et al., 2016), culinary tourism destinations (Issariyakulkarn, 2019), foodie travel (Su et al., 2020), novelty seeking in food tourism (Li & Su, 2022), and food image (Bayramov, 2022). Since this model is recognized as a strong and comprehensive predictive power (Hsu et al., 2018), this makes TPB a widely examined model in empirical studies in the hospitality and gastronomy tourism research field. Similarly, Al Amin et al. (2021) claimed that the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is one of the psychological theories used to predict tourists' intention to visit gastronomy tourism destinations. In this context, the intention to visit a gastronomy tour-

ism destination is significantly influenced by three primary TPB constructs: attitudes toward gastronomy tourism, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control.

Additionally, several studies have asserted that the expanded TPB model can be more effective than the original TPB, as it integrates new latent constructs (Horng et al., 2013; Li & Su, 2022). These new additional constructs, including novelty seeking (Li & Su, 2022) and the gastronomy image of a destination (Wang, 2015), make the TPB model more robust, offering valuable theoretical insights into understanding and explaining visit intentions, which leads to the development of a new conceptual model. Therefore, this study added two new constructs to the TPB framework: novelty seeking and the image of gastronomy tourism, to more comprehensively explore and examine tourist behaviour intention. However, the relationship between tourist behaviour intention and actual behaviour is not a significant predictor of actual behaviour, aligning with the study by Dolnicar et al. (2019). Therefore, this study does not investigate the actual behaviour in the proposed new model, consistent with the results of Bianchi et al. (2017). The current study adopted the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), integrating novelty seeking and an image of a gastronomy destination to predict tourist behavioural intention. Based on the above discussions, the following proposed hypotheses are presented in this study:

H8⁺: Attitude is positively related to visit intention to a gastronomy destination.

H9⁺: Subjective norms positively relate to visit intention to a gastronomy destination.

H10⁺: Perceived behavioural control is positively related to visit intention to a gastronomy destination.

In summary, this study proposes a unified research framework that integrates novelty seeking and gastronomy image with TPB to address research gaps in gastronomy tourism research in Vietnam, particularly in Ho Chi Minh City. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework and the hypotheses in the structural model.

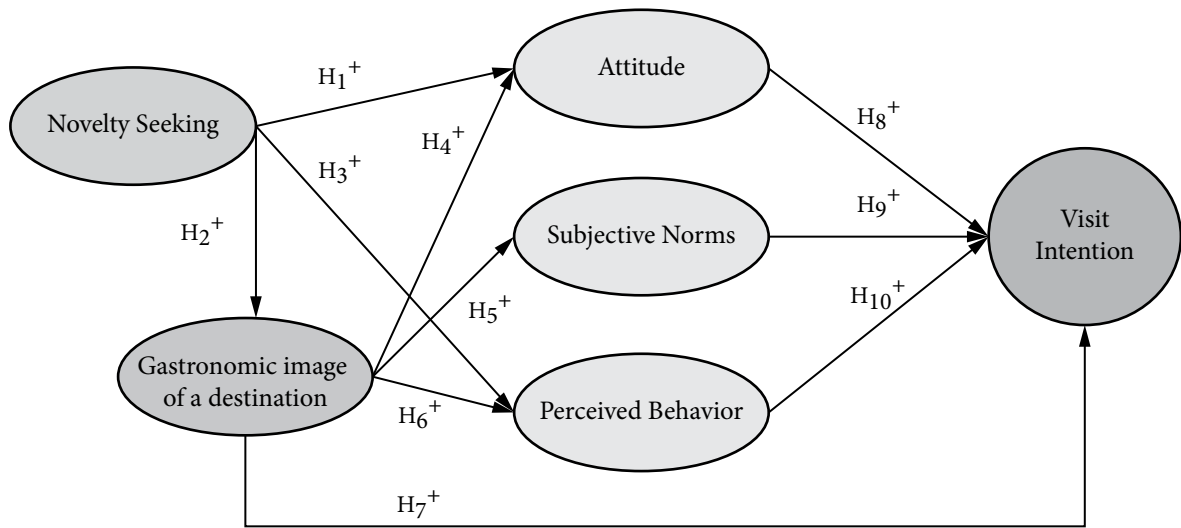


Figure 1 The new Proposed Conceptual Framework of the Study

Research Methodology

Research Context

Ho Chi Minh City boasts a diverse array of ancient architectural works and natural attractions, including the Saigon River and the Can Gio Mangrove Biosphere Reserve, recognized by UNESCO, which have contributed to the city’s charm, youthfulness, and dynamism. Moreover, the city boasts a rich collection of historical and cultural sites, including the Cu Chi tunnels and the Sac Forest Can Gio, providing unforgettable tourist experiences.

One of the key attractions of tourism in Ho Chi Minh City is its diverse gastronomy, which appeals to a wide range of customers. As Ngọc Hương (2022) notes, culinary tourism is a promising direction for attracting and engaging tourists through successfully established culinary streets such as Bui Vien (District 1), Ky Dai Quang Trung (District 10), and Ha Ton Quyen (District 11), identifying gastronomy tourism as a key motivation for developing the tourism industry in Ho Chi Minh City.

According to the Tourism Information Technology Centre (2023), Ho Chi Minh City has gained international recognition, including one Michelin-starred restaurant, 38 Michelin-selected restaurants and eateries, 16 Bib Gourmand restaurants, and one individual recipient of the Michelin Service Award. This recognition enhances Ho Chi Minh City’s reputation as a gastronomy destination, distinguishing it from other cities without international recognition.

In parallel, the city welcomed 5 million international and 35 million domestic tourist arrivals, resulting in an estimated total tourism revenue of 160,000 billion Vietnamese Dong (Department of Tourism of Ho Chi Minh City, 2023). These positive outcomes can be attributed to Ho Chi Minh City’s continued focus on tourism product development, in which gastronomy is one of the ‘strategic’ products to attract tourists, extend the length of stay, and enhance tourist spending. Moreover, the city’s annual gastronomy festival offers visitors the opportunity to explore the city’s diverse culinary scene, positioning gastronomy as a key attraction and thereby enhancing the city’s appeal.

Measurements of Items

The measurement items were developed based on prior studies to ensure the content validity and measurement robustness. The core constructs are formed from the original TPB constructs, including attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, as well as two additional constructs: novelty seeking and the image of the gastronomy destination. All constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Table 1 Measurements of Variables

Variable(s)	Code	Measurement	Original Sources	Decision
Novelty- Seeking (NS)	NS1	I like to learn about the different food cultures in Ho Chi Minh City	Ji et al. (2016)	Accepted
	NS2	I enjoy trying various foods and beverages in Ho Chi Minh City	Ji et al. (2016)	Accepted
	NS3	I seek new gastronomy experiences in Ho Chi Minh City	Ji et al. (2016)	Accepted
	NS4	I want to try unfamiliar foods and beverages in Ho Chi Minh City	Chang and Mak (2018)	Accepted
Gastronomic Image of Tourism Destination (IMG)	IMG1	The image of gastronomy tourism in Ho Chi Minh city is reliable	Yang et al. (2021)	Accepted
	IMG2	The image of gastronomy tourism in Ho Chi Minh city usually offers good value for money	Yang et al. (2021)	Accepted
	IMG3	Ho Chi Minh city usually provides a unique gastronomy experience	Bayramov (2022), Choe and Kim (2018), Park et al. (2017)	Accepted
	IMG4	Ho Chi Minh City is an appealing destination for gastronomy tourism	Bayramov (2022), Park et al. (2017)	Accepted
Attitude (AT)	AT1	I think that visiting the gastronomy destination in Ho Chi Minh City is a desirable behaviour	Chang et al. (2011)	Accepted
	AT2	I think that visiting the gastronomy in Ho Chi Minh City is enjoyable	Chang et al. (2018)	Accepted
	AT3	I think that visiting in Ho Chi Minh City is valuable	Anantamongkolkul (2021)	Accepted
	AT4	I think that visiting Ho Chi Minh City is interesting	Anantamongkolkul (2021)	Accepted
Subjective Norms (SN)	SN1	I want to take a trip after hearing about gastronomy in Ho Chi Minh City from friends and family	Su et al. (2020)	Accepted
	SN2	I want to take a food/ gastronomy trip to Ho Chi Minh City, which is popular among my relatives	Su et al. (2020)	Accepted
	SN3	Most people I know believe that choosing Ho Chi Minh City as a gastronomy tourism destination is a great decision	Bayramov (2022), Bianchi et al. (2017)	Accepted
	SN4	Most people whom I know think I would approve of my gastronomy trip to Ho Chi Minh City	Bayramov (2022), Lam and Hsu (2006)	Accepted

Continued on the next page

Table 1 Continued from the previous page

Variable(s)	Code	Measurement	Original Sources	Decision
Perceived Behavioural Control (PBC)	PBC1	I feel there would be nothing that prevents me from taking a gastronomy trip to Ho Chi Minh city	Bayramov (2022), Park et al. (2017)	Accepted
	PBC2	I feel I have sufficient resources, time, and opportunities to take a gastronomy trip to Ho Chi Minh City	Bayramov (2022), Bianchi et al. (2017)	Accepted
	PBC3	Whether or not I travel to gastronomy in Ho Chi Minh City is completely up to me	Nystrand and Olsen (2020)	Accepted
	PBC4	I have complete control over whether or not I choose to travel and explore the gastronomy in Ho Chi Minh City	Nystrand and Olsen (2020)	Accepted
Visit Intention (VI)	VI1	I will recommend gastronomy tourism in Ho Chi Minh City to others	Anantamongkolkul (2021)	Accepted
	VI2	I will visit the gastronomy tourism of Ho Chi Minh City in the future	Anantamongkolkul (2021)	Accepted
	VI3	I will leave positive reviews on social media channels about gastronomy tourism in Ho Chi Minh City	Anantamongkolkul (2021)	Accepted
	VI4	Gastronomy tourism in Ho Chi Minh City is my first choice for a holiday vacation in the future	Park et al. (2017)	Accepted

agree). Minor wording adjustments were made to fit the context of Ho Chi Minh City's gastronomy tourism.

Table 1 summarizes item codes, sources, and final decisions after the pilot test. Specifically, Novelty Seeking with four items was adapted from the studies by Chang et al. (2018) and Ji et al. (2016); the Image of Gastronomy Tourism was based on the research conducted by Bayramov (2022), Choe and Kim (2018), and Yang et al. (2021); Tourist Attitude with four items was adapted from the studies of Anantamongkolkul (2021) and Chang and Mak (2018); Subjective Norms with four items was adapted from the research of Bayramov (2022), Bianchi et al., (2017), and Su et al. (2020); Perceived Behavioural Control with four items was adapted from the studies of Bayramov (2022), Bianchi et al. (2017), Nystrand and Olsen (2020), and Park et al. (2017); Visit Intention to the gastronomy destination with four items was adapted from the study of Anantamongkolkul (2021) and Park et al. (2017).

All measurement items were satisfactory and retained after the pilot test because their factory loading met the recommended threshold of greater than 0.70, indicating that these items were clear and appropriate for evaluating domestic tourists' visit intention toward gastronomy tourism in Ho Chi Minh City.

Sample Design and Data Collection

Initially, a pilot test was conducted with 40 domestic tourists visiting Ho Chi Minh City to refine the wording of the questionnaire, ensure clarity, and accurately capture their interest in local gastronomy. A convenience sampling approach was used for primary data collection following the pilot survey. During the peak season, questionnaires were distributed directly to domestic tourists in Ho Chi Minh City between April and August 2023 at various tourist attractions, public spaces, and events across the city focused specifically on food and culture, such as the Food and Culture Festival 2023, the F&B Networking Fair 2023, and the

First Vietnam-ASEAN Culture and Food Festival. This timeframe was selected because the Department of Tourism of Ho Chi Minh City (2022) reported 2.1 million domestic tourist arrivals in the first six months of 2022. After thoroughly explaining the purpose of the study, the questionnaire survey was administered to domestic tourists, and their responses were collected for further analysis.

Hair Jr. et al. (2014) recommend a sample size of at least $p \times 5$ to ensure a reliable representation of the population, where p represents the number of independent variables. With 20 observed variables in this study, the minimum required sample size would be at least 100. However, Hair et al. (2017) suggested that small sample sizes can achieve high statistical power levels in Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). Additionally, using the formula provided by Burns and Bush (1995), a sample size of 385 respondents was reasonable, with a 95% confidence level and a desired accuracy of 95%. Therefore, this study suggests a minimum sample size of 385 respondents to ensure high reliability. The sample for this study consisted of 485 domestic tourists, collected through distributed questionnaires. However, 24 of these responses were deemed invalid due to missing items. Consequently, the final sample comprised 417 usable questionnaires for data analysis, representing 94.55% of the initial sample, which was deemed sufficient for the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling analysis, as suggested by Hair et al. (2017).

Because the study employed a convenience sample and collected all measures from the same survey using the same questionnaire and response method, the potential for common method bias needs to be addressed (Kock et al., 2021). To examine CMB in PLS-SEM, the variance inflation factor (VIF) was calculated using the full collinearity test for all latent variables in the model, following the recommendation by Sood and Sharma (2021).

Research Methods

The current study employs the PLS-SEM technique to explain and predict the overall relationship among all constructs in the proposed research model. The PLS-SEM technique facilitates the simultaneous ex-

Table 2 Summary of Respondents' Profiles

Indicators		Sample size N =	Per cent	skew-ness	kurto-sis
		417			
Gender	Male	199	47.7	-0.092	-2.001
	Female	218	52.3		
Age	18–22 years old	56	13.4	0.393	-0.062
	22–32 years old	192	46.0		
	32–42 years old	127	30.5		
	42–52 years old	38	9.1		
	Above 52 years old	4	1.0		
Educational Background	High school	50	12.0	-0.117	0.151
	College	107	25.7		
	Bachelor	217	52.0		
	Master and above	35	8.4		
	Other	8	1.9		

planation and prediction of latent variables, proposed hypotheses, and the structural model. This technique analyses complex relationships and their effectiveness in research (Hair, Tomas, et al., 2017). In this study, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed to evaluate and validate the proposed model, which integrates the extended Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) with two additional variable constructs – novelty-seeking and gastronomic image – to predict the behavioural intentions of domestic tourists to visit a gastronomy destination in Ho Chi Minh City for culinary experiences and enjoyment.

Analysis of Results

Respondents' Profile

The initial section of the survey gathers demographic information, including gender, age group, and educational background. Table 2 presents the demograph-

ic analysis from the survey, indicating that 47.7% of participants are male and 52.3% are female, with ages ranging from 22 to 42 years; 76.5% of respondents fall within this age range. Furthermore, over half (52.0%) of the respondents hold bachelor's degrees. This study also conducted normality tests to ensure the data's suitability for further analysis. The skewness and kurtosis values are acceptable, ranging from -2 to +2 and -7 to +7, respectively (Byrne, 2013; Hair et al., 2010). This finding confirms that the data demonstrates normality and meets the assumptions for subsequent analysis.

Analysis of Results

The measurement model used composite reliability (CR), Cronbach's Alpha (α), and average variance extracted (AVE) to test the structural relationships. The value of composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's Alpha (α) exceeded 0.70, while convergent validity is supported when the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeds 0.50 (Hair, Tomas, et al., 2017; Henseler et al., 2015). As reported in Table 3, the values for CR and AVE exceed 0.7 and 0.5, respectively, with all Cronbach's Alpha values surpassing the 0.70 threshold (minimum $\alpha = 0.852$), indicating good internal consistency. Additionally, all CR values surpass 0.900, which is considered acceptable (Hair et al., 2019; Henseler et al., 2016). Furthermore, AVE values exceed the minimum required level of 0.5 (the minimum AVE is 0.693), demonstrating strong convergent validity. These results indicate that internal consistency and convergent validity were satisfactory, effectively capturing a sufficient amount of variance in their intended latent constructs.

Discriminant validity was employed to ensure that the latent constructs in the proposed model are empirically distinct (Henseler et al., 2015). This study employs two criteria, the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the HTMT ratio, to assess discriminant validity. First, the Fornell-Larcker criterion is satisfied when the square root of AVE (the diagonal elements - in bold) is greater than its correlations with other constructs (off-diagonal elements). As shown in Table 4, the diagonal values are higher than the corresponding off-diagonal values (ranging from 0.833 to 0.864),

Table 3 The Reliability and Convergent Validity

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted (AVE)
AT	0.866	0.909	0.713
IMG	0.865	0.908	0.712
NS	0.871	0.912	0.721
PBC	0.866	0.909	0.713
SN	0.852	0.900	0.693
VI	0.886	0.922	0.746

Table 4 Discriminant Validity – Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	AVE value	AT	IMG	NS	PBC	SN	VI
AT	0.713	0.844					
IMG	0.712	0.729	0.844				
NS	0.721	0.570	0.637	0.849			
PBC	0.713	0.520	0.576	0.655	0.845		
SN	0.693	0.582	0.649	0.493	0.580	0.833	
VI	0.746	0.685	0.705	0.620	0.731	0.696	0.864

Table 5 Discriminant Validity – Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT)

	AT	IMG	NS	PBC	SN
IMG	0.841				
NS	0.657	0.733			
PBC	0.598	0.663	0.752		
SN	0.677	0.755	0.572	0.674	
VI	0.780	0.804	0.705	0.832	0.801

confirming discriminant validity according to the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Second, the HTMT ratio is also calculated as an additional measure to assess discriminant validity; values lower than 0.850 further suggest good discriminant validity (Hair, Tomas, et al., 2017). Additionally, Table 5 reported HTMT criterion results ranging from 0.572 to 0.801, all of which are lower than the threshold of 0.850 (Hair et al., 2021; Hair, Mult, et al., 2017; Henseler et al., 2015), indicating acceptable discriminant validity and further supporting the discriminant validity of the model. Overall, the measurement mod-

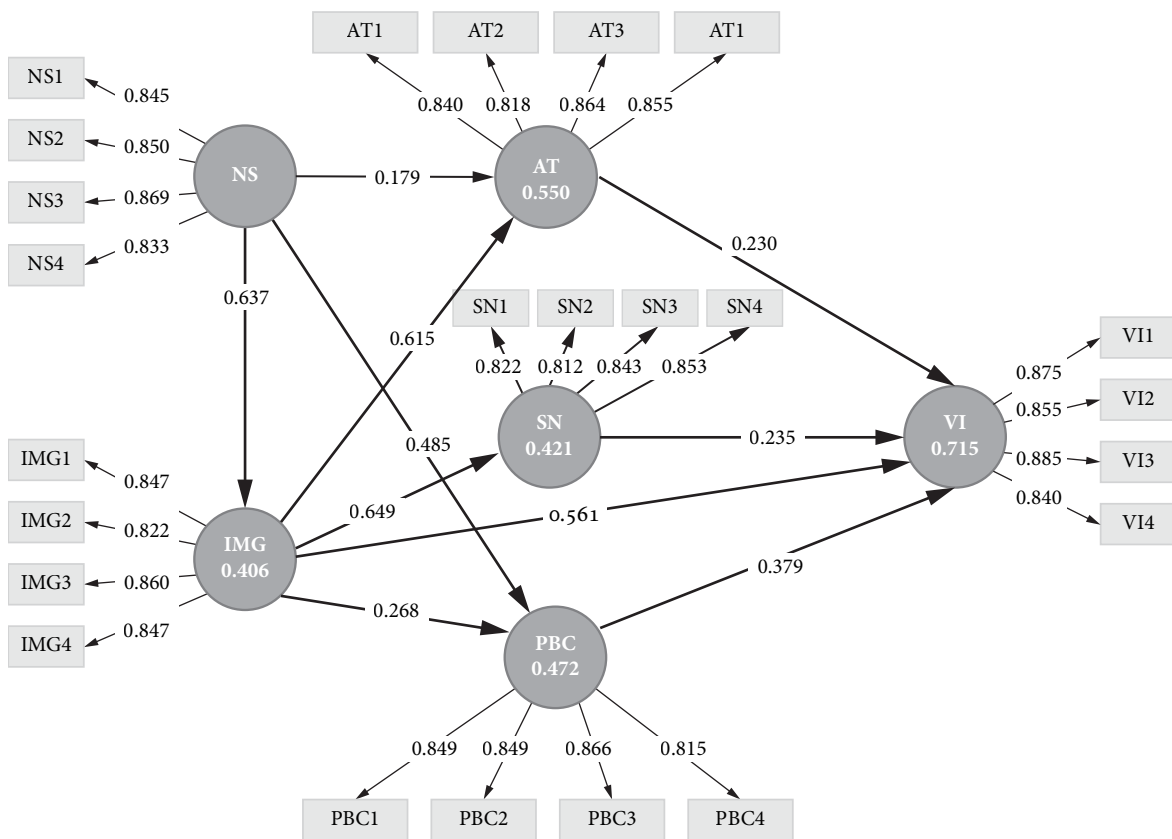


Figure 2 Result of the Proposed Research

el demonstrates satisfactory discriminant validity in addition to the previously established convergent validity.

Figure 2 presents the relationship among the constructs and the explanatory power of the proposed model, including standardized path coefficients and R² values for each endogenous construct.

R-squared (R²) values were employed to assess and evaluate the model’s explanatory power for endogenous constructs (Hair et al., 2017). R² values can be categorized as strong, moderate, or weak depending on the research context. As shown in Figure 2, the model explains the variance in domestic tourists’ visit intentions toward gastronomy destinations, with an R² value of 0.715 and an adjusted R-squared value of 0.712, indicating a statistically significant relationship that accounts for 71.2% of the variance in visit intention ($p < 0.01$). According to Hair et al. (2017), this

R² value ranges from strong to moderate, indicating good explanatory power of the proposed model.

As summarized in Table 6 and illustrated in Figure 3, the analysis results indicate that 55.0% of tourists’ attitudes are influenced by the destination’s gastronomy image and novelty-seeking behaviour. Novelty seeking accounts for 40.6% of the variance in gastronomic image. Novelty-seeking and gastronomy images explain 47.2% of perceived behavioural control, while the gastronomy image explains 42.1% of the subjective norm. Overall, the findings confirm a strong explanatory power of the novel proposed model, offering a comprehensive understanding of visit intentions toward gastronomy destinations in Ho Chi Minh City.

The results of hypothesis testing are summarized in Table 7. The hypotheses were tested using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples, as

Table 6 The Results of R-Square, R-Squared Adjusted

Variables	R-square	R-squared adjusted
AT	0.550	0.548
IMG	0.406	0.404
PBC	0.472	0.470
SN	0.421	0.420
VI	0.715	0.712

suggested by Hair et al. (2017). Figure 3 (structural model) and Table 6 show that all hypotheses are supported at the 0.05 significance level. The values of the path coefficients (β) in the structural model are provided in Table 6, indicating that the interplay between novelty seeking and tourist attitude is supported by H1⁺ ($\beta = 0.570, t = 10.024, p < 0.000$). H2⁺ proposed that novelty seeking significantly affects the gastronomy image, which was supported ($\beta = 0.637, t = 14.201, p < 0.001$). H3⁺ proposed that novelty seeking is positively related to perceived behavioural control, which was supported ($\beta = 0.655, t = 14.988, p < 0.001$). H4⁺ postulated that the gastronomy image has a positive effect on tourist attitude, which was supported ($\beta = 0.615, t = 10.732, p < 0.001$). H5⁺ hypothesized that the gastronomy image has a significantly positive influence on the subjective norm, which was supported ($\beta = 0.649, t = 14.333, p < 0.001$). The hypothesis H6⁺ posited that the gastronomy image has a positive effect on perceived behavioural control, which was supported ($\beta = 0.268, t = 4.290, p < 0.001$). H7⁺ posited that the gastronomy image had a positive effect on visit intention, which was supported ($\beta = 0.561, t = 10.024, p < 0.001$). H8⁺ posited that tourist attitude has a positive impact on visit intention ($\beta = 0.230, t = 4.017, p = 0.000$). The subjective norm has a positive and significant effect on visit intention, as proposed in H9⁺, which was also supported ($\beta = 0.235, t = 3.900, p = 0.000$). The results demonstrated a significant positive correlation between perceived behavioural control and visit intention, as proposed in H10⁺, which was also supported ($\beta = 0.379, t = 6.070, p < 0.001$). In summary, the path coefficient and p-value results signify that all hypotheses from H1

Table 7 The Result of Path Analysis

Hypotheses	Paths	Original sample (O)	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values
H8 ⁺	AT -> VI	0.230	0.057	4.017	0.000
H4 ⁺	IMG -> AT	0.615	0.057	10.732	0.000
H6 ⁺	IMG -> PBC	0.268	0.062	4.290	0.000
H5 ⁺	IMG -> SN	0.649	0.045	14.333	0.000
H7 ⁺	IMG -> VI	0.561	0.056	10.024	0.000
H1 ⁺	NS -> AT	0.570	0.051	11.295	0.000
H2 ⁺	NS -> IMG	0.637	0.045	14.201	0.000
H3 ⁺	NS -> PBC	0.655	0.044	14.988	0.000
H10 ⁺	PBC -> VI	0.379	0.062	6.070	0.000
H9 ⁺	SN -> VI	0.235	0.060	3.900	0.000

to H10 are significantly supported. Overall, the findings support the new gastronomy visit intention conceptual model.

Variance inflation factors (VIFs) and tolerance values were used to assess multicollinearity among the variables in the proposed model. Multicollinearity becomes a concern when the VIF exceeds 4.0 or the tolerance falls below 0.20 (Hair Jr. et al., 2014). As shown in Table 8, all inner VIF values range from 1.000 to 2.665, significantly below the threshold of 4.0. This suggests that multicollinearity is not a concern with these constructs within the model, thereby reinforcing confidence in the independence of the variables and their substantial contributions to the model. This finding further supports the utility of the new conceptual framework for comprehensively predicting the intention to visit gastronomy tourism in Ho Chi Minh City. Additionally, all variance inflation factor (VIF) coefficients for the variables were below 3.3, indicating that common method bias did not occur in this study (Kock, 2015; Kock & Lynn, 2012; Vu & Nguyen, 2025).

Table 8 The VIF Values of the Variables

	AT	PBC	VI
AT	0.000	0.000	2.262
IMG	1.682	1.682	2.665
NS	1.682	1.682	0.000
PBC	0.000	0.000	1.707
SN	0.000	0.000	1.993
VI	0.000	0.000	0.000

Conclusion, Managerial Implications, Research Limitations

The current study aimed: (1) to evaluate and validate the relationship between Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) constructs (attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behaviour control) and visit intentions, (2) to assess an extended TPB framework by integrating novelty seeking and the image of gastronomy tourism, and (3) to identify the impact of these additional constructs on tourists' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control in the context of domestic gastronomy tourism in Ho Chi Minh City.

The proposed framework demonstrates a strong explanation of visit intentions (adjusted $R^2 = 0.712$), indicating that the extended TPB model effectively explains the intention to visit gastronomy among domestic tourists in Ho Chi Minh City. Overall, the empirical results support all ten hypotheses and confirm that the proposed model provides a strong explanation of domestic tourists' visit intention toward gastronomy destinations. These findings are consistent with previous studies by Li and Su (2022) and Sukthankar et al. (2025), which confirm the significant role of attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control in influencing tourist visit intentions.

First, the current study revealed that the relationships between tourist attitude towards gastronomy tourism and visit intention ($H8^+$), subjective norm and visit intention ($H9^+$), and perceived behaviour control and visit intention ($H10^+$) were supported, respectively, which is in agreement with the prior studies of Horng et al. (2013), Li and Su (2022), and Sukthankar et al. (2025). Collectively, these results confirmed the effectiveness of the TPB for explaining the intentions of domestic tourists to visit gastronomy destinations in Ho Chi Minh City.

Second, the results supported hypotheses $H1^+$, $H2^+$, and $H3^+$, confirming that novelty seeking significantly impacts attitude, gastronomy image, and perceived behavioural control, consistent with the results of previous studies by Aydin et al. (2022), Bayramov (2022), and Pujiastuti (2020). Notably, the current study differs from Assaker et al. (2011), who found that novelty-seeking does not correlate with gastronomic image, thereby offering new theoretical insights into how novelty-seeking enhances a gastronomic image and leads to an increase in visit intention. In this sense, the study first attempted to fill gaps in the existing literature effectively and confirms the relationships between novelty-seeking, key TPB constructs, and gastronomy image.

Third, the hypotheses of $H4^+$, $H5^+$, $H6^+$, and $H7^+$ have been supported, demonstrating that the gastronomy image has a significant impact on attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and visit intention. These findings are consistent with several prior studies of Bayramov (2022), Ozdemir et al. (2015), and Yang et al. (2021). These results highlight that the image of a gastronomy destination significantly impacts tourist attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and the intention to visit Ho Chi Minh City. In addition, the study also found a substantial positive impact of novelty seeking on perceived behavioural control ($\beta = 0.655$, $t = 14.988$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that tourists who desire novelty-seeking may positively influence domestic tourists' intentions to visit, based on their perceived control behaviour. Overall, the findings underscore the critical role of gastronomy image and novelty seeking in driving visit intention and, therefore, are a key focal point in gastronomy tourism development. Consequently, gastronomy tourism development strategies should focus on enhancing novel culinary experiences and improving the overall image of gastronomy destinations to increase visit intention.

Managerial Implications

The findings provide practical implications and actionable guidance for local authorities in Ho Chi Minh City. First, the results suggest that the gastronomy image of the city, combined with new tourism

products and designs, and food and beverage activities, reinforces novelty-seeking, which can strengthen attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, thereby reinforcing the intention to visit (Sukthankar et al., 2025). Accordingly, tourism destination marketers can utilize these insights to develop targeted gastronomy marketing strategies and design new culinary tours and events. The local authorities can collaborate with travel agencies to create gastronomy tourism products that highlight the distinct food tours and culinary experiences offered in conjunction with other cities.

Second, marketers and local food providers need to improve tourists' perceptions of the local food in Ho Chi Minh City, as tourists who have a favourable opinion of local food are more likely to want to visit a destination for food tourism (Choshaly, 2025; Sukthankar et al., 2025). Such efforts can promote Ho Chi Minh City's position as a premier food tourism destination and attract more domestic and international tourists seeking culinary experiences and exciting adventures. As gastronomy tourism acts as a bridge between different cultures, enriching the experiences of both tourists and local communities (Xiaoxin et al., 2025), it can not only attract tourists but also contribute to the sustainable development of tourism, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set out in the 2030 Agenda (Padyala & Kallu, 2025; Paunić et al., 2024), particularly SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the contributions of this study, it acknowledges several limitations. First, the data were directly collected in Ho Chi Minh City from April to August 2023, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other cities or different tourist seasons in Vietnam. Future research should be conducted across various towns and seasons to develop a robust and generalized model. Second, the convenience sampling technique used in this study may have several biases. Therefore, future research could employ alternative sampling techniques, such as the probability sampling method, to mitigate the bias in the results. Third, the study identified key factors, as well as other potential

factors and additional latent factors that may influence visit intentions, which remain unexplored. Future research should extend the TPB model to include international tourists, thereby improving the prediction of tourist visit intention and actual behaviour.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the study addresses a key research gap in the existing literature by providing empirical evidence for an extended TPB framework for predicting domestic tourists' intention to visit gastronomy tourism in Vietnam. By underscoring the significant roles of novelty seeking and gastronomic image alongside TPB constructs, the study not only provides an advanced theoretical understanding of tourist visit intention but also offers practical insights for positioning Ho Chi Minh City as a leading gastronomy tourism destination, thereby enhancing the competitiveness of Ho Chi Minh City in global tourism markets and supporting sustainable tourism development goals.

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A Bibliometric Perspective on Health, Medical, and Wellness Tourism Research: Trends, Themes, and Future Directions

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Although medical tourism, wellness tourism, and health tourism have expanded significantly in recent decades, research has often addressed them separately, limiting comprehensive understanding of their shared development, particularly in response to global health disruptions. This study addresses that gap by conducting a unified bibliometric analysis that maps the thematic evolution, intellectual foundations, and collaboration patterns across health-oriented tourism. A total of 1,717 peer-reviewed articles published between 1974 and 2025 were retrieved through title-based searches from Scopus and Web of Science. Data were cleaned, merged, and analysed using the Biblioshiny 4.0 platform, with performance metrics, co-occurrence networks, thematic mapping, and international collaboration examined. The study also compares recent patterns with earlier bibliometric research to assess the continuity and divergence in the field's development. The analysis yields three key findings. First, academic interest surged post-2010, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, thematic clusters show a shift from treatment-focused medical tourism/health tourism toward wellness, mental health, and preventive care, suggesting a broader emphasis on proactive well-being. Third, co-authorship analysis reveals regionally concentrated networks with limited integration between Global North and South researchers. Theoretically, the study contributes to the Push-Pull Theory of Travel Motivation by integrating health-specific drivers such as affordability, safety, risk perception, and psychological well-being. It also adds to crisis-sensitive tourism literature by linking global disruptions to evolving motivational structures. Practically, the findings provide actionable insights for policymakers and destination managers seeking to align services with shifting post-pandemic traveller priorities and to reposition health-focused destinations in a more resilient global tourism economy.

Keywords: health tourism, medical tourism, wellness tourism, bibliometric analysis, COVID-19



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Introduction

Health tourism (HT) is defined broadly as individuals travelling abroad to access medical treatment (Figureddo et al., 2024) and includes medical tourism (MT)

and wellness tourism (WT) (Zhong et al., 2024). MT refers to travelling abroad to receive medical treatment, such as surgery or oncology, that is either too expensive or unavailable in one's home country (Jiang

et al., 2022; Zhong et al., 2024), while WT encompasses non-clinical services aimed at promoting well-being, including yoga, meditation, and spa therapies (Figueiredo et al., 2024). Therefore, while MT focuses on reactive action, WT is based on proactive treatment.

HT is one of the fastest-growing subsectors, comprising 15% of global tourism revenues (Pirnar & Altın, 2024). According to the Global Wellness Institute, its value increased from \$563 billion in 2015 to \$639 billion in 2017, with a 6.5% annual growth rate – twice that of the overall travel industry. By 2022, this growth was expected to reach 7.5%, surpassing the global tourism average of 6.4% (Jiang et al., 2022). This trend underscores not only the economic vitality of HT, but also its increasing alignment with broader shifts in health-conscious consumer behaviour. HT also enables service exports and medical knowledge transfer, particularly benefitting developing nations that position themselves as affordable, quality destinations for treatment and recovery (Lukose et al., 2024). For instance, Türkiye, Thailand, and Mexico have become prominent in MT, while regions such as Iceland, Bali, and Costa Rica have carved a niche in WT (Zhong et al., 2024).

Individuals' decisions to engage in HT are largely influenced by a balance between push and pull factors. Push factors are internal motivations rooted in dissatisfaction with domestic healthcare systems, such as long waiting times, high costs, bureaucratic complexity, or perceived inadequacies in service quality. These are especially potent when treatments are not covered by public or private insurance (Pirnar & Altın, 2024; Lukose et al., 2024). In contrast, pull factors derive from the appealing attributes of foreign destinations. These include advanced medical technologies, comprehensive treatment packages, multilingual staff, integrative wellness philosophies, and accessibility through low-cost carriers (Pirnar & Altın, 2024). Favourable currency exchange rates and positive destination branding also play significant roles in travellers' evaluations (Figueiredo et al., 2024). The Push-Pull Theory of Travel Motivation (Dann, 1977) offers a valuable lens to interpret the motivational spectrum behind HT. Push factors often involve emotional states like anxiety, fear of inadequate care,

or a desire to avoid long delays, while pull factors are based on perceptions of safety, quality, and cost-efficiency in foreign healthcare systems. The outbreak of COVID-19 reshaped this balance. On one hand, push factors intensified due to heightened distrust in local health infrastructure, pandemic-induced stress, and backlogs in elective care. On the other hand, destinations that emphasized safety protocols, holistic recovery, and mental well-being emerged as attractive alternatives, intensifying the emotional pull of wellness-oriented locations (Figueiredo et al., 2024). The pandemic's effects extend beyond behaviour – it transformed academic inquiry into HT. Recent studies, particularly from China, report that health awareness, health knowledge, and subjective health literacy have become central predictors of HT intention in the post-COVID era (Pu et al., 2021). These changes suggest a paradigm shift, which is instead of being a discretionary or luxury activity, HT is increasingly perceived as a strategic decision for physical and mental preservation. Moreover, COVID-19 triggered a surge in thematic interest toward 'risk management', 'mental health', and 'resilience' in tourism studies (Zhong et al., 2024; Figueiredo et al., 2024). Therefore, this study also seeks to answer the following research question: *To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the thematic structure and intellectual evolution of academic literature on HT, MT, and WT?* The research of Pu et al. (2021) indicates that even at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, in contrast to expectations about general lockdowns leading to a downward trend in tourism generally, people with high consciousness about their health indicated greater intention to apply for HT, MT, and WT. However, to answer this question in detail, we need to apply bibliometrics, one of the analyses conducted with big data.

Bibliometrics, originally developed in library science, is used to analyse large sets of academic literature, such that bibliometric studies frame representative summaries of the existing literature to examine and categorize bibliographic content (Donthu et al., 2020). Bibliometric analysis is particularly suitable for mapping the evolution of academic interest over time and identifying thematic shifts in response to major global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the sector's dynamism, bibliometric analyses of HT remain limited in scope. Several studies focus exclusively on MT without considering the broader wellness dimension (Virani et al., 2020; Habibi et al., 2022; Dhakate et al., 2023; Latief & Ulfa, 2024), while others study WT independently of the medical context (Gulyas & Molnar, 2023; Martins et al., 2023). Figueiredo et al. (2024) likewise performed basic bibliometric analyses on HT. However, this study focuses more on the 'sustainability factor of HT' as a systematic literature review covering only 93 articles. Moreover, analyses relying solely on regional or language-specific databases, particularly in Chinese, have inherent limitations in generalizability and coverage (Sun et al., 2022; Zhong et al., 2023). While Lukose et al. (2024) conducted a broader Scopus-based analysis, their study did not track post-pandemic keyword shifts or cross-database validation. Furthermore, Scopus is more comprehensive but less selective than Web of Science, prioritizing coverage over strict quality control (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). The authors call for future studies to analyse the effects of the global health crisis, particularly COVID-19, on this issue. Therefore, in terms of responding to this call, to understand the evolution of the HT, MT, and WT issues in academia more deeply with more comprehensive analyses and to see the effect of COVID-19, we believe that our study will be fruitful for both researchers and practitioners.

While prior bibliometric studies have examined either MT (e.g. Habibi et al., 2022; Dhakate et al., 2023) or WT separately (e.g. Martins et al., 2023; Gulyas & Molnar, 2023), this study uniquely integrates HT, MT, and WT into a single analytical framework. Moreover, unlike studies that rely on a single database (e.g. Scopus-only in Lukose et al., 2024 or CNKI in Sun et al., 2022), we use a dual-database approach to improve comprehensiveness and reduce database bias. Finally, our focus on post-COVID-19 thematic evolution, which is absent in most earlier works, adds timely value to the literature by revealing how global health crises reshape academic discourse. This positions our study as both broader in scope and more sensitive to crisis-induced shifts in health tourism research.

By analysing 1,717 peer-reviewed articles through Biblioshiny 4.0, we examine publication outputs, the-

matic evolution, keyword co-occurrence, and global collaboration networks. The use of both databases allows for comprehensive retrieval, better representativeness, and correction of platform-specific biases (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). This approach also reveals a theoretical shift in which the COVID-19 era amplified the salience of emotional, psychological, and subjective factors in HT decision-making. The literature now reflects increased attention to psychological variables such as behavioural intention, subjective knowledge, and perceived safety (Pu et al., 2021; Zhong et al., 2024). This indicates a deeper alignment between the Push-Pull framework and emotional travel motivations.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: Section 2 outlines the methodology; Section 3 presents bibliometric findings; Section 4 offers a theoretical discussion; and Section 5 concludes with contributions, limitations, and future directions.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a bibliometric analysis approach, which is widely used to explore the intellectual structure, thematic evolution, and collaborative dynamics of large bodies of academic literature (Donthu et al., 2021). Four research questions were developed to obtain a thorough grasp of "the literature in the fields of wellness tourism (WT), medical tourism (MT), and health tourism (HT):

- RQ1: *How well do studies perform in terms of trends in citations and publications?*
- RQ2: *How are studies about HT, MT, and WT conceptually structured?*
- RQ3: *How is health-oriented tourism research structured socially?*
- RQ4: *Has the thematic development of literature on health-oriented tourism been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Data Collection and Search Strategy

Data were gathered from the Web of Science Core Collection (WoS) and Scopus, two significant academic databases, to improve coverage and depend-

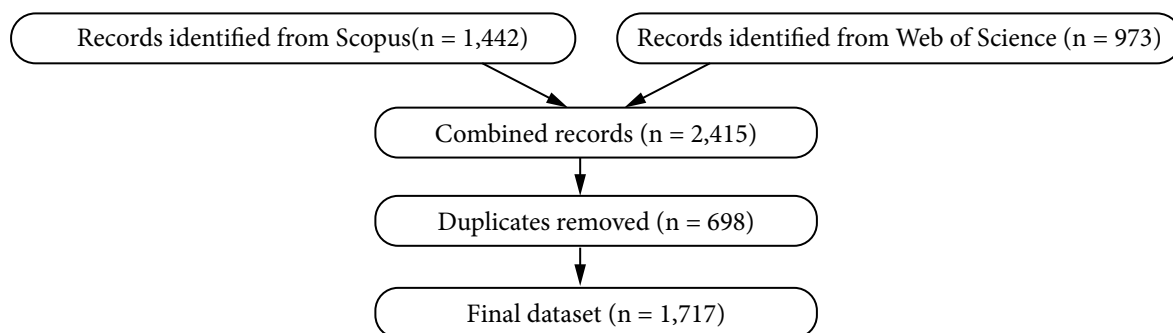


Figure 1 Flow Diagram of the Dataset Identification and Filtering Process

ability. WoS is renowned for its stringent indexing criteria, consistent metadata quality, and high citation reliability (Gavel & Iselid, 2008), whereas Scopus provides more coverage (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). For the analysis of multidisciplinary fields like HT, MT, and WT, the combination of both guarantees a thorough scope while preserving high data quality. To ensure accessibility and scholarly validity, the search was limited to English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles (Block et al., 2020), while conference papers, reviews, book chapters, editorials and non-peer reviewed documents were excluded. The search terms used were: 'health tourism' OR 'medical tourism' OR 'wellness tourism'. Searches were limited to the *Title* field to enhance topical precision. Searching abstracts or keywords could yield more results; however, limiting the search to titles helps exclude unrelated studies and ensures thematic precision. This method adheres to best practices for improving conceptual clarity in bibliometric research (Donthu et al., 2021). In addition, according to Kraus et al. (2020), if a title-only search yields sufficient literature for synthesis, this will suffice. Articles from 1974 to 2025 were included in the data that was retrieved on July 8, 2025. This period was not predetermined; rather, it developed from the databases' scope, as the first pertinent article indexed in Scopus was published in 1974.

Data Cleaning and Processing

The initial search yielded 973 records from WoS and 1,442 records from Scopus, totalling 2,415 documents. A customized R script in RStudio was used to merge and clean the datasets in order to remove duplication.

Based on author matching, title similarity, and DOI, duplicate records were found. After 698 duplicate articles were eliminated, the final dataset contained 1,717 unique articles. The flow diagram is presented in Figure 1.

Analytical Tools and Techniques

Bibliometric analysis was conducted using the Bibliometrix R package via the Biblioshiny 4.0 interface. Biblioshiny was chosen over other tools like VOSviewer because it has a full set of analysis tools, works with R, and has an easy-to-use interface that lets you do performance and conceptual structure analysis, track the evolution of themes, and map international collaboration all in one place. This software enabled performance analysis (publication and citation trends), co-word and thematic mapping for conceptual structure, and co-authorship and collaboration network analysis for social structure mapping. Keyword co-occurrence and thematic clustering analyses were conducted to identify core research themes, their temporal evolution, and the density and centrality of conceptual subdomains within the field. Keyword evolution and thematic clustering were also used to analyse temporal and thematic shifts associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 1 provides a summary of the cleaned dataset that was used for the analysis.

Results

The findings presented in this section address the four research questions posed earlier by analysing the bibliometric patterns of 1,717 health tourism-related publications.

Table 1 Main Information

Description	Results
Timespan	1974:2025
Data Retrieval Date	July 8, 2025
Total Records	2,415
From Scopus	1,442
From the Web of Science	973
Duplicate Entries Removed	698
Final Unique Documents	1,717
Sources	861
Annual Growth Rate %	9.55
Document Average Age (Years)	6.73
Average citations per doc	15.9
References	0
Document Contents	
Keywords Plus (ID)	2,619
Author's Keywords (DE)	4,017
Authors	
Authors	3,953
Authors of single-authored docs	274
Authors Collaboration	
Single-authored docs	334
Co-Authors per Doc	3.08
International co-authorships %	13.28

Performance Analysis

In this part, to answer the first research question, we analysed publication and citation trends using the figures below. Figure 2 illustrates the annual scientific production on HT, MT, and WT from 1974 to 2025. Three different publication phases are revealed by the results. The first time frame, which spans 1974 to 2007, shows a very early stage of research with very few publications, usually less than 10 annually, and little scholarly attention. Significant growth started in 2008 and peaked in 2010, most likely as a result of rising interest in cross-border medical services worldwide and new laws promoting health tourism in nations like India, Malaysia, and Türkiye. The yearly publication count increased steadily between 2011 and 2016, indicating that the field was becoming more established

and thematically diverse. From 2017 to 2022, scientific output increased sharply, peaking in 2023. This rise coincides with COVID-19, which raised global awareness of personal health and responsive tourism behaviour. The pandemic appears to have not only influenced practical HT behaviours but also intensified academic interest in the subject. Earlier bibliometric analyses (Sun et al., 2022; Zhong et al., 2023) noted similar growth phases but lacked attention to the pandemic's impact. Our study highlights COVID-19 as a pivotal catalyst for the exponential rise in publications, offering a stronger explanatory framework. This finding reinforces patterns observed by Zhong et al. (2023), who also reported a post-pandemic publication surge. However, our dual-database approach captures a more pronounced and globally representative trend. Interestingly, 2024 shows a sudden drop in the number of publications. This decline is most likely attributable to indexing delays or the fact that 2024 data were incomplete at the time of retrieval (July 8, 2025). Therefore, the decrease should be interpreted cautiously and not as a definitive reversal of the upward trend.

The average number of citations per publication annually is shown in Figure 3. Particularly in the early stages of the development of the literature on HT, the impact of citations seems to be very erratic. Interestingly, there are isolated peaks in 1987, 2000, and 2005, with an average of more than four citations per article. These spikes most likely reflect a few key or influential works that were released during those years and attracted ongoing scholarly interest. The average number of citations per year stabilizes a little after 2010, ranging from 1.5 to 2.5 citations per article. As previously noted, this time frame corresponds with a dramatic rise in the number of publications, indicating that although the field experienced a quantitative expansion, its per-paper impact became more dispersed throughout a greater corpus of literature. This illustrates how the field has developed and how the research topics within HT, MT, and WT have become more varied. This period coincides with a sharp increase in publication volume, as previously observed, suggesting that while the field expanded quantitatively, its per-paper impact became more distributed

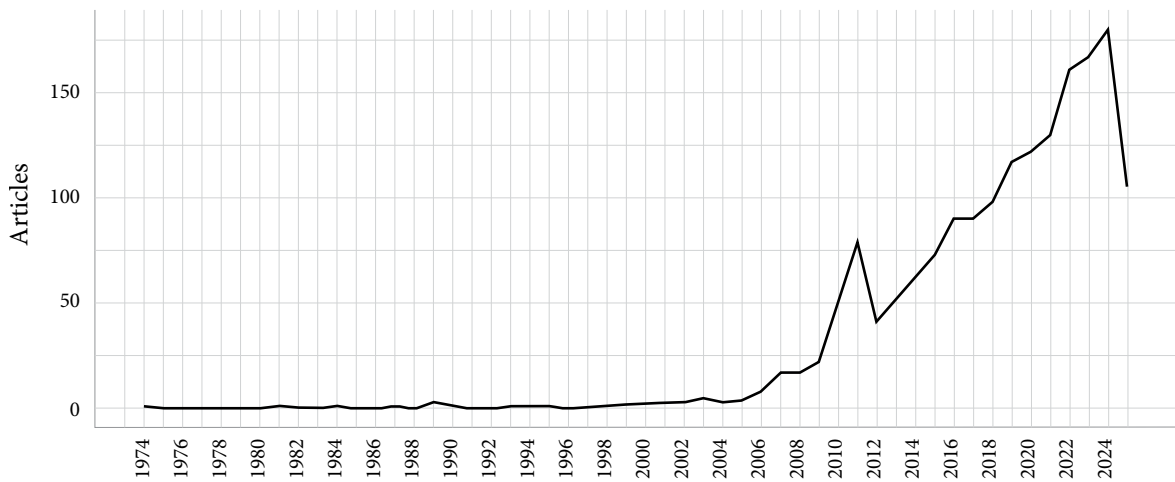


Figure 2 Annual Scientific Production

across a larger body of literature. This reflects the maturation of the field and the diversification of research themes within HT, MT, and WT. Similar to Figure 2, in the most recent years, a visible decline in citation averages is recorded (see Figure 3). This drop is not necessarily indicative of reduced scholarly impact but rather reflects citation lag; newer articles typically require time to accumulate citations. Thus, average citation data for the most recent years should be interpreted cautiously. Similar findings were reported by Lukose

et al. (2024), who noted that MT studies showed high volume but modest average impact. By combining Web of Science and Scopus, our study confirms this imbalance while also highlighting how the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated production, further widening the gap between output and citation maturity. This continuity with earlier bibliometric work reinforces the interpretation that HT scholarship is undergoing rapid expansion with delayed impact recognition.

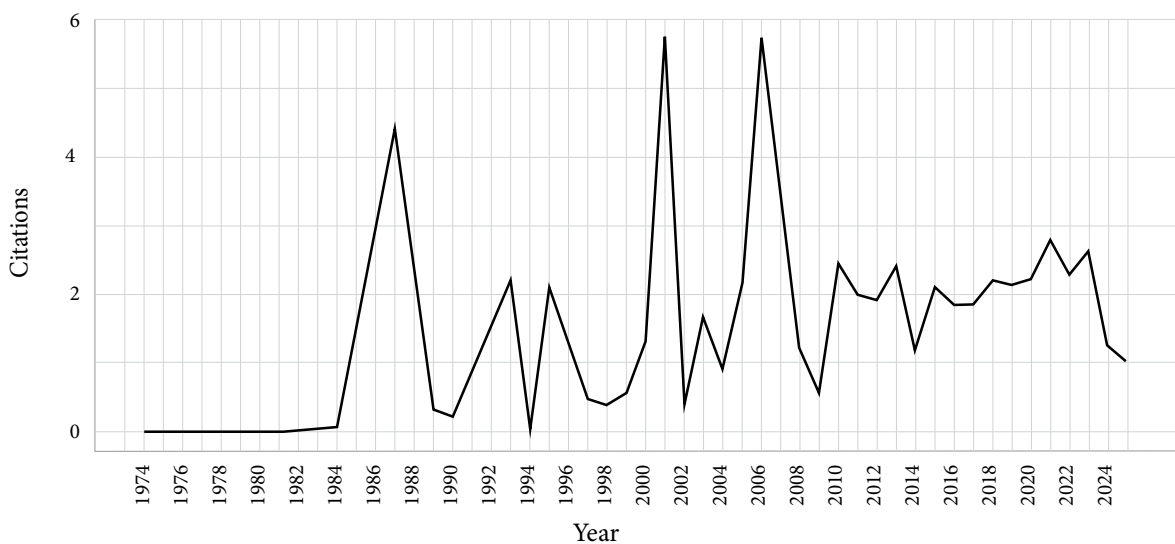


Figure 3 Average Citations per Year

Table 2 Sources of Highest Impact

Journal	TP	TC	h-index	g-index	PY_Start
<i>Tourism Management</i>	25	3,182	24	25	1987
<i>International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health (IJERPH)</i>	27	453	15	20	2019
<i>Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing</i>	18	804	15	18	2010
<i>Tourism Review</i>	21	661	15	21	2011
<i>International Journal of Tourism Research</i>	29	562	12	23	2010
<i>Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research</i>	16	341	10	16	2013
<i>Current Issues in Tourism</i>	13	448	10	13	2013
<i>International Journal of Healthcare Management Sustainability</i>	17	298	10	17	2014
<i>Sustainability</i>	39	344	10	16	2015
<i>Globalization and Health</i>	10	330	9	10	2011

Notes TP: Total Publications; TC: Total Citations; PY: Publication Year

Next, we analysed the 10 most impactful sources within this research. Table 2 provides us with the number of articles published in the relevant journal, their h-indexes, g-indexes, and the number of citations they have so far.

The journals in Table 2 are ranked in terms of their h-index, as it is advantageous in providing productivity and the impact of the journal at the same time (Walters, 2007). On the other hand, Leo Egghe proposed the g-index in 2006 as an enhancement of the h-index to more accurately gauge the worldwide citation performance of a collection of articles (Ali, 2021). *Tourism Management* stands out among these sources, earning the highest h-index and g-index. Since its first publication in the field in 1987, it has published a significant number of articles, and those articles have been regularly cited, demonstrating their academic impact and ongoing relevance. The prominence of *Tourism Management* illustrates the field's increasing integration into mainstream tourism scholarship, signalling that HT is no longer peripheral but part of the core tourism research agenda. The presence of *IJERPH* and *Sustainability* shows the interdisciplinary expansion of HT, linking tourism not only with health sciences but also with environmental and social sustainability debates. This diversification reflects how HT research is moving beyond a purely economic or service delivery perspective toward a broader frame-

work that includes well-being, resilience, and sustainable development.

Next, we identified the 10 most influential authors related to this study in Table 3.

The most important writers in the literature on health-oriented travel are compiled in Table 3 according to impact indices, total citations, and publication count. With 41 publications and 1,303 citations, Valorie Crooks is the most prolific author. She also has the highest h-index and g-index of any author. Her work, which dates back to 2010, is regularly published in prestigious journals and frequently addresses the accessibility, policy, and ethical aspects of medical tourism. Following closely behind is Jeremy Snyder, who exhibits comparable scholarly output and citation impact, indicating a strong working relationship between these two authors that is frequently seen in Canadian contexts. Despite having fewer publications, authors like Heesup Han and Leigh Turner have comparatively high citation-to-publication ratios, suggesting that their work may be more selective but heavily cited. Ying Li is a noteworthy latecomer to the field; she started publishing in 2022 and has already accumulated 252 citations from 15 papers, indicating quick scholarly traction and a significant emerging influence. It is also noteworthy that the most productive authors are not always the most cited. This suggests that while some scholars drive the field forward

Table 3 Author's Local Impact

Author	TP	TC	h-index	g-index	PY_Start
Valorie Crooks	41	1,303	19	35	2010
Jeremy Snyder	38	1,266	18	35	2010
Rory Johnston	28	1,072	16	28	2010
Leigh Turner	12	567	11	12	2008
Heesup Han	13	731	10	13	2012
Seongseop Kim	16	345	10	16	2013
Krystyna Adams	11	244	9	11	2011
Timothy Lee	11	347	9	11	2011
Sunhyup Hyun	8	540	8	8	2014
Ying Li	15	252	8	15	2022

Notes TP: Total Publications, TC: Total Citations; PY: Publication Year

through volume, others shape its intellectual influence through conceptual or highly innovative contributions. Table 3 reveals not only differences in publication volume and citation counts but also generational and geographic diversity in impact. For instance, while authors like Valorie Crooks and Jeremy Snyder have contributed consistently since 2010 with high cumulative influence, newer scholars such as Ying Li, who began publishing only in 2022, have achieved rapid visibility, reflecting the emergence of East Asian authorship in the field. Such asymmetry is typical in emerging research domains, where both foundational theorists and prolific contributors coexist.

We then checked the contributions of single-author and co-authored studies at the national level in Table 4.

Table 4 highlights the country-wise distribution of scientific output in health-oriented tourism. As evidence of its strong academic presence, the USA leads with the most publications and citations. Canada and Australia illustrate a 'high impact despite lower volume' profile; they achieve the highest AAC values, reflecting influential work published in widely cited international journals. This indicates that while these countries are not the most prolific, their contributions shape key academic conversations. In the case of Canada, this may be attributed to a small but cohesive research community (e.g. Crooks et al. 2010) that consistently publishes in high-impact journals and fo-

cuses on underexplored topics such as ethics, policy, and equity, areas with strong interdisciplinary appeal. For Australia, one possible explanation lies in the country's integration of wellness and environmental tourism, particularly in regions like Queensland and Tasmania, which attract international attention due to their eco-health offerings. Additionally, Australian institutions often publish in high-impact international journals and engage in cross-disciplinary work, linking health tourism with public health, indigenous studies, and sustainability. These interpretations are consistent with Lukose et al. (2024), who noted similar trends but did not offer in-depth country-level explanations. Our findings expand on theirs by identifying collaborative density and thematic focus as potential explanatory factors behind high impact-to-volume ratios in specific countries. Additionally, our results align with earlier bibliometric patterns (e.g. Donthu et al., 2021) which show that countries with targeted research agendas tend to yield higher impact despite lower publication volume. With a robust output and a lower AAC, China ranks second in terms of total publications, suggesting a trend toward quantity over impact. Similar to this, nations like Thailand, India, and Iran produce a lot, but their AAC scores are still low, indicating that their research profiles are still developing. Earlier bibliometric studies (e.g. Lukose et al., 2024) identified China's rapid rise in productivity but lower average impact, a pattern confirmed here.

Table 4 Country-Related Scientific Production

Country	General Status			Corresponding Author-Related			
	TP	TC	AAC	TP	SCP	MCP	MCP_Ratio
USA	422	4,757	26.40	180	166	14	7.8
China	357	2,747	15.20	181	154	27	14.9
Iran	221	674	7.20	94	80	14	14.9
India	190	836	9.00	93	90	3	3.2
Malaysia	177	1,378	16.20	85	73	12	14.1
South Korea	135	1,711	20.90	82	58	24	29.3
Canada	134	2,059	34.30	60	47	13	21.7
UK	112	1,364	27.30	50	35	15	30.0
Australia	96	1,885	41.00	46	36	10	21.7
Thailand	80	457	7.70	59	55	4	6.8

Notes TP: Total Publications; TC: Total Citations; AAC: Average Article Citations; SCP: Single-Authored Publication; MCP: Multi-Authored Publication

Our dual-database approach adds nuance by showing that Canada and Australia, often overlooked in Scopus-only analyses, exert disproportionate influence relative to their volume. High MCP ratios for international collaboration indicate active participation in cross-country research in South Korea, the UK, and Canada. In contrast, the MCP ratios for the USA and India are lower, suggesting a greater emphasis on domestic research. We also examined the most cited papers in the field as part of the performance analysis. The ten most cited papers in the HT field were thus examined.

Table 5 lists the most highly cited publications in the field of health-oriented tourism. The most cited article is Connell's study (2006) titled 'Medical Tourism: Sea, Sun, Sand and ... Surgery', published in *Tourism Management*, indicating foundational status in the development of MT literature. Mueller and Kaufmann study (2001) titled 'Wellness Tourism: Market Analysis of a Special Health Tourism Segment and Implications for the Hotel Industry', and Han and Hyun's study (2015) titled 'Customer Retention in the Medical Tourism Industry: Impact of Quality, Satisfaction, Trust, and Price Reasonableness' follow closely, suggesting both relevance and enduring influence in recent years. The dominance of Connell's contributions demonstrates how early conceptualiza-

tions of MT set the intellectual agenda for subsequent scholarship. Mueller and Kaufmann (2001) provided one of the first systematic frameworks for WT, which continues to serve as a cornerstone reference in WT literature. Han and Hyun (2015) advanced the field by applying service quality and customer satisfaction models, illustrating the convergence of marketing and HT. Connell's study (2013) titled 'Contemporary Medical Tourism: Conceptualisation, Culture and Commodification' Appears again among the top 5, demonstrating the author's sustained contribution to the domain. Horowitz et al.'s study (2007) titled 'Med-

Table 5 Most Cited Documents

Author(s)	TC	TCPY
Connell (2006)	542	27.10
Mueller and Kaufmann (2001)	414	16.56
Han and Hyun (2015)	372	33.82
Connell (2013)	369	28.38
Horowitz et al. (2007)	312	16.42
Abubakar and Ilkan (2016)	271	27.10
Lunt and Carrera (2010)	218	13.63
Yu and Ko (2012)	202	14.43
Crooks et al. (2010)	198	12.38
Hopkins et al. (2010)	192	12.00

ical Tourism: Globalization of the Healthcare Marketplace', though published in a medical journal, holds a strong citation profile, underscoring the interdisciplinary nature of the topic. This citation pattern suggests that interdisciplinary positioning, particularly within widely indexed journals outside core tourism outlets, may have contributed to broader academic visibility. Foundational conceptual works like those of Connell (2006) or Mueller and Kaufmann (2001) not only entered the discourse early but also addressed transferable themes – such as commodification, wellness, and service quality – that continue to resonate across disciplines. Previous bibliometric studies (e.g. Donthu et al., 2021) have similarly emphasized how early theoretical framing and cross-sector relevance enhance long-term citation impact.

Conceptual Structure

To address the second research question, we conducted a multi-layered analysis of the conceptual structure of the literature on HT, MT, and WT. Specifically, we employed three complementary bibliometric techniques: co-occurrence network analysis, thematic mapping, and thematic evolution analysis.

Figure 4 presents the co-occurrence network of keywords related to HT, MT, and WT research. 'Med-

ical tourism' emerges as the central node, indicating its dominant role in the conceptual landscape. Five major thematic clusters are identified. The first cluster (red), composed of health services, healthcare, medical tourism, Thailand, Malaysia, Canada, India, and medical travel, is renamed 'Medical Tourism Systems and Destinations'. The second cluster (purple) is composed of sustainable tourism, tourism development, wellness tourism, and sustainable development, and is renamed 'Sustainability and Broader Policy Perspectives'. The third cluster (blue) is composed of service quality, trust, satisfaction, behavioural intention, and destination image, and is renamed 'Service Quality and Consumer Behaviour'. The fourth cluster (green), composed of COVID-19, pandemic, mental health, and well-being, is renamed 'COVID-19 and Health Awareness'. The last cluster (orange), composed of motivation and tourist satisfaction, is renamed 'Tourist Motivation and Experience'. The structure suggests a multidisciplinary integration of tourism studies, health services, and marketing science, particularly intensified in the post-pandemic period. Moreover, the emergence of a dedicated COVID-19 cluster, closely linked with 'mental health' and 'well-being', reflects broader changes in tourist behaviour. As supported by recent studies, the pandemic triggered a significant

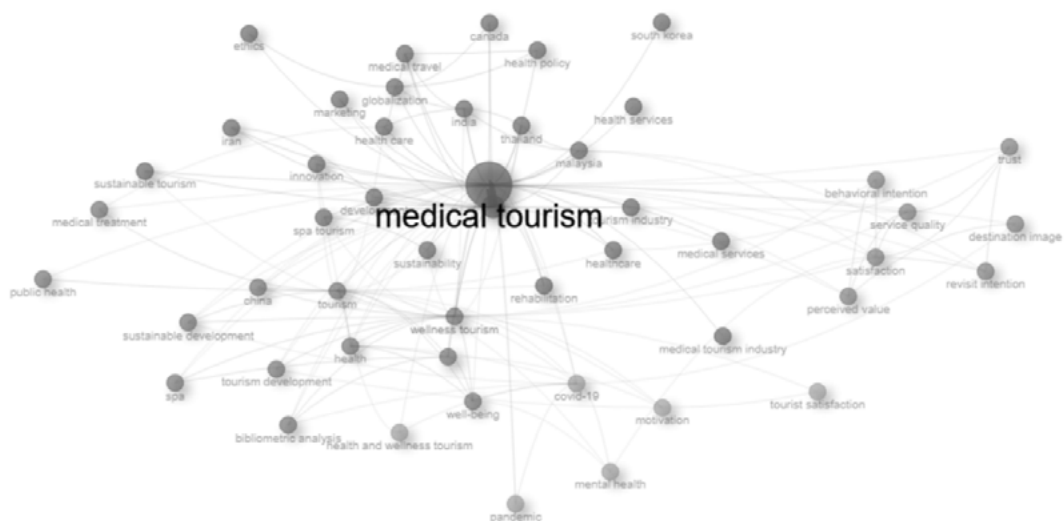


Figure 4 Co-Occurrences Network of Keywords

shift in preferences, from mass tourism toward small-group or individualized travel experiences, driven by heightened awareness of health and safety (Lo et al., 2025). This behavioural transition may help explain the growing academic focus on health-related tourism domains.

Thematic maps use centrality and density axes to classify clusters into four thematic quadrants (Sott et al., 2020). Centrality denotes the strength of interactions with different clusters and thus reflects the significance of the theme for advancing a specific domain (Saini et al., 2022), while density, conversely, indicates the robustness of the connections between the words within the group and assesses the potential for self-enhancement of the topic (Callon et al., 1991). The chart has four quadrants. As stated by Cobo et al. (2011), *Motor themes* (Q1) are crucial themes with high centrality and density and are thoroughly established themes that play a crucial role in organizing the research area; *Basic themes* (Q2) have strong cen-

trality but low development and relate to significant topics for the field, yet are still in progress; *Emerging or declining themes* (Q3) require qualitative analysis to determine their trend and are themes that are either diminishing in influence within the field or are just starting to appear; *Niche themes* (Q4) are clusters with high density and low centrality that could be isolated and signify particular subjects within the domain.

In the *Motor Themes* quadrant, we observe the cluster comprising ‘wellness tourism’, ‘wellness’, and ‘motivation’. These themes are well-developed and extremely central, suggesting that wellness-focused travel is not only a major force behind the current research agenda but also benefits from a body of knowledge that is reasonably mature and cohesive. Their stance highlights the change in academic focus toward lifestyle tourism experiences and preventive health behaviours. ‘Medical tourism’, ‘Malaysia’, and ‘India’ are fundamental and frequently mentioned subjects in the *Basic Themes* quadrant. The literature

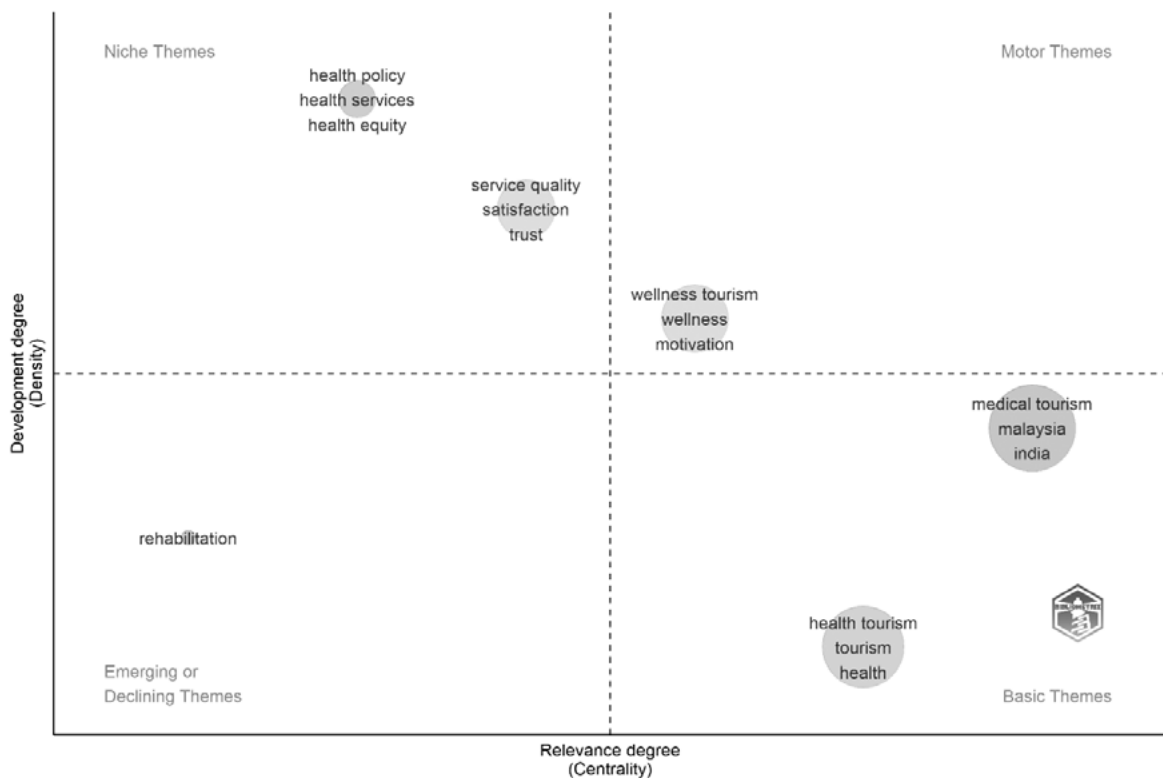


Figure 5 Thematic Map

is still wide, diverse, and conceptually less cohesive, even though these themes are extremely important to the field. This suggests that there is room for more in-depth theoretical growth and improvement regarding these fundamental subjects.

There are two different sets of concepts in the *Niche Themes* quadrant. The first comprises the specialized and developed subjects of ‘health policy’, ‘health services’, and ‘health equity’, which are probably related to health systems, governance, and access equity. The second micro-cluster, ‘service quality’, ‘satisfaction’, and ‘trust’, represents an applied marketing and consumer psychology angle. Although well-developed internally, both groups have limited centrality, suggesting that they are explored in isolated subfields or disciplinary silos rather than integrated into the mainstream tourism research discourse. In the *Emerging or Declining Themes* quadrant, ‘rehabilitation’ appears as an underdeveloped and peripheral concept. Because of its remote location, it may be a topic that is either in decline or has not yet received consistent scholarly attention in the larger body of literature on HT.

Thematic evolution analysis shows both continuity and transformation in health-oriented tourism literature. We selected 2020 as the cut-point year to see the impact of COVID-19. From 1974 to 2020, medical tourism remained dominant, with related themes

such as *rehabilitation*, *medical services*, and *health tourism*. In the 2021–2025 period, medical tourism still plays a central role, but new themes like COVID-19, cosmetic surgery, wellness tourism, and behavioural intention emerge. The explicit appearance of COVID-19 as a theme highlights the pandemic’s strong influence, marking a shift toward crisis-driven health awareness, service adaptation, and wellness-focused tourism trends. Our thematic evolution map broadly confirms Lukose et al. (2024), who found an early focus on practical and clinical aspects, mid-phase attention to legal and ethical concerns, and a post-2020 turn toward COVID-19, wellness, and sustainability. However, our dual-database analysis adds nuance by highlighting health equity and resilience as distinct post-pandemic themes that were not emphasized in their Scopus-only dataset.

Social Structure

This study uses a co-authorship network analysis, which illustrates the format of scholarly collaborations among authors, institutions, and nations, to answer the third research question and investigate the collaborative dynamics within health-oriented tourism research. This method aids in locating significant contributors, international partnerships, and the general interconnectedness of the research community.

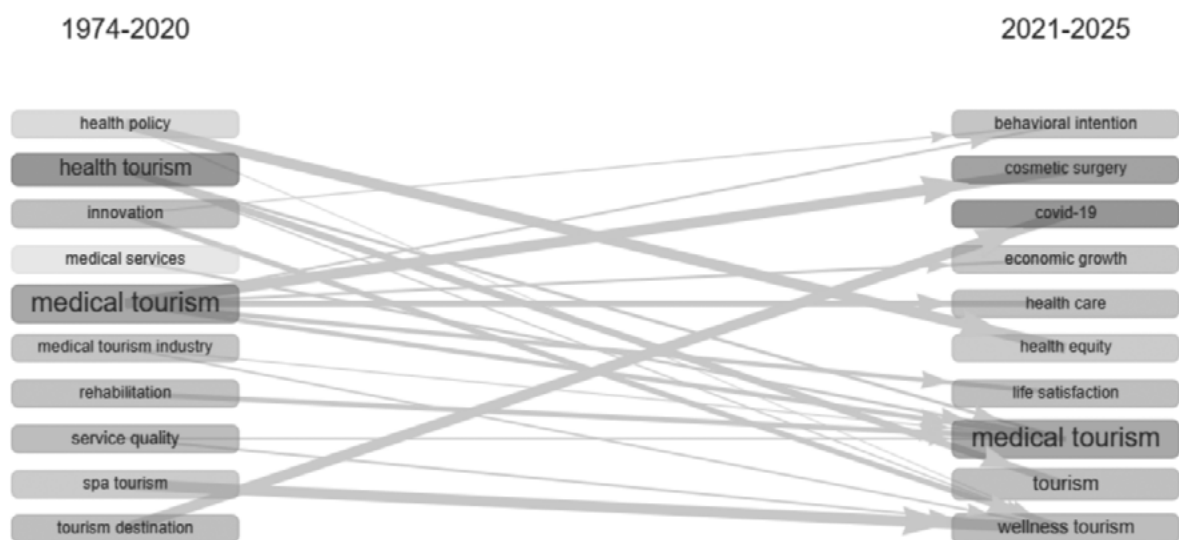


Figure 6 Thematic Evolution

According to Figure 7, the most prominent and densely connected cluster is led by Crooks V, who appears as the central figure in a strong Canadian research group including Adams K, Ormond M, Kingsbury P, and Labonté R. The size and tight connections within this purple cluster suggest sustained and prolific collaboration, likely producing influential work on policy, ethics, and accessibility in medical tourism. Researchers from South Korea, including Kim H, Kim S, Han H, Lee T, and Yu J, make up another distinct and closely related cluster. A cooperative academic community centred on customer satisfaction, service quality, and behavioural elements of medical and wellness tourism is exhibited by these authors (blue cluster). With numerous connections indicating a growing corpus of literature coming from China in recent years, the red cluster, which is centred on Liu Y, Chen X, and Li Y, represents a Chinese network. This group seems to be more interested in marketing-related and quantitative analyses. Smith M, Dryglas D, and Lubowiecki-Vikuk A are part of the green cluster, which most likely represents an interdisciplinary or European group focusing on specialized subjects. The orange group featuring Horsfall D and Smith R appears as a compact collaboration unit with limited external linkage. The clustering structure in Figure 7

reflects not only regional research hubs but also thematic differentiation across national contexts. Such co-authorship patterns often emerge due to national funding schemes, institutional collaboration incentives, and linguistic proximity. The prominence of the Canadian group may be tied to its policy-oriented research agenda and interdisciplinary outreach, while the distinct South Korean and Chinese clusters suggest regionally concentrated but growing engagement. These patterns underline the field's current fragmentation, but also its potential for convergence as thematic overlaps increase.

The Impact of COVID-19

Finally, we reviewed the figures gathered throughout the results section to answer the fourth research question. Several visual analyses clearly demonstrate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the development of research about health tourism. Figure 1 shows that publication output increased significantly beginning in 2020 and peaked in 2023. This increasing trend is consistent with the global health crisis and reflects heightened scholarly interest in subjects such as perceptions of travel risk, personal well-being, and cross-border healthcare. Further evidence that the pandemic affected the volume and thematic scope of

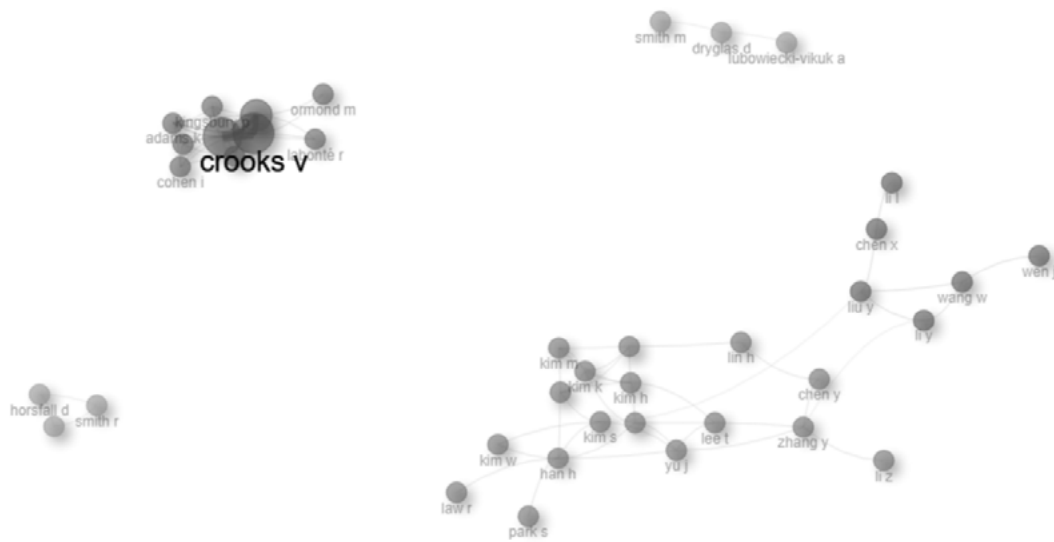


Figure 7 Co-Authorship Analysis

research is provided by Figure 3, which displays 'COVID-19' forming a visible cluster with terms like 'mental health', 'well-being', and 'pandemic'.

These connections highlight the increasing attention being paid by academics to psychosocial factors and preventive health practices. More specifically, Figure 6 identifies 'COVID-19' as a major and developing theme from 2021 to 2025, creating conceptual connections with terms like 'economic growth', 'health equity', and 'cosmetic surgery'. This implies that the pandemic broadened the field's interdisciplinary scope to include equity, healthcare infrastructure, and elective procedures in addition to inspiring new directions in the field. When combined, the visual evidence points to COVID-19 as a pivotal event that sped up the field's growth and changed its conceptual framework to include more varied, health-policy-conscious, and human-centred research topics.

Discussion

This study presents a comprehensive bibliometric overview of the health, medical, and wellness tourism literature, covering nearly five decades of scholarly work and illustrating how research priorities have evolved in response to global crises such as COVID-19. The findings reveal not only a quantitative growth in publications but also a qualitative shift in the conceptual architecture of the field. While earlier studies largely focused on infrastructure, service delivery, and destination attractiveness, more recent scholarship has turned toward themes such as mental health, subjective well-being, and resilience. These emerging themes signal a deeper engagement with the effective and psychological dimensions of health-oriented travel, marking a significant shift from reactive to proactive understandings of HT.

The pandemic has served as a critical juncture, reconfiguring both traveller motivations and research agendas. The increased prominence of keywords such as 'COVID-19', 'mental health', and 'well-being' in co-occurrence networks and thematic evolution analyses confirms the transformative impact of the crisis. From the perspective of the Push-Pull Theory of Travel Motivation (Dann, 1977), COVID-19 functions primarily as a macro-level push factor. It height-

ened travellers' anxieties, disrupted local healthcare systems, and elevated concerns over health and safety, thereby pushing individuals to seek alternatives abroad. These push factors were no longer limited to structural deficiencies like long waiting times or high costs but now encompassed deeper psychological drivers, including health anxiety, burnout, and the pursuit of emotional recovery. Conversely, destinations that responded with strict safety protocols, wellness-focused environments, and holistic treatment options became attractive through enhanced pull factors. These included spa retreats, forest resorts, and integrative therapies, all of which are perceived as both safe and restorative in a post-pandemic world. This evolving balance between push and pull reflects a broader transformation in the underlying motivations for health-related travel. No longer driven solely by physical needs or treatment access, motivations now often stem from subjective perceptions of well-being, trust, and empowerment.

A closer examination of the five major thematic clusters identified in the co-word analysis further clarifies this dynamic. The 'COVID-19 and Health Awareness' cluster encapsulates the immediate and long-term consequences of the pandemic, not just as a medical crisis but as a psychological and social one. Here, COVID-19 acts as a powerful push factor, triggering health-related anxieties and highlighting systemic vulnerabilities. Travellers were compelled to seek destinations offering a sense of safety, leading to the emergence of new pull factors such as 'mental wellness', 'resilience', and 'safety protocols'. The other cluster, centred around 'Tourist Motivation and Experience', exemplifies the shift from curative to preventive tourism. Push motivations in this cluster stem from stress, fatigue, and a desire for balance in increasingly complex urban lives. Pull factors include the availability of nature-based therapies, yoga, meditation, and personalized wellness programmes. Importantly, this cluster shows the growing centrality of wellness in health tourism discourse, suggesting that WT is no longer a subfield but a dominant conceptual pillar. In contrast, the 'Medical Tourism Systems and Destinations' cluster remains rooted in traditional pull factors such as affordability, procedural exper-

tise, and destination branding. Yet even this area has begun to shift, with patients increasingly considering non-medical factors like post-operative care quality, emotional support, and institutional transparency. The push factors here remain more structural – long waits, high costs, or inadequate care in home systems – but are now being complemented by emotional and trust-related concerns. In another cluster, ‘Service Quality and Consumer Behaviour’, although positioned as a niche theme in the thematic map, has critical implications for the field’s evolution. Trust, often seen as a pull factor, has become more multifaceted in the post-pandemic era. It encompasses not just provider reliability but also certification, safety communication, and ethical transparency. The inclusion of ‘behavioural intention’ and ‘satisfaction’ in this cluster indicates a growing interest in the psychological underpinnings of decision-making in HT contexts. Despite its peripheral position, this cluster is theoretically rich and deserves greater integration into mainstream HT research. Finally, the ‘Sustainability and Broader Policy Perspectives’ cluster reflects a nascent but significant shift in the field’s ethical and structural orientation. Here, motivations are less individualistic and more value-driven. Push factors include climate anxiety, health fatigue from urban living, and disillusionment with over-commercialized tourism models. Pull factors encompass eco-conscious resorts, green certifications, and community-based wellness projects. Although still underdeveloped, this cluster opens the door for an expanded motivational framework that incorporates environmental and social consciousness.

Taken together, these clusters reveal a field in transition, not just in terms of topics but also in its theoretical underpinnings. While the Push-Pull Theory remains a useful lens, its application must now account for more nuanced, multifactorial motivations that go beyond the dichotomy of escape versus attraction. For instance, post-pandemic travellers may be driven simultaneously by fear (push) and hope (pull), or by dissatisfaction with both home and host systems. Moreover, the pandemic has blurred the line between medical and wellness tourism, giving rise to hybrid experiences, such as recovery retreats, digital

detox packages, or integrated care tourism, that challenge traditional categorizations.

Thematic evolution analysis further supports this interpretation. Before 2020, themes such as ‘rehabilitation’, ‘hospital services’, and ‘cross-border care’ dominated the literature. In the post-2020 period, these were partially eclipsed by newer themes like ‘subjective knowledge’, ‘psychological resilience’, and ‘trust’. This shift suggests a move from externally validated care models to those centred on individual perception, satisfaction, and empowerment. It also reflects a growing acknowledgment of the emotional labour and psychological risk involved in health travel, especially during global crises. This transformation is also visible in the geographical structure of the field. Countries such as Canada, South Korea, and China lead in scholarly production and collaboration networks, but there remains a disconnect between academic output and real-world HT leadership. Destinations like Türkiye, Thailand, and Mexico are underrepresented in scholarly discourse despite being key players in the global HT market. This gap underscores the need for greater integration of practice-based insights into academic work, and for more diverse authorship and epistemologies within the field.

Ultimately, this study shows that health-oriented tourism is no longer a peripheral or emerging niche, but a mature, multidimensional field shaped by psychological, cultural, and global forces. The COVID-19 pandemic did not just influence travel behaviour; it restructured the very motivations, concepts, and methods through which we study health tourism. Future research must therefore expand the Push–Pull framework to better accommodate hybrid motivations, integrate underrepresented themes like trust and health equity, and more actively engage with the complex realities of travellers in a world increasingly shaped by crisis.

Theoretical Contributions

This research adds a number of theoretical insights to the body of knowledge on health-conscious travel. First of all, it is one of the few bibliometric analyses that looks at wellness, medical, and health tourism all at once, providing a more comprehensive and com-

parative viewpoint. A more thorough theoretical understanding of the field is also supported by the study's combination of data from the Web of Science and Scopus databases, which guarantees a more balanced and extensive representation of the world's literature. Second, the study connects changing scholarly themes with traveller motivation theory by framing the analysis through the Push-Pull Theory of Travel Motivation. This allows us to better understand how both internal and external factors influence research priorities. The Push-Pull Theory of Travel Motivation and bibliometric trends are combined in this study to provide a new theoretical framework that connects changing research topics with changing traveller motivation, particularly in light of international crises and growing health consciousness. Thirdly, the field's thematic development has been impacted by global health crises like COVID-19, highlighting the theoretical significance of crisis-sensitive dynamics in tourism literature. Lastly, a theoretical shift from reactive treatment to proactive and preventive care is indicated by the emergence of new themes like 'motivation', 'mental health', and 'wellbeing', which point to a growing field of study in health-related tourism. Crucially, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the motivational framework that underpins health tourism. In contrast to pre-pandemic research, which focused primarily on pull factors like cost and care quality, post-pandemic literature is increasingly incorporating new push factors like increased personal health concerns, mental health, and safety needs. This transformation not only enriches the explanatory power of the Push-Pull framework but also aligns with broader global shifts in health consciousness. Additionally, the rising global emphasis on sustainability has reshaped pull motivations in health-oriented travel. Travellers increasingly seek wellness experiences that are not only restorative but also environmentally responsible, such as eco-retreats, plant-based detox programmes, or climate-conscious spa centres. While these trends are often positioned as industry innovations, they also carry theoretical significance by expanding the scope of the pull factor in the Push-Pull framework. As health tourism shifts from reactive care to preventive, holistic well-being, sustainable wellness practices

reflect a deeper alignment between individual health goals and environmental awareness. This suggests the need for a broadened theoretical approach that incorporates ecological and ethical considerations into traveller motivation frameworks.

It seems that COVID-19 will continue to shape the literature structure. According to our analysis, this topic, in addition to MT, WT, will be expected to be studied through 2025. However, we believe that it will last longer, but we are not quite sure how much; maybe until a new pandemic emerges or another global event that impacts HT, such as a war or a global financial crisis. Is it possible that researchers should expect another issue that has a global impact? We believe that, instead of waiting for another one, scientists should focus on the current global issues' effect, such as climate change on HT and its sub-dimensions, MT, and WT.

In addition to the findings regarding COVID-19, another important point that draws our attention is that the countries that are more productive and effective on the subject are not developed in the scope of HT, while the scientists of the countries with developed HT remain more passive on the subject. The USA, the UK, and China (the origin of COVID-19) lead other countries within the scope of HT in academia, but they are in the middle or last place in the implementation phase. On the other hand, Mexico, Türkiye, and Thailand indicate the reverse. Therefore, we call for papers examining HT-related issues conducted in developed countries to see theoretical and practical differences. Moreover, the co-authorship and collaboration network analysis reveals a clear regional clustering, particularly along East Asian–North American lines. This reflects existing geopolitical and academic power structures, where countries like China, South Korea, and the United States dominate both funding and publication volume. Such patterns parallel global research trends, especially in areas like digital health, wellness innovation, and medical infrastructure. However, this also highlights a lack of integration between high-output academic regions and high-demand tourism destinations. The imbalance points to a need for more collaborative work that bridges the Global North and South, ensuring that scholarly

agendas align with the operational realities of health tourism in emerging markets.

Practical Implications

This study contributes theoretically through bibliometric literature analysis. However, we can say that because health-oriented tourism enhances the broader tourism industry by attracting health-conscious travellers and patients seeking quality care, which benefits the local economy, it is critical to recognize its favourable impacts on the local economy, and policymakers must develop strategies to ensure these benefits are realized (Figueiredo et al., 2024).

The findings of this study offer actionable insights for policymakers, tourism authorities, and healthcare service providers. National tourism boards and health ministries should think about incorporating preventive health initiatives – like mental wellness retreats, thermal spas, and customized nutrition services – into tourism development strategies, especially in light of the noted post-COVID shift from reactive medical tourism to proactive wellness-oriented tourism. Countries like Thailand or Türkiye, for instance, could reposition some areas as centres of wellness and health, particularly where natural resources (like mineral waters or therapeutic climates) complement wellness trends. In order to improve service integration, governments should also provide incentives for hospitals and hospitality organizations to form cross-sectoral partnerships. Transparent pricing, international accreditation, and environmental consciousness are likely to become increasingly important factors in destination appeal, according to the bibliometric trend showing a rise in interest in ‘sustainability’ and ‘trust’. In addition to aiding in their recovery, these findings can help destinations reposition themselves competitively in the rapidly changing health tourism market. Strategic positioning can also be guided by an understanding of the motivational dynamics framed by the Pull Theory. For example, pull factors like affordability, quality, and innovation should be prioritized in destination marketing, while push factors draw attention to shortcomings in the health systems of home countries. Finally, governments can promote academic partnerships and international collabora-

tions to raise the profile and legitimacy of their HT industries.

Practically, the study equips tourism stakeholders, public health officials, and policymakers with evidence-based guidance on how the priorities and vulnerabilities of health-oriented tourism have evolved. As shown in the results, post-COVID research places significant emphasis on terms such as ‘COVID-19’, ‘healthcare’, and ‘health equity’, which reflect a shift in real-world operational focus – from growth-centric development toward health security, traveller confidence, and contingency planning. For researchers and institutions looking to make a significant contribution to the developing conversation, the identification of top nations and journals also enables strategic benchmarking. Furthermore, tourism boards and destination managers can create communication and service strategies that address safety, trust, and preparedness in the post-pandemic environment by using the thematic transition found in keyword co-occurrence clusters to learn about new traveller concerns. Furthermore, the observed trend of wellness tourism replacing medical and health tourism points to a rise in proactive and preventive health practices as well as a greater public awareness of personal health. While the above recommendations provide strategic direction, we propose several actionable steps for practitioners and policymakers to operate these insights. As a starting point, health ministries and tourism boards should develop national HT strategies that explicitly integrate mental wellness services such as spa resorts and nature-based therapies into tourism planning documents. Secondly, regional governments can establish certification schemes for wellness centres and medical providers, signalling adherence to international safety and ethical standards to build trust with prospective HT travellers. Thirdly, healthcare providers should collaborate with hospitality services to offer integrated recovery packages, especially in post-operative care, targeting medical tourists from countries with long waiting times. Fourth, policymakers should consider financial incentives such as tax breaks for hospitals and wellness resorts that attract international clients and adhere to sustainable and inclusive health practices. Fifth, governments and ac-

ademia should fund longitudinal studies to assess the well-being outcomes of HT and WT to ensure ethical, evidence-based marketing and service design. Lastly, destination marketing organizations should leverage insights from Push-Pull theory to tailor campaigns such as emphasizing safety, affordability, mental well-being, and cultural compatibility in post-pandemic recovery strategies.

Limitations and Further Research

Although the study involves comprehensive analyses, certain limitations remain. First, due to data structure constraints in the Scopus database, reference-level metadata were not available, preventing the execution of co-citation and bibliographic coupling analyses. These methods are crucial for mapping the intellectual structure of a field, and future research may overcome this by relying more heavily on the Web of Science or integrating reference metadata when available. Second, the search strategy was restricted to the title field to ensure thematic precision. Although this improves topical accuracy, it might have left out pertinent studies that touch on health tourism in other fields. Third, only English language publications were included in the study, which might lead to a lack of representation for non-English contributions, especially from nations with robust regional scholarship.

Including Chinese-language documents could offer deeper insights, particularly regarding the regional impact of COVID-19. Although this study includes only English-language publications, it differs fundamentally from previous research (Sun et al., 2022; Zhong et al., 2023) that relied solely on Chinese-language databases. The results of those studies were constrained by their regional focus and absence of global indexing. On the other hand, this study makes use of two internationally renowned academic databases, Web of Science and Scopus, guaranteeing scholarly rigour and extensive coverage. Rather than being a restriction on the data sources themselves, the decision to exclude non-English papers was made for consistency and interpretability. Finally, because it takes time for newer publications to accrue citations, the citation-based indicators for recent years might be impacted by time-lag effects. In addition to COVID-19,

future research could explore the impact of climate change-induced natural disasters on wellness and spa tourism, particularly in vulnerable regions such as the Caribbean and Southeast Asia, where infrastructure and service continuity are increasingly at risk. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, the results offer a strong basis for bibliometric investigations in the field of health-oriented tourism in the future.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive bibliometric overview of HT, MT, and WT research, revealing key trends in scholarly output, thematic focus, and international collaboration. By analysing 1,717 articles from Scopus and Web of Science, the study highlights the field's growth trajectory, evolving conceptual structures, and the notable influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. These insights offer valuable guidance for future research and policy development in health-oriented tourism.

Declaration of Using AI

We utilized ScholarGPT 5.0 for language-proofreading the manuscript.

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Co-Creation and Destination Image: A Bibliometric and Thematic Analysis Using CiteSpace

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Co-creation has gained increasing scholarly attention as an approach for involving tourists, residents, and stakeholders in shaping destination image. However, existing research is fragmented, lacking an integrated review of its conceptual foundations, thematic evolution, and implications. This study aims to address this gap by mapping the intellectual structure and emerging trends of co-creation and destination images. A bibliometric and thematic analysis was conducted on 72 peer-reviewed publications indexed in Scopus, using CiteSpace for co-citation and keyword co-occurrence mapping, complemented by Scopus AI for trend identification. The analysis revealed four thematic clusters: destination branding, stakeholder engagement, emotional experience, and digital interaction. Results demonstrate that co-creation operates as a multidimensional, layered process, enhancing emotional attachment, destination loyalty, and brand value, rather than a single experiential design activity. The study concludes that co-creation plays a structurally significant role in destination branding and stakeholder engagement, as demonstrated by the dominant clusters in the bibliometric and thematic analyses. By synthesising existing knowledge and identifying research gaps, this paper offers a comprehensive reference for academics and practitioners, reinforcing the relevance of co-creation in destination management.

Keywords: co-creation, destination image, bibliometric analysis, destination branding, CiteSpace



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Introduction

In contemporary tourism, destination image is no longer shaped solely by formal marketing campaigns but is increasingly the result of multi-dimensional collaborative processes between multiple actors (Abbas et al., 2025; Frías-Jamilena et al., 2024). Among them, co-creation, the process in which tourists, local residents, and Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) jointly design and create tourism experienc-

es, has emerged as an influential approach (Pappas et al., 2024; Yin et al., 2024). Understanding the role of co-creation in shaping and transforming perceptions of destinations has become an essential requirement for destination branding and sustainable tourism development, especially in the context of global competition (Pham et al., 2022; Uslu & Tosun, 2024).

Beyond academic interest, the relevance of co-creation has intensified in practice as destinations con-

front rapidly shifting market dynamics, heightened visitor expectations, and increasing pressure to differentiate in a crowded global landscape (Campos et al., 2018; Pham et al., 2022). Tourists now demand meaningful, personalised, and emotionally resonant experiences rather than standardised offerings, making participatory value creation a central component of competitive positioning (Nangpiire et al., 2022; Uslu & Tosun, 2024). At the same time, digital platforms have amplified the influence of user-generated narratives, enabling tourists to shape destination meanings at unprecedented speed and scale (Fan et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2022). These transformations require destinations to understand not only how co-creation unfolds across physical and digital environments, but also how it contributes to brand resilience, community alignment, and long-term sustainability.

Despite the significant increase in the number of studies on co-creation in tourism, there are still some literature gaps in the field (John & Supramaniam, 2024; Solakis et al., 2024). First, there are few studies that systematically and visually synthesise the knowledge network related to co-creation and destination image (Glyptou, 2021). Second, the analysis of the theoretical evolution, thematic scope, and impact of co-creation, which combines quantitative scientific indicators and academic data visualisation, remains incomplete. Third, the role of emerging factors, such as digital platforms, co-branding, and emotional value, has not been fully explored in the overall research framework.

Building on this gap, the study pursues two objectives: (i) to map and systematise the knowledge structure surrounding co-creation in shaping destination image, and (ii) to identify research directions that can strengthen both theoretical development and managerial decision-making. Accordingly, the research question is, 'How has co-creation been conceptualised, applied, and positioned within academic discussions on destination image, and what future trajectories do they suggest?'

The contribution of the paper lies in consolidating a dispersed body of literature and clarifying the core thematic areas that structure current knowledge,

ranging from destination branding and stakeholder participation to digital interaction and experiential dynamics. Through this synthesis, the study highlights underexplored issues and provides a foundation for advancing future research agendas with clearer conceptual and practical relevance, particularly in a tourism landscape shaped by participatory and digitally mediated forms of value creation.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews existing studies on co-creation and destination image. Section 3 outlines the research design and analytical procedures. Section 4 presents the main results, including thematic clusters and emerging trends. Section 5 discusses these findings, draws theoretical and practical implications, and proposes future research avenues. Section 6 concludes with key contributions and implications for destination management and development.

Literature review

Co-Creation in Tourism

In the tourism field, co-creation is understood as a process in which tourists, local residents, and stakeholders participate in designing, creating, and enhancing the value of tourism experiences (John & Supramaniam, 2024; Pham et al., 2022). Unlike co-production, which focuses on customers' partial participation in predetermined service activities, co-creation emphasises open interaction, where parties share ideas, resources, and responsibilities to form new value (Borges-Tiago & Avelar, 2025). This concept is often associated with service-dominant logic, which assumes that value does not exist in products or services but is formed through experiences and interactions in specific contexts (Leal et al., 2022).

The process of co-creation in tourism occurs simultaneously at many levels (Borges-Tiago & Avelar, 2025; John & Supramaniam, 2024). At the individual level, it manifests itself in service moments when tourists engage in activities and interact with staff and the community to create personalised experiences. At the community and business levels, co-creation occurs through collaboration between DMOS, tourism businesses, and local communities to develop products, services, or events. At the system level, co-creation

involves the coordination of policies, infrastructure, and destination branding to facilitate participation and collaboration among all parties.

Beyond its functional role in experience design, co-creation has become central to understanding how destination image is formed and transformed in contemporary tourism systems (Camatti & Wallington, 2023; Giannopoulos et al., 2021). As tourists increasingly seek authenticity, emotional resonance, and personalised value, co-creation provides the mechanism through which these expectations are negotiated and materialised (Carvalho et al., 2023; Oliveira & Panyik, 2015). This makes co-creation not only an operational practice but also a lens through which scholars examine tourist behaviour, stakeholder relations, and the evolution of destination meaning.

The development of digital technologies, including social media, online review platforms, virtual/augmented reality, and, more recently, artificial intelligence, has expanded the space for co-creation from the offline environment to the online and hybrid environment (Costa et al., 2025; Wider et al., 2023). This not only increases the possibilities for interaction, personalisation, and emotional engagement but also allows for the participation of different groups of tourists, overcoming the limitations of time and space. However, current studies still face the challenge of clearly distinguishing between related concepts such as participation, engagement, and co-creation, leading to inconsistencies in measurement and analysis (Kumar & Malhotra, 2025). In addition, longitudinal studies are still limited, not fully reflecting the changing nature of co-creation in the tourism context.

Existing literature on co-creation in tourism spans several distinct strands, including service design, customer experience, branding, community participation, and digital interaction. While each strand contributes valuable insights, they often evolve in parallel rather than in dialogue. This fragmentation results in conceptual ambiguities; for example, whether co-creation should be treated as an individual behaviour, a relational process, or a governance mechanism. Strengthening the conceptual integration among these strands remains a key research challenge, par-

ticularly when applying co-creation to complex constructs such as destination image.

Co-Creation and Destination Image

Destination image is the set of perceptions, impressions, and emotions that tourists and the public have about a tourist destination (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2024; Zhuo & Ueda, 2025). This is a key factor influencing the intention to choose a destination, satisfaction, and loyalty of tourists. Recently, co-creation has been considered a mechanism that directly affects the process of forming and transforming destination images (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2024; Pappas et al., 2024). If in the past, destination images were mainly shaped through promotional and communication campaigns implemented by DMOS, now they are created through the interaction and active contributions of many subjects, especially tourists and local communities (Amani, 2024).

Co-creation affects destination images in many ways. First, the process of participating in service design and experience helps tourists create personalised memories, thereby forming feelings of attachment and empathy with the destination (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2024). Second, collaboration between businesses, communities, and DMOS creates highly authentic tourism products and stories that meet the expectations of modern tourists for real experiences (Yin et al., 2024). Third, digital platforms and social networks have expanded the space for co-creation, allowing tourists to not only consume but also produce and share content, thereby influencing others' perceptions of the destination (Wei et al., 2023).

Beyond its communicative role, destination image operates as an asset that shapes competitiveness, differentiation, and long-term positioning (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2024; Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020). In this context, co-creation becomes a mechanism through which destinations can mobilise diverse voices to build more resilient and adaptable images (Amani, 2024; Bouchriha et al., 2023). This is particularly relevant in saturated tourism markets, where traditional branding tools are no longer sufficient to maintain distinctiveness and emotional relevance. Co-creation allows destinations to integrate lived experiences, lo-

cal narratives, and digital expressions into their brand architecture, thereby strengthening both cognitive and affective dimensions of image formation.

The link between co-creation and destination images is also evident in destination branding (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2024; Yin et al., 2024). When tourists become co-authors of their experiences and destination stories, the brand becomes more vibrant and flexible, able to adapt to changes in tourism trends and consumer behaviour. In addition, co-creation helps align the interests of stakeholders, reduce conflicts, and create shared values, thereby strengthening the reputation and sustainability of the destination image. However, this relationship also has potential challenges. Not all forms of co-creation are positive; without strategic coordination, co-created content and experiences can be inconsistent or even contradictory to the brand's vision. Therefore, the governance of co-creation needs to balance the openness of the interaction with the control needed to maintain the unity of the destination image.

Despite the increasing emphasis on co-creation, the literature still grapples with several challenges. One issue concerns the uneven power dynamics among stakeholders: not all groups contribute equally to co-created narratives, which can lead to dominant representations that overlook marginalised voices. Another challenge relates to message fragmentation, as user-generated content may produce multiple, and sometimes conflicting, representations of the same destination. These tensions highlight the need for more nuanced analytical frameworks that can capture both the enabling and constraining effects of co-creation on destination image.

Co-Creation in Tourism Marketing and Branding

In the context of an increasingly competitive global tourism market, destination marketing and brand management are no longer limited to one-way communication from managers to customers but require the active participation of tourists and stakeholders in the process of creating and spreading value (Abbas et al., 2025; Bui et al., 2025). Co-creation, by its nature a multi-dimensional collaboration, has become an important pillar in destination marketing and branding.

From a marketing perspective, co-creation extends the scope and depth of the brand experience by allowing tourists to participate in the design of products, services, and promotional content (Buhalis et al., 2023). These activities can take place directly at the destination through cultural events, festivals, or field experiences, as well as online through social media platforms, interactive websites, or mobile applications. This process helps create personalised brand narratives while increasing the ability to spread messages through tourists' own social networks (Nangpiire et al., 2022).

Beyond enhancing communication effectiveness, co-creation changes the very logic of how destinations build relationships with tourists (Bouchriha et al., 2023; Pappas et al., 2024). Instead of positioning visitors as passive recipients of marketing messages, co-creation frames them as active contributors whose interactions and expressions shape the perceived meaning of the brand (Pandey et al., 2025; Uslu & Tosun, 2024). This shift aligns with broader changes in consumer culture, where travellers increasingly seek participation, authenticity, and identity-affirming experiences. As a result, co-creation is no longer an optional marketing tool but a capability that determines how destinations compete and remain relevant.

In terms of branding, co-creation serves as a long-term approach to build and maintain a consistent yet flexible destination image. The participation of tourists, communities, and businesses in creating tourism products and stories helps brands reflect local identity while adapting to new market trends. Forms of co-creation, such as co-branding between destinations and tourism businesses or promotional campaigns based on user-generated content, can enhance reputation, expand reach, and create sustainable competitive advantages. However, co-creation in destination marketing and branding also requires close coordination. Co-created content and experiences can fragment, dilute messages, or create image conflicts without direction. Therefore, managers need to establish a clear integrated framework that defines the roles, powers, and responsibilities of each party and maintain a feedback mechanism to ensure harmony between participant creativity and the overall brand direction.

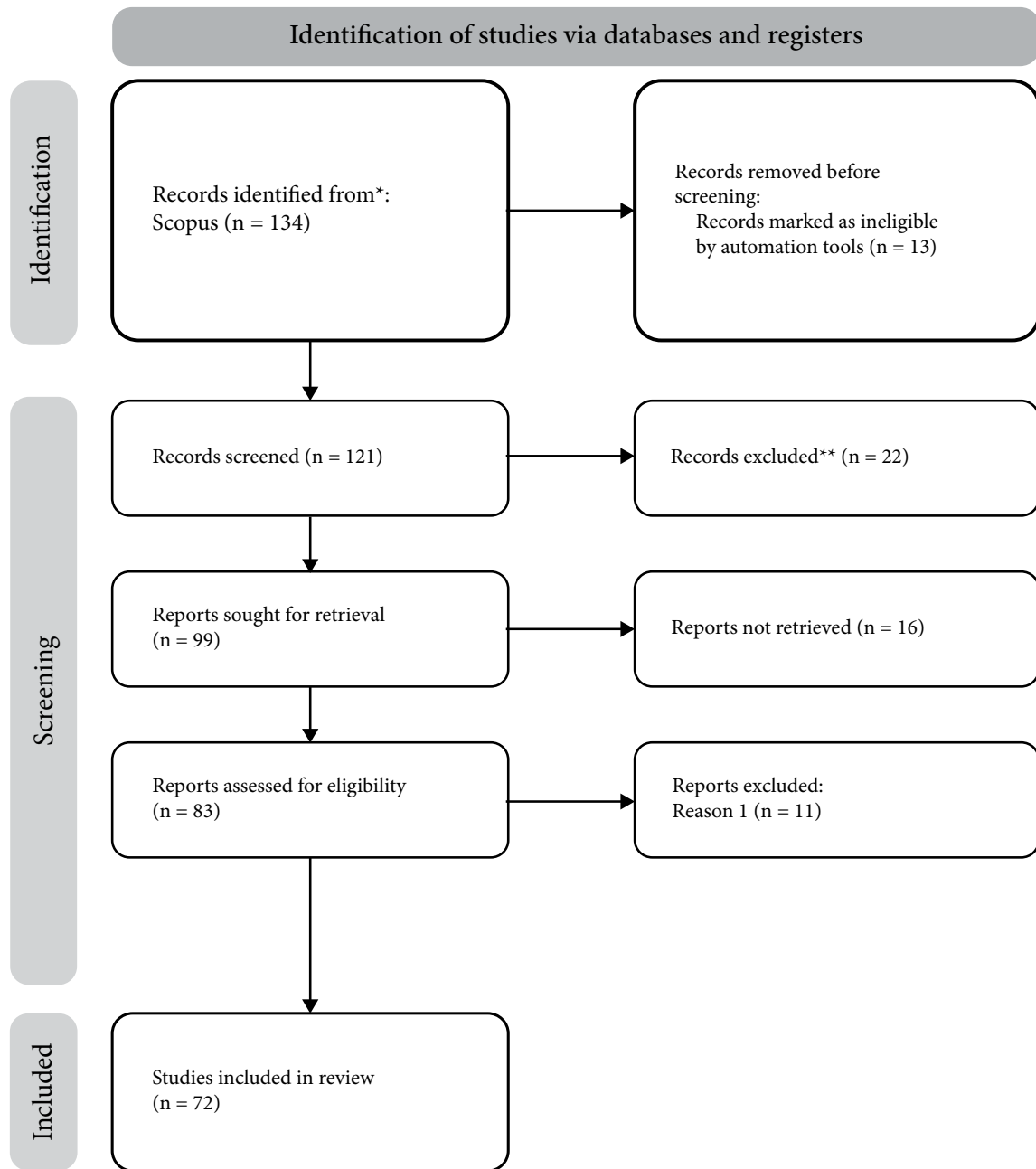


Figure 1 PRISMA Flow Diagram

Despite its potential, integrating co-creation into branding introduces a series of managerial complexities. When multiple actors generate brand-related content, the boundary between the official brand voice and user-created narratives becomes blurred.

This raises questions about message coherence, brand ownership, and the extent to which organisations should control or curate co-created representations. These challenges are amplified in multicultural destinations, where diverse visitor segments may co-create

divergent images that coexist but do not always align with positioning goals.

Methodology

This study applies bibliometric analysis, following the guidelines of the PRISMA process to ensure transparency, reproducibility, and systematisation in synthesising and analysing scientific publications related to the role of co-creation in destination image formation (Page et al., 2021). Following Figure 1, the methodology is implemented through three main stages: data collection, screening and selection, and data analysis.

Data Collection

The selected data source was the Scopus database, one of the most comprehensive indexing systems covering peer-reviewed publications in tourism, marketing, and destination management (Geng et al., 2024). The search was conducted on 24 April 2025 using the Scopus Title-Abstract-Keywords search field to ensure precise retrieval of studies directly relevant to the topic. The search strategy applied a combination of keywords: (co-creation OR collaboration OR participation OR joint creation) AND (destination OR tourism OR locale OR site) AND (image OR perception OR branding OR identity).

Boolean operators (AND/OR) were used to refine and optimise the search logic. The results were limited to English-language publications published between 2005 and 2024 to ensure both relevance and temporal consistency.

Screening and Selection Process

The initial search yielded 134 publications. A multi-stage screening procedure consistent with PRISMA guidelines was then applied. First, non-English publications and items that were not research-oriented documents, such as editorials, letters, notes, conference reviews, and other non-article materials, were excluded (13 publications removed). Only books, book chapters, conference papers, and articles were retained for further screening. Second, 22 publications unrelated to tourism or social sciences were removed based on scope relevance. Third, titles were screened to identify studies that did not address co-creation or destination

image, resulting in the exclusion of 16 additional publications. Finally, abstracts were reviewed to confirm conceptual and empirical relevance, leading to the removal of 11 further publications.

After completing all screening stages, 72 publications remained and were included in the bibliometric and thematic analyses.

Data Analysis

The final dataset extracted from Scopus was first organised and examined using Microsoft Excel to produce descriptive indicators, including the publication trend over time, the geographical distribution of research, and the list of most cited publications. These descriptive outputs provided an initial overview of the development and dispersion of scholarship on co-creation and destination image.

Subsequently, CiteSpace 6.3 (advanced) was employed to conduct the core bibliometric analyses, including authors' co-citation network analysis and keyword co-occurrence mapping. These techniques enabled the identification of intellectual linkages, thematic clusters, and structural patterns within the field (Geng et al., 2024).

To complement the structural mapping, Scopus AI was used to explore key thematic areas emerging from the dataset. As a recently introduced analytical feature, Scopus AI identifies central themes by synthesising conceptual patterns across Scopus-indexed publications (Aguilera-Cora et al., 2024). Although still not widely applied in tourism studies, this tool provides an additional lens through which to validate the thematic structure revealed by the bibliometric analysis.

By simultaneously using descriptive statistics, network-based bibliometric analysis, and AI-assisted thematic exploration, the study offers a robust and multi-layered assessment of the intellectual structure and emerging research trends surrounding co-creation and destination image.

Results and Discussion

Publication Trend over Time

Particularly in the past five years, academic interest in the role of co-creation in destination image has shown

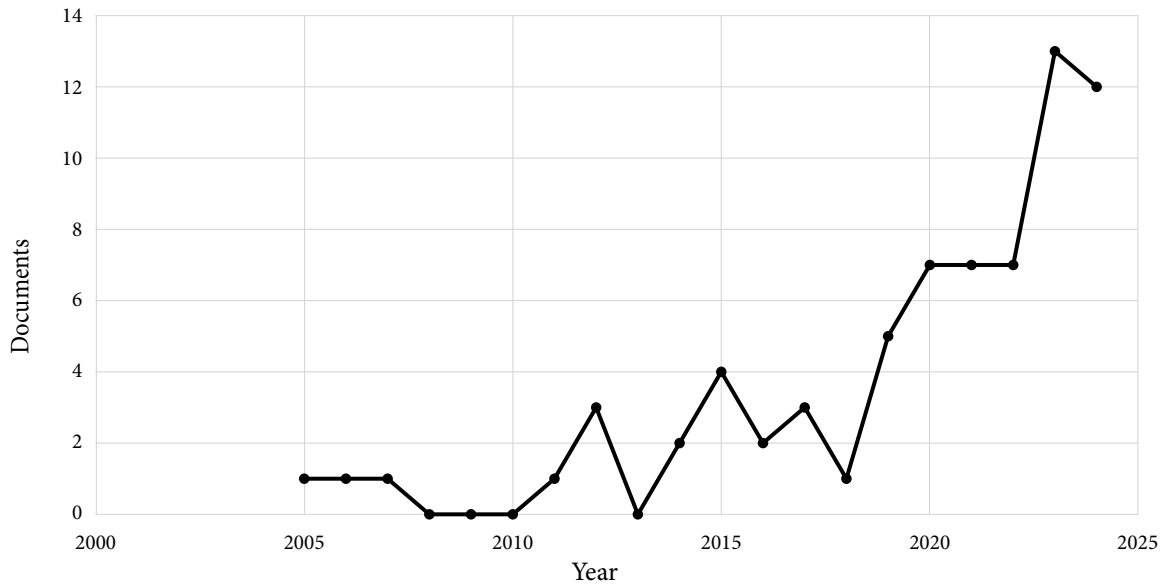


Figure 2 Annual Publications

a marked upward trend. Academic contributions on this subject remained inconsistent between 2005 and 2015, as shown in Figure 2; annual publications hardly ever exceeded three papers.

From 2016 on, though, there is a clear change as publication frequency rises consistently. Between 2022 and 2024, the most notable increase happened; this resulted in a peak of 13 documents in 2023 and

12 documents in 2024. This reflects growing scholarly agreement on the contribution of co-creation in forming cognitive as well as experiential aspects of destination image. The development also points to a congruence with worldwide patterns in digital transformation, stakeholder involvement, and consumer empowerment in tourism.

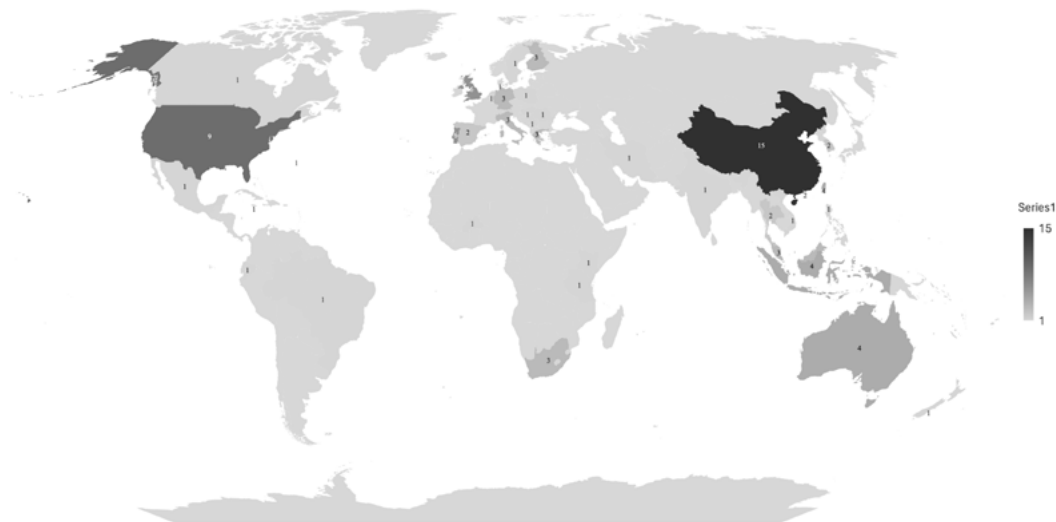


Figure 3 Publications by Countries

Geographic Distribution of Research

The research on this subject is mostly conducted by China (15 documents) and the United States (9 documents), as shown in Figure 3, thus stressing the worldwide relevance of co-creation, particularly in major, diverse tourism economies.

The major contributions from Portugal and the United Kingdom (6 each) highlight robust academic activity in Europe, presumably connected to active heritage tourism, cultural interaction programmes, and smart tourism projects stressing co-created experiences.

Australia, Indonesia, and Taiwan each contributed four publications, reflecting the Asia-Pacific’s increasing curiosity in participatory tourism development models. Completing the list with three papers apiece are Finland, Germany, and Greece, highlighting the worldwide reach of this research theme.

This wide geographic dispersion points to an emerging scholarly discourse that goes beyond regional boundaries and local tourism agendas. Although early co-creation publications were mostly written in Western academic settings, more recent contributions from Asia and the Global South show a variety of uses for co-creation, including digital storytelling, smart tourism ecosystems, and community-based tourism.

Academic focus on cooperative, inclusive, and experiential tourism models seems to be changing in publication trends. Rising interest following 2020 shows a growing awareness of the transforming potential of co-creation not only for improving tourist experiences but also for redefining destination branding in ways that are resilient, flexible, and inclusive.

Most Cited Publications

This subsection highlights the publications that have had the strongest influence on research about co-creation and destination image. Based on Scopus citation data, Table 1 presents the most cited studies, reflecting both their overall impact and their continuing relevance to the field.

With 367 citations, an average of 45.88 citations annually, the top-ranked paper by Rasoolimanesh et al. (2017) stands out noticeably. An important component of stakeholder-based co-creation, this paper looks at resident impressions in urban versus rural

Table 1 Most Cited Publications

Rank	Author(s)	Total Citations	TC per Year
1	Rasoolimanesh et al. (2017)	367	45.88
2	Oliveira and Panyik (2015)	162	16.20
3	King et. al. (2015)	101	10.10
4	Iglesias-Sánchez et al. (2020)	79	15.80
5	Gardiner and Kwek (2016)	78	9.75
6	Campos et al. (2018)	75	7.50
7	Sigala (2012)	74	5.69
8	Sims (2009)	73	4.29
9	Choi and Sirakaya-Turk (2016)	71	7.89
10	Buhalis and Amaranggana (2014)	69	5.75

locations. Its high leading citation count emphasises the scholarly acceptance of community involvement and views in forming destination image.

Oliveira and Panyik (2015) and King et al. (2015) also stand out for their emphasis on digital challenges and the phenomenon of image degradation, respectively (King et al., 2015; Oliveira & Panyik, 2015). These pieces show early awareness of the online and cognitive aspects of destination branding, essential components for co-creation in contemporary tourism. Investigated by Iglesias-Sánchez et al. (2020), Instagram as a co-creation platform shows the influence of social media in tourism narratives, thus stressing a rising digital trend in co-creation (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020).

Collectively, these highly cited publications provide a solid foundation for developing integrated models of destination co-creation and open up many avenues for further research. They suggest potential topics such as: how to measure the emotional resonance of co-created experiences; the long-term impact of digital co-creation on destination loyalty; and how resident-tourist collaboration transforms local identity.

Authors’ Co-Citation Network Analysis

CiteSpace’s generated co-citation network exposes the intellectual basis and thematic clustering within the literature on co-creation and destination image. Three

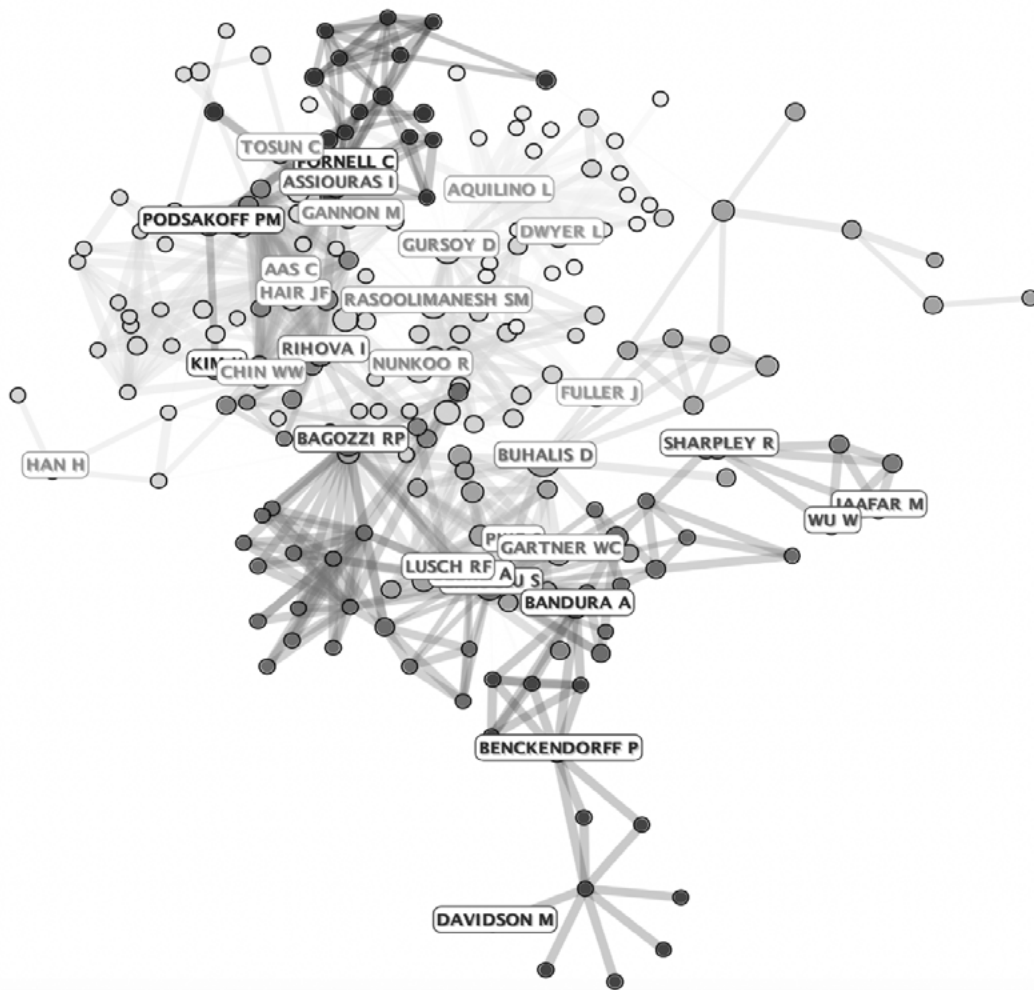


Figure 4 Cluster of Authors' Co-Citation Network

main clusters as shown in Figure 4, each reflecting a unique body of research influencing the theoretical and methodological development of the field, are found visualised here.

Cluster 1: Foundations in Destination Marketing and Branding

This cluster comprises fundamental academics including Buhalis, Law, Gretzel, and Kotler, who have been instrumental in combining co-creation into digital marketing and smart tourism models (Buhalis & Inversini, 2014; Gretzel & Jamal, 2009; Hjalager & Konu, 2011). Strong theoretical contributions to des-

tinuation image creation and consumer-based brand equity reflect the frequent co-citation of authors such as Baloglu and Pike. By means of branding, digital storytelling, and experiential marketing, this group has set the stage for how co-creation shapes opinions.

Cluster 2: Stakeholder Engagement and Quantitative Methodologies

Featuring major contributors like Rasoolimanesh, Ringle, Sarstedt, and Hair, this cluster marks a methodological turn in tourism research. These academics underline quantitative modelling, e.g. structural equation modelling and PLS-SEM, and investigate

how co-creation activities among residents and tourists affect perceived destination value, satisfaction, and loyalty (Tasico & Del Rosario, 2022). This cluster firmly supports empirical, measurement-based methods of stakeholder-based value co-creation.

Cluster 3: Cultural and Event-Based Co-Creation

Scholars of cultural and creative tourism such as Richards, Ritchie, and Getz form the cluster, often anchored in cultural immersion and heritage experiences; their studies centre on festival and event co-creation (Santoro et al., 2021). This cluster emphasises the increasing importance of community-driven tourism, in which tourists co-create destination images by engaging in cultural exchanges, thus helping to shape narratives.

Keyword Co-Occurrence Network

This study employed a bibliometric and thematic analysis using CiteSpace to explore the evolving role of co-creation in shaping destination image. The clustering analysis yielded 12 distinct themes based on citation and keyword co-occurrence (Figure 5). These themes were then grouped into four broader clusters relevant to our research objective.

Cluster 1: Co-Creation and Destination Marketing

This theme is anchored by cluster 1 (value co-creation), where seminal authors emphasise the role of stakeholders, including tourists, local businesses, and governments, in collaboratively shaping the destination value proposition (Buhalis et al., 2023; Giannopoulos et al., 2021; Yin et al., 2024). This cluster intersects with cluster 5 (resident participation) and cluster 0 (social identity), revealing how local engagement and identity construction are foundational to co-creation. The research in this domain highlights how co-created experiences enhance destination branding, increase tourist satisfaction, and foster loyalty (Cao et al., 2023; Rita et al., 2024).

Furthermore, cluster 4 (service ecosystem perspective) complements this view by introducing a systems-thinking lens, positioning co-creation within a network of interactions that collectively form the destination image. The alignment between co-crea-

tion and marketing is especially visible in how service providers tailor offerings based on real-time tourist feedback and participatory design (Oliveira & Panyik, 2015).

This cluster represents the convergence of co-creation and destination marketing, in which multi-actor collaboration not only creates experiential value but also acts as a long-term brand positioning tool. When stakeholders, from among tourists, communities, businesses, and governments, participate in building the value proposition, marketing strategies can shift from product orientation to experience orientation, while increasing the ability to adapt to market fluctuations. In particular, the service ecosystem approach helps marketing strategies not be fragmented but become a continuous process of coordination between product design, communication, and brand management, based on real feedback from tourists and communities.

Cluster 2: Tourist Experience and Emotional Perception

Cluster 2 (local perception) embodies this thematic category, focusing on the affective and cognitive responses of both tourists and local residents (Oliveira & Panyik, 2015; Yin et al., 2024). The role of emotions, memory, and place attachment emerges strongly, highlighting how tourist experiences are co-constructed and deeply personal (Čivire et al., 2024). The bridging between clusters 0, 2, and 5 illustrates how perceptions are not formed in isolation but are influenced by local interactions and socio-cultural exchanges. The notion of behavioural participation (cluster 6), although more distanced in the network map, contributes a psychological dimension by examining how intentions and actual behaviours during co-created experiences shape long-term perceptions and revisit intentions (Giannopoulos et al., 2022).

The content of this cluster affirms that the destination image development strategy cannot be separated from the emotional and cognitive factors of both tourists and local residents. Emotional attachment and tourism memory play a key role in maintaining loyalty and intention to return. Therefore, the destination strategy needs to design highly personalised touchpoints where tourists and residents can co-cre-

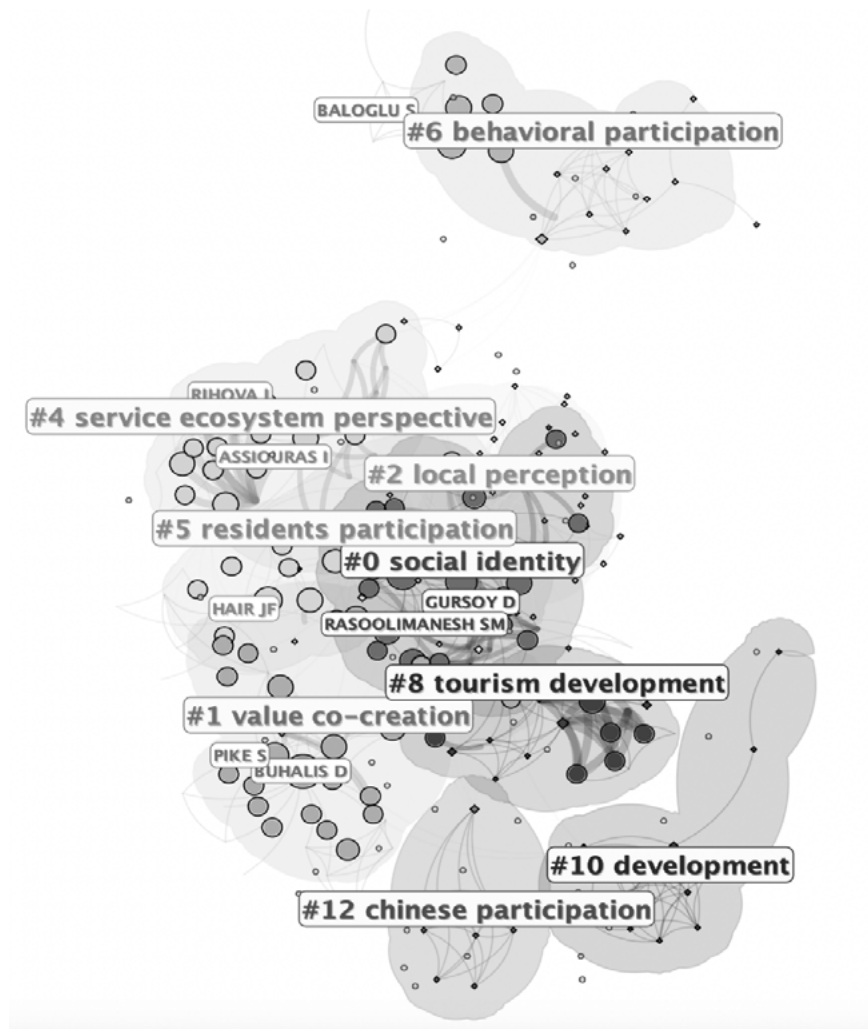


Figure 5 Cluster of Keyword Co-Occurrence Network

ate meaningful experiences. At the same time, understanding the motivations and behaviours of tourists in the context of co-creation allows destination managers to develop appropriate communication and product strategies, ensuring resonance between the actual experience and the desired brand image.

Cluster 3: Digital Co-Creation and Social Media

The digital transformation of tourism is encapsulated in cluster 6 (behavioural participation) and cluster 8 (tourism development). These clusters explore how user-generated content, online reviews, and social media platforms allow tourists to actively partic-

ipate in shaping destination narratives (Giannopoulos et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2022). Research within these clusters shows how virtual co-creation extends the tourist experience beyond the physical trip and contributes to digital destination image formation.

The publications in Cluster 6 reinforce the idea that behavioural patterns online (e.g. sharing photos, writing reviews) are integral to shaping how destinations are perceived globally (Liu & Meng, 2024; Shin et al., 2020). Cluster 10 (development), while broader in focus, occasionally touches on the implications of digital tools for sustainable tourism and stakeholder engagement in developing regions.

This cluster highlights the strategic role of the digital space as a new front in destination image management. User-generated content, online reviews, and social media sharing not only reflect personal experiences but also become strategic data sources to predict market trends and adjust brand messaging. Encouraging digital co-creation allows the lifecycle of tourism experiences to extend beyond the trip, while creating a viral effect that expands the brand's reach. From a strategic perspective, managing digital co-creation requires a balance between user creative freedom and consistent image direction, especially in a context where destination competition is increasingly based on online reputation.

Cluster 4: Destination Image, Management, and Communication

This final theme encapsulates how co-creation influences broader governance and communication. Cluster 4 (service ecosystem) and cluster 8 (tourism development) feature prominently here, with contributions that discuss how destination managers utilise co-created content to align with tourist expectations (Frow et al., 2015; Shin et al., 2020).

Cluster 12 (Chinese participation) adds a geo-cultural dimension, illustrating how co-creation and image perception vary across contexts. Studies in this cluster highlight unique dynamics in Asian tourism markets, particularly how government-led initiatives and cultural values shape both co-creation practices and image interpretation (Ji et al., 2018). Additionally, cluster 10 (development) and cluster 3 (not labelled explicitly in the image but potentially represented by overlapping nodes with social identity and tourism development) suggest how public health, environmental sustainability, and crisis communication now intersect with co-creation practices. These aspects have become particularly salient post-COVID-19, where destination image is increasingly tied to health safety, resilience, and ethical responsibility.

This cluster shows that co-creation not only impacts products and experiences but also becomes an important element in destination management. Exploiting co-created content to adjust and reinforce communication messages allows managers to main-

tain the compatibility between tourist expectations and the development direction of the destination. In particular, the geo-cultural context factor suggests that co-creation needs to be customised to suit each market, such as the difference in the role of government and cultural values in Asian countries compared to the West. In addition, the connection between co-creation and issues such as environmental sustainability, health safety, and crisis communication suggests that modern destination management strategies need to integrate co-creation into the framework of risk management and social responsibility, especially in the post-COVID-19 period.

Key Themes in Co-Creation and Destination Image
Scopus AI's thematic analysis reveals four main thematic branches arising from co-creation in destination image, as shown in Figure 6: these are consumer-centric approaches, destination marketing, event tourism, and experience tourism. Every branch has sub-themes corresponding with different conceptual, empirical, and pragmatic contributions to the literature. These ideas also strongly relate to the clusters found in the co-citation and keyword co-occurrence studies.

Cluster 1: Destination Marketing and Management

This cluster highlights how DMOS, authorities, and tourism businesses, together with tourist motivations, shape co-created destination images. A body of relevant studies has established how destination management practices and branding strategies align with co-creation processes, providing the conceptual foundations that later research has expanded (Hjalager & Konu, 2011; King et al., 2015). Emphasising destination branding and stakeholders, cluster 1 in the keyword network directly fits this theme and shows how co-creation improves marketing communication, differentiation, and loyalty in competitive tourism settings.

This cluster demonstrates the relationship between co-creation and destination management, in which DMOS play a guiding and coordinating role, and tourists are the source of inspiration and motivation for product innovation. Integrating co-creation into mar-

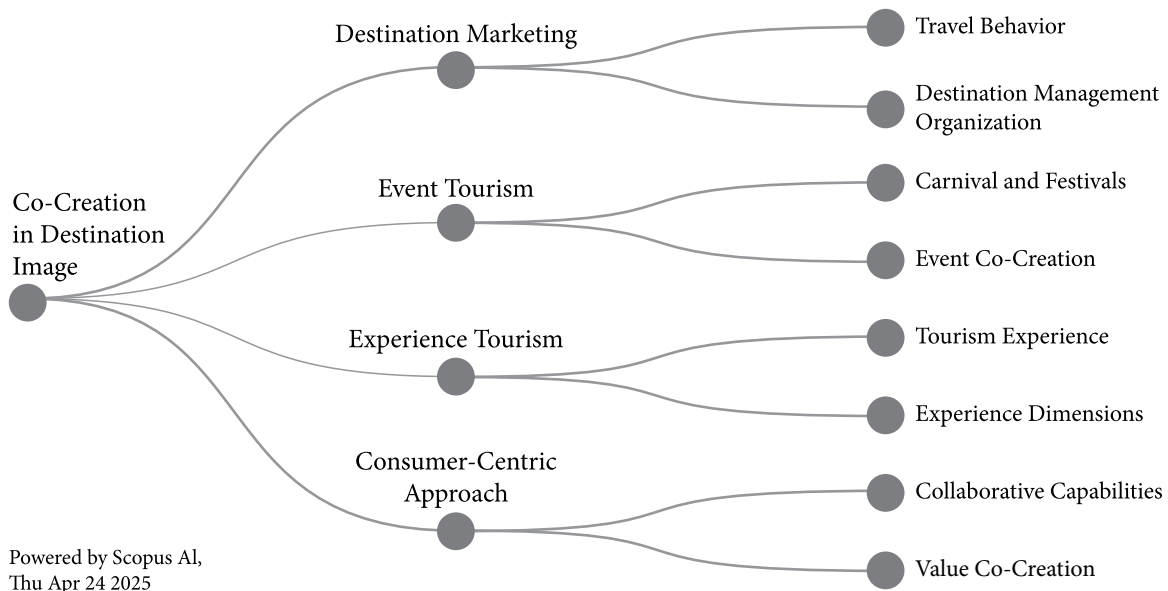


Figure 6 Key Themes in Co-Creation and Destination Image by Scopus AI

keting strategies helps increase differentiation and strengthen competitive advantage in an increasingly fierce global tourism environment. Through the participation of many stakeholders, destination brand strategies are not only built from a management perspective but also reflect the voices and real experiences of communities and tourists, creating a more vibrant and sustainable brand image.

Cluster 2: Event Tourism and Participatory Experience

Corresponding to cluster 3 in the co-citation network, the second branch incorporates event co-creation and carnivals and celebrations. In event-based settings, this literature investigates how tourists start as co-producers of meaning (Pappas et al., 2024). Events provide forums for the creation of experiential value whereby residents and tourists coexist to shape stories. Emphasising the socio-cultural results of co-created events, this participatory model also finds support in the keyword cluster involving community participation and emotional solidarity.

Research in this cluster shows that tourism events are not only cultural and entertainment products but also a strategic space for implementing co-creation. When tourists and local residents participate in the

organisation, storytelling, and experience of events, the experiential value becomes multi-layered and richer. From a strategic perspective, co-created events have the potential to strengthen community engagement, enhance destination authenticity, and create a distinct impression in the tourist’s memory. This approach is especially important for destinations that compete on the basis of cultural identity and iconic activities.

Cluster 3: Exploratory Tourism and Experiential Aspects

Consistent with keyword cluster 3 (e.g. tourist destination, tourism management, value co-creation), this theme, covering tourism experience and experience dimensions, is fundamental to modern tourism theory. Previous research in this field looks at how behavioural, emotional, and cognitive aspects support unique and customised experiences (Campos et al., 2018). These results cross with quantitative contributions from Hair and Rasoolimanesh, who track co-creation’s impact on destination loyalty and satisfaction.

This cluster highlights the central role of tourism experiences in destination development strategies. Behavioural, emotional, and cognitive factors not

only shape individual experiences but also directly influence tourist loyalty and satisfaction, important metrics in brand management. Applying co-creation to experience design and management helps create tourism products that are more relevant to the needs, desires, and cultural context of each tourist group. At a strategic level, such an approach helps destinations maintain their ability to adapt to changing consumer trends and build long-term relationships with their target markets.

Cluster 4: Consumer-Centric Approach and Value Co-Creation

Finally, the consumer-centric approach and associated sub-themes like value co-creation mirror a paradigm change from passive consumption to active involvement. This fits cluster 1 in the keyword co-occurrence network, highlighting ideas like perception, residents, self-efficacy, and sustainable tourism, as well as cluster 2 in the co-citation network. Taken together, these studies show that co-creation helps both tourists and residents to influence tourism offers depending on personal, cultural, and emotional relevance (Tasico & Del Rosario, 2022).

This cluster represents a shift from a passive consumption model to an active engagement model, in which tourists and residents participate in shaping tourism products and services. Putting consumers at the centre not only improves the relevance of products to individual needs but also increases the cultural and emotional significance of the experience. This approach helps destinations build sustainable partnerships with communities, raise awareness of sustainable development, and reinforce the destination's image as an open, friendly, and socially responsible space.

Discussion and Implications

Discussion

This study provides several new findings that contribute significantly to the academic and managerial understanding of co-creation and destination image.

First, the analysis of publication trends shows a clear increase in the number of studies since 2016, especially in the period 2022–2024. What is noteworthy

is not only the quantitative growth but also the qualitative shift: co-creation has been repositioned from an activity supporting experience design to a strategic component of destination management, linked to long-term goals of branding and sustainability. Linking this trend to the context of digital transformation and the rise of consumer power shows that current research is reflecting new market and technological dynamics, rather than simply reproducing traditional theoretical frameworks (Buhalis et al., 2023; Solakis et al., 2024).

In terms of scope, the geographical distribution map shows that the topic is no longer concentrated mainly in Western academia but is expanding strongly to Asia and the Global South. This expansion is not simply about adding more case studies but rather about the emergence of new strategic variations, from digital storytelling applications and smart tourism ecosystems to community-based tourism models, that require adjustments and extensions to existing theories. This also raises the need to more clearly identify cultural-institutional factors as moderating variables in order to explain why and under what conditions co-creation creates a positive destination image.

Another new point is the identification of complex relationships between research streams through co-citation networks and keyword cluster analysis. The results show that the four main content areas, destination marketing and management, tourist experience and emotion, digital and social media co-creation, and image and communication management, do not operate in isolation but are closely linked into a knowledge ecosystem. This helps overcome the fragmented approach of previous studies, opening up the possibility of developing integrated models that reflect both the internal dynamics of co-creation and external environmental factors such as technology and stakeholder structure.

In addition, the analysis of the most cited publications shows that co-creation does not only create one-way benefits. Foundational studies have highlighted the risks of the digital environment and the potential for image degradation without appropriate governance (John & Supramaniam, 2024), but most previous studies have not delved into the mechanisms of

adverse co-creation or the imbalance of participation. Adding this perspective shifts the discussion away from the linear assumption that co-creation automatically leads to a more positive destination image and instead emphasises the need to consider contextual conditions and moderating variables that determine whether co-creation generates sustainable value.

The analyses from Scopus AI and CiteSpace show that the current study has moved beyond the stage of describing the phenomenon to move closer to building a clear framework. The similarities between the thematic clusters from the two analytical sources show that co-creation has become the intersection point between many separate fields such as strategic marketing, customer experience, tourism technology, and community management. This is a solid basis for developing co-creation management models according to the life cycle of destination image, from building to expanding to consolidating.

Overall, the above findings confirm the novelty of the study in three points: repositioning co-creation as a strategic element, expanding the theoretical scope to diverse cultural-institutional contexts, and building a foundation for multidimensional integration models. This is an important premise for developing theoretical and managerial implications in the next section, aiming both to contribute to academic knowledge and to create practical application value for destination management in the digital age.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study collectively reposition co-creation from a narrow operational activity to a mechanism embedded in destination image management. Across the CiteSpace co-citation clusters and keyword co-occurrence patterns, co-creation consistently appears not as an isolated interactional practice but as a structural component of destination branding, stakeholder governance, and long-term competitiveness. This strategic repositioning extends existing theories by linking tourist engagement directly to the broader trajectories of sustainable tourism development and destination brand evolution.

The results also underscore the need for stronger contextualisation in co-creation theory. The geo-

graphical distribution of publications, especially the increasing contributions from Asia and the Global South, demonstrates that cultural norms, institutional arrangements, and market maturity shape how co-creation is practiced and how it influences destination image. The mismatch between global theoretical assumptions and localised empirical realities suggests that cultural-institutional moderators should be incorporated explicitly into theoretical models, ensuring greater sensitivity to context.

In addition, the convergence across three analytical layers, keyword co-occurrence, thematic clustering, and co-citation networks, reveals that co-creation is inherently multi-layered and interdisciplinary. The clusters identified in this study link domains that are often examined separately in the literature, including strategic marketing, experiential design, digital participation, and community-based governance. Theoretical models should therefore reflect interactions across micro-level tourist emotions and engagement, meso-level stakeholder and community networks, and macro-level technological and policy environments.

The study also brings attention to the concept of adverse co-creation. Several clusters, especially those tied to digital participation and user-generated content, point to the possibility that co-creation can generate negative image spillovers when governance is weak. This challenges the dominant linear assumption that 'more co-creation leads to a better destination image', suggesting instead that risk, resilience, and content governance should be incorporated into future theoretical formulations.

Practical Implications

Taken together, the findings suggest that DMOS should move beyond viewing co-creation as a marketing tactic and instead embed it as a long-term investment. Because the dominant clusters in the co-citation and keyword analyses highlight branding, stakeholder collaboration, and digital engagement, integrating co-creation into brand strategy, policy implementation, communication, and event programming becomes essential for achieving sustained competitiveness.

The strong geographical diversity observed in the dataset also highlights that co-creation cannot follow a universal template. Differences in cultural norms, governance capacity, and technological readiness mean that DMOS must adapt co-creation to local conditions if initiatives are to resonate authentically with residents and remain appealing to tourists. Tailoring these strategies ensures that co-creation contributes meaningfully to both community identity and visitor experience.

The thematic clusters further reveal multiple strategic entry points for implementing co-creation, from experiential branding and participatory event design to personalisation and digital interaction. Selecting among these pathways should depend on the destination's stage in its brand life cycle, its positioning in the competitive landscape, and the resources at hand. A careful alignment between cluster-specific insights and managerial priorities can increase strategic coherence.

At the same time, recognising that co-creation can also generate unintended or negative outcomes requires DMOS to integrate risk management into their strategies. The prominence of digital and social media-related clusters suggests the importance of monitoring user-generated content, anticipating potential negative narratives, and establishing rapid-response mechanisms. Ensuring balanced representation among community groups can also prevent resident fatigue and mitigate identity distortion associated with over-commercialisation or uneven participation.

Finally, the convergence of bibliometric and AI-based thematic analyses illustrates the practical value of data analytics in managerial decision-making. Because both approaches independently highlight similar emerging topics and structural patterns, DMOS can adopt comparable analytic tools to track evolving trends, benchmark their destination against competitors, and adapt strategies proactively in a fast-changing tourism environment.

Future Research Agenda

Future research should first explore how multi-stakeholder co-creation initiatives shape key components of destination brand equity, such as brand love, brand

identification, and brand attachment. This direction aligns with the clusters emphasising stakeholder collaboration and experiential branding, and is especially relevant in collectivist cultural contexts where social identity may moderate co-creation outcomes.

Second, the temporal and spatial dynamics of co-creation merit closer empirical investigation. The cluster structures suggest that co-creation unfolds not only at the point of consumption but also across pre-trip, on-site, and post-trip phases. Comparative research across service environments, including hotels, attractions, and mobility services, and longitudinal or mixed-method designs combining surveys with digital trace data (e.g. social media interactions or app-based behaviour) would yield deeper insights into these dynamics.

Third, the growing relevance of co-branding in tourism, hinted at in several thematic clusters, deserves more systematic theorisation. Future studies could examine how collaborations between destination brands and local businesses generate interbrand trust, shape perceived authenticity, and influence loyalty and purchase intentions. Applying frameworks such as brand alliances or signalling theory can help clarify these mechanisms.

Finally, the expansion of virtual co-creation environments, including augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), metaverse (and social media-based collaborative platforms), opens a promising research pathway. Because digital co-creation emerged strongly in the keyword and thematic clusters, future research should investigate how immersive digital spaces influence tourism intentions, perceived co-creation value, and cross-cultural differences driven by digital literacy or cultural orientation.

Across all these directions, interdisciplinary approaches, spanning marketing, sociology, psychology, communication, and technology studies, will be essential. At the same time, participatory and qualitative methods such as ethnography and action research can help capture the lived experiences of tourists and residents. Ultimately, future work should frame co-creation not only as a lever for destination competitiveness but also as a contributor to community well-being and alignment with global sustainability

objectives such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Conclusion

This study has provided an integrated perspective of how co-creation impacts the process of destination image formation and transformation, based on a bibliographic analysis of CiteSpace and Scopus AI. The results indicate that co-creation is not a single activity but a multi-layered and evolutionary process that connects institutions, businesses, communities, and individual tourists. Through co-citation and co-occurrence networks, the study identifies four main thematic clusters: destination branding, stakeholder engagement, emotional experiences, and digital interactions.

In terms of theoretical implications, the results reposition co-creation as a mechanism in destination image management, connecting the micro (emotional, cognitive), meso (community and business networks), and macro (policy, technology) levels. At the same time, the study points out the need to adapt existing theory to better suit diverse cultural-institutional contexts, especially in Asia and the Global South. In terms of managerial implications, the findings suggest that co-creation can become the foundation of long-term brand strategy but requires close coordination and risk management, especially in the digital environment, to avoid negative impacts such as negative information or community fatigue. DMOS can exploit co-creation through multiple entry points, from cultural events and personalised experiences to digital interactions, depending on the stage of brand development and resource conditions.

This study also has some limitations. First, the data were collected only from the Scopus database and were limited to English-language publications, which may have missed important studies from other sources or in other languages. Second, the bibliometric analysis provided an overview and knowledge structure but did not go into depth to assess the content quality or empirical results of each study. Given these limitations, future research directions could expand the scope of data to different databases and languages and combine mixed-methods and longitudinal stud-

ies to capture the evolution of co-creation over time. In addition, integrating qualitative data from field observations, expert interviews, and digital content analysis will provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms, conditions, and impacts of co-creation on destination image.

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Validating Gastronomy as a Distinct Tourism Typology: A Meta-Synthesis Systematic Review

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This study examines the intellectual development of gastronomy tourism as a distinct typology within the tourism discipline. Through a meta-synthesis of 63 peer-reviewed articles published between 1998 and 2025, the research identifies six major thematic clusters: cultural heritage, experiential practices, economic entrepreneurship, sustainability integration, social identity, and technological innovation. These clusters reveal how gastronomy has evolved beyond its traditional role as a cultural complement into a central driver of destination identity, competitiveness, and policy. The study also introduces a three-stage development model of recognition, integration, and specialization that describes how destinations institutionalize gastronomy tourism over time. Findings show that gastronomy engages in multiple dimensions: it preserves heritage, enhances visitor experience, stimulates local economies, promotes sustainability, strengthens community belonging, and adapts to digital platforms. This multi-dimensionality supports the argument that gastronomy has matured into a distinct tourism typology. The study contributes theoretically by synthesizing fragmented literature and practically by offering a framework for policymakers, destination planners, and entrepreneurs to integrate gastronomy strategically.

Keywords: gastronomy tourism, tourism typology, meta-synthesis, systematic review

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Introduction

Food has always been more than a biological necessity. Across cultures, it functions as a symbol of identity, a marker of heritage, and a medium for social exchange (Bessière, 1998; Long & Robinson, 2017). In recent decades, food has also become a visible driver of economic, cultural, and creative industries, shaping consumer preferences and influencing how commu-

nities and nations present themselves globally (Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Ellis et al., 2018). As global food culture evolves through innovation, commercialization, and cultural preservation, its role within tourism has become increasingly significant.

Tourism, one of the world's largest industries, has historically revolved around attractions, landscapes, and cultural performances (UN Tourism, n.d.). Yet, as

travel motivations diversify, food has emerged as a critical component of the tourism experience. Meals are no longer incidental to travel; rather, they are central to how visitors engage with place, culture, and people (Hjalager, 2002, 2010; Hjalager & Richards, 2003). Tourists increasingly seek encounters with local cuisines not only to satisfy hunger but also to experience authenticity, heritage, and creativity (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; Sims, 2009). This shift has transformed food into both a motivator and a key differentiator within competitive tourism markets.

The intersection of food and tourism, often termed *food tourism*, highlights this transformation. Food tourism broadly encompasses travel where the consumption of local food and drink forms a meaningful part of the experience (Hall et al., 2003; Hall & Mitchell, 2003). Within this domain, *culinary tourism* and *gastronomy tourism* have emerged as related, yet distinct concepts. Culinary tourism tends to emphasize exploration of cooking methods, restaurants, and culinary schools (Wolf, 2006), while gastronomy tourism integrates broader cultural, sensory, and symbolic dimensions of food (Kivela & Crofts, 2006; Okumus, 2021). These overlapping terms have created definitional ambiguity, complicating both theoretical development and practical application.

The academic literature reflects this ambiguity. Some scholars treat food, culinary, and gastronomy tourism as interchangeable (Hall & Mitchell, 2006, 2007), whereas others argue for nuanced distinctions (Ellis et al., 2018). This inconsistency has hindered the consolidation of a coherent intellectual structure. Consequently, despite rapid growth in publications, gastronomy tourism research remains fragmented across tourism, hospitality, cultural geography, and food studies. Without synthesis, the field struggles to articulate gastronomy tourism's unique characteristics, patterns, and relationships to other tourism forms (Soeroso & Turgarini, 2020).

This lack of clarity underscores the importance of establishing gastronomy tourism as a distinct typology. A recognized typology must demonstrate definitional distinctiveness, unique motivational and experiential attributes, and measurable impacts that differentiate it from other forms of tourism (Hjalager, 2003;

Wickens, 2002). For gastronomy, such recognition is essential not only for academic categorization but also for practical application. Destinations, policymakers, and practitioners require conceptual clarity to design authentic gastronomic experiences, develop targeted marketing strategies, and preserve culinary heritage while remaining competitive (Okumus et al., 2018).

Conceptual clarity is particularly urgent given the rapid transformation of food culture under globalization, social media, and shifting consumer demands. Traditional tourism theories developed largely in the context of mass tourism may not adequately capture the motivations, sensory dimensions, and embodied experiences unique to gastronomy tourism (Batat, 2021). New frameworks are therefore required to account for how gastronomy motivates travel, acts as a cultural bridge, and generates both economic and socio-cultural outcomes (Richards, 2012).

To advance the field, a comprehensive synthesis of gastronomy tourism scholarship is needed. Such synthesis can consolidate fragmented research, establish theoretical boundaries, and provide a roadmap for both scholars and practitioners (Ellis et al., 2018). This study responds to that need by applying a systematic meta-synthesis review of gastronomy tourism literature published since 1998 to 31 July 2025. Unlike narrative reviews, a meta-synthesis integrates diverse findings into broader theoretical insights, moving beyond individual case studies toward cumulative knowledge (Bae et al., 2014; Scherer et al., 2019).

The systematic review approach ensures transparency and rigour. Following PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021), this study identified and analysed 63 Scopus-indexed peer-reviewed articles. Bibliometric mapping through VOSviewer complemented the synthesis by visualizing keyword co-occurrence, thematic evolution, and author networks (van Eck & Waltman, 2010). Together, these methods enable a comprehensive assessment of gastronomy tourism's intellectual structure and its evolution over time. Accordingly, this research is guided by three core questions:

1. What is the intellectual structure of gastronomy tourism research, including its primary clusters and contributors?

2. How has gastronomy tourism research evolved thematically between 1998 and 2025?
3. What patterns, typologies, and characteristics validate gastronomy as a distinct tourism discipline?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to validating gastronomy tourism as a legitimate and mature field, clarifies its theoretical and empirical foundations, and provides for future research and practice.

Literature Review

The theoretical foundation of gastronomy tourism rests on the intersection of several disciplinary domains, including tourism studies, hospitality management, food studies, cultural geography, and consumer behaviour. This interdisciplinary nature has contributed to both the richness and complexity of gastronomy tourism scholarship, while simultaneously creating challenges for establishing unified theoretical frameworks.

Tourism typology research has traditionally focused on categorizing tourism forms based on various criteria, including tourist motivations, destination characteristics, activity types, and experience outcomes (Smith, 2002; Smith & Costello, 2009). Classical tourism typologies (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Cohen, 1979; Cohen 1988) modes of tourist experience and psychographic segmentation, provided foundational frameworks for understanding tourist diversity and behaviour patterns. However, these early typologies primarily addressed general tourism phenomena without specific consideration of specialized interests like gastronomy.

The emergence of special interest tourism challenged conventional typological approaches by recognizing that modern travellers increasingly seek specialized experiences aligned with interests, hobbies, or lifestyle preferences (Lacy & Douglass, 2002). This shift from mass tourism to specialized tourism forms created theoretical space for gastronomy tourism's emergence as a distinct category.

Contemporary tourism typology research acknowledges that successful typologies must demonstrate clear definitional boundaries, unique charac-

teristics, and distinctive outcomes that differentiate one tourism form from others (Hjalager, 2003). For gastronomy tourism, this requires establishing that food and beverage consumption during travel creates sufficiently unique motivations, experiences, and outcomes to warrant separate theoretical consideration.

The relationship between food and tourism has been recognized since early tourism development, though academic attention remained limited until the 1990s. Bessière's (1998) seminal work on local food and cuisine as tourist attractions in rural areas provided foundational insights into how traditional food systems could serve tourism development objectives while preserving cultural heritage.

Subsequent scholarship expanded this foundation by examining various dimensions of food-tourism relationships. Hall and Mitchell (2003) contributed significantly by establishing wine tourism as a distinct phenomenon, demonstrating how specific food and beverage categories could generate specialized tourism markets with unique characteristics and requirements.

The early 2000s witnessed rapid growth in food tourism research, with scholars like Richards (2012) arguing for gastronomy's essential role in tourism production and consumption. This period established gastronomy tourism as a legitimate research domain and highlighted its potential for destination development and cultural preservation.

Conceptual Frameworks in Gastronomy Tourism

Contemporary gastronomy tourism scholarship has developed several conceptual frameworks attempting to explain tourist motivations, experiences, and outcomes. The experiential paradigm, emphasizing authentic and immersive experiences, has become particularly influential in understanding gastronomy tourism phenomena (Kivela & Crofts, 2006; Putra, 2021).

Cultural authenticity represents another significant theoretical dimension, with scholars examining how gastronomic experiences provide access to local culture, traditions, and identity (Garcia, 2019; Richards, 2015). This perspective positions gastronomy tourism as a form of cultural tourism in which food

serves as the primary medium for cultural exchange and understanding.

The satisfaction-loyalty paradigm, borrowed from general tourism and hospitality literature, has been widely applied to gastronomy tourism contexts. Scholars have investigated how gastronomic experiences influence tourist satisfaction, destination loyalty, and behavioural intentions, often finding that food experiences significantly impact overall trip evaluation and return intentions.

Recognition of gastronomy tourism's market diversity has led to various segmentation approaches. Demographic segmentation identifies distinct age, income, and education patterns among gastronomy tourists, with research suggesting higher education and income levels compared to general tourists (Hall et al., 2003). Motivational segmentation attempts to categorize gastronomy tourists based on primary travel motivations, ranging from dedicated culinary travellers who plan entire trips around food experiences to opportunistic tourists who engage with local cuisine as a secondary activity (McKercher et al., 2008). Behavioural segmentation examines actual tourist behaviour during gastronomic experiences, including restaurant selection criteria, willingness to try new foods, and engagement with local food culture. This approach has revealed significant variation in how different tourist segments approach and experience gastronomy.

From destination perspectives, gastronomy tourism represents both opportunity and challenge. Opportunities include destination differentiation, cultural preservation, economic development, and sustainable tourism promotion (Sims, 2009). Many destinations have successfully leveraged culinary heritage and contemporary gastronomy to establish distinctive market positions and attract specialized tourist segments.

Challenges include maintaining authenticity while meeting tourist expectations, balancing commercialization with cultural integrity, and developing infrastructure and services capable of supporting gastronomy tourism development (Rand & Heath, 2006). These challenges highlight the complex relationship between tourism development and local food sys-

tems. Despite substantial growth in gastronomy tourism scholarship, several gaps remain.

First, limited systematic synthesis of existing knowledge hinders theoretical development and practical application. Most studies focus on specific destinations, segments, or phenomena without broader theoretical integration. Second, definitional inconsistency creates confusion about gastronomy tourism's scope and boundaries. Terms like food tourism, culinary tourism, and gastronomic tourism are often used interchangeably without clear conceptual distinctions, complicating theory building and empirical comparison. Third, methodological diversity, while enriching the field, limits cumulative knowledge development. Studies employ various theoretical frameworks, measurement instruments, and analytical approaches, making cross-study comparison and synthesis challenging. Fourth, limited longitudinal research restricts understanding of gastronomy tourism's evolution and changing dynamics. Most studies provide snapshots of particular moments or contexts without examining how gastronomy tourism develops over time. Finally, insufficient attention to gastronomy tourism's relationships with other tourism forms limits theoretical integration and practical coordination. Understanding how gastronomy tourism intersects with cultural tourism, rural tourism, and urban tourism could enhance both theoretical comprehension and practical application.

Methodology

This study applied a systematic literature review using the meta-synthesis approach. A systematic literature review, as explained by Snyder (2019), involves identifying, critically evaluating, collecting, and analysing relevant research to answer specific research questions. Unlike primary research, a meta-synthesis does not generate new empirical data but synthesizes existing studies to develop broader insights, theories, and interpretations that go beyond the findings of individual works (Bakhshi Movahed et al., 2023). The purpose was to provide a holistic and integrated understanding of gastronomy tourism as a distinct tourism typology.

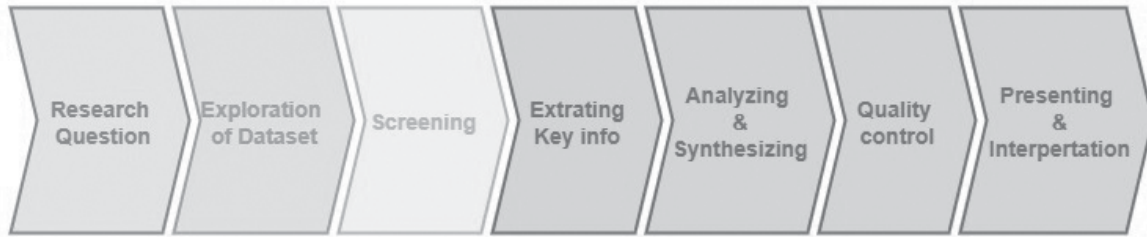


Figure 1 Meta-Synthesis Procedure

Following the guidelines of Sandelowski and Barroso, as presented in Movahed et al. (2023), this study employed a seven-step meta-synthesis procedure:

The research was guided by three questions:

1. What is the intellectual structure of gastronomy tourism research, including its primary clusters and contributors?
2. How has gastronomy tourism research evolved thematically between 1998 and 2025?
3. What patterns, typologies, and characteristics validate gastronomy as a distinct tourism discipline?

To address these questions, a systematic search was conducted using the keywords ‘gastronomy tourism’, ‘culinary tourism’, ‘food tourism’, and ‘gastronomic tourism’. The search was performed using the latest version of Harzing Publish or Perish (v. 8.18.5091) across Google Scholar (n = 1000) and Crossref (n = 500), resulting in a preliminary dataset of 1,500 articles. After excluding non-Scopus publications, 1,000 articles remained. An additional search via the Scopus API identified a further 200 eligible articles. In total 1,200 articles were considered in the preliminary

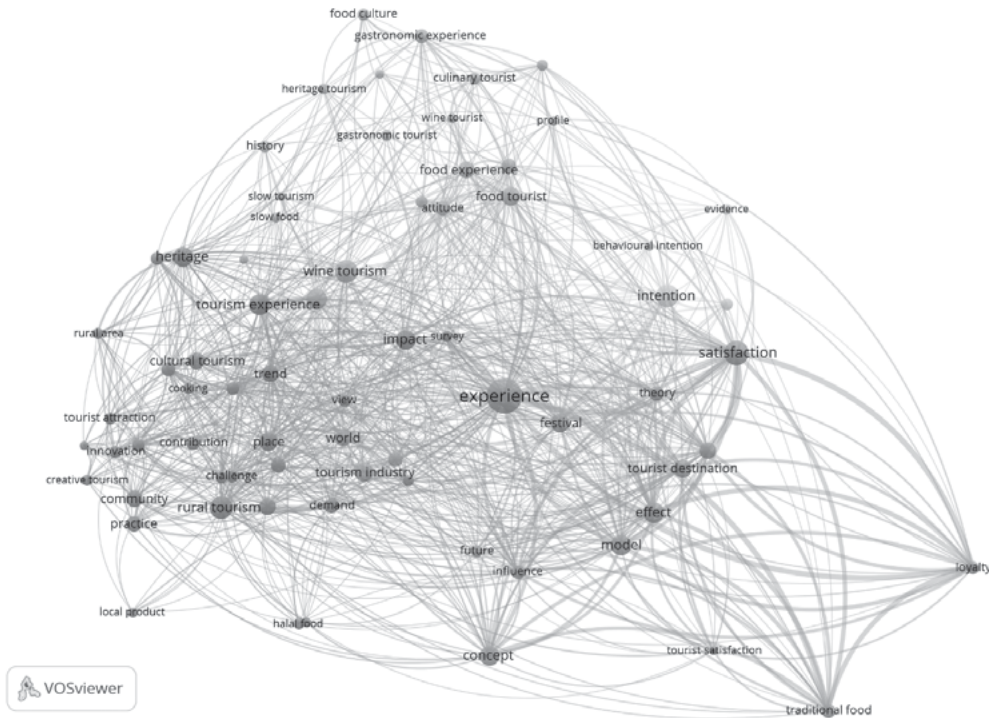


Figure 2 Network Visualization of Gastronomy

tourism typologies, including ‘culinary tourist’, ‘food tourist’, ‘wine tourism’, and ‘gastronomic experience’, representing research that examines distinct market segments and niche tourism products. (3) The blue cluster concentrates on theoretical frameworks and outcome measures, encompassing ‘satisfaction’, ‘loyalty’, ‘model’, and ‘theory’, indicating a substantial body of work dedicated to conceptualizing and measuring the effects of gastronomy tourism. The dense interconnectivity observed throughout the network demonstrates the multidisciplinary nature of gastronomy tourism research. Bridge concepts such as ‘food culture’, ‘tourist destination’, and ‘tourism industry’ facilitate connections between clusters, illustrating how gastronomic elements are integrated within broader tourism systems and academic discourse.

This structural analysis suggests that the field has evolved from general tourism concepts toward more

specialized gastronomic applications, while maintaining strong theoretical foundations rooted in established tourism outcomes and satisfaction paradigms.

The overlay visualization illustrates the thematic evolution of gastronomy tourism research over time. The network map shows clusters of keywords connected through co-occurrence links, where colour gradients represent the temporal development of topics. Earlier themes such as *heritage*, *wine tourism*, *rural tourism*, and *cultural tourism* appear in darker shades, reflecting their prominence in earlier studies. As research evolved, newer themes such as *experience*, *satisfaction*, *intention*, *effect*, and *loyalty* emerge in lighter shades, showing the shift of gastronomy tourism scholarship toward consumer-centric and experiential dimensions. This transition indicates how the field has expanded from its initial focus on cultural and regional aspects of gastronomy to more system-

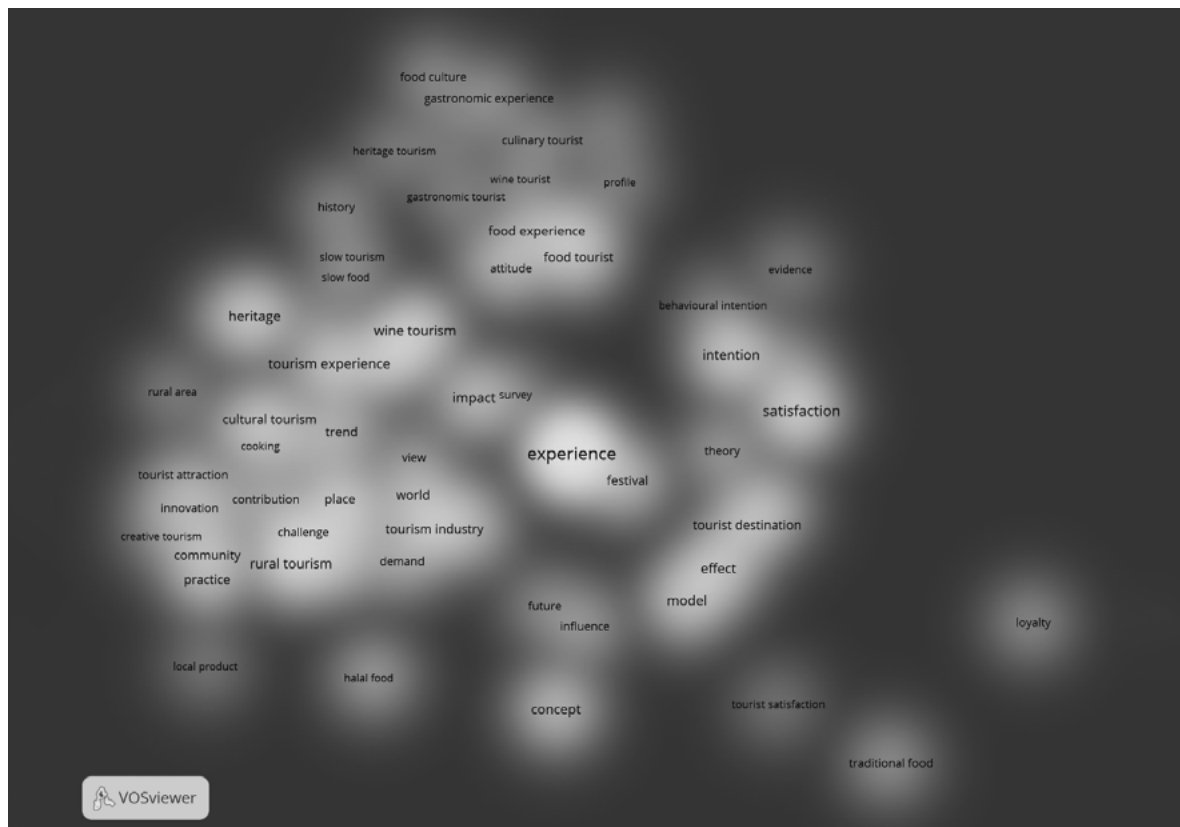


Figure 4 Density Visualization

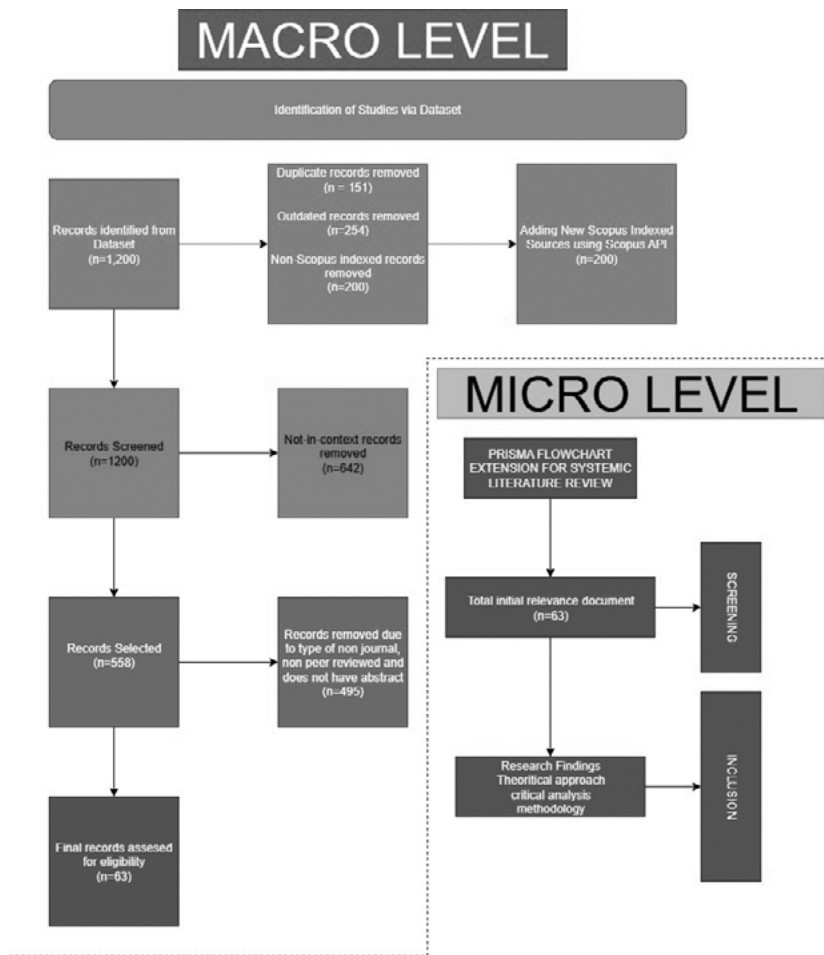


Figure 5 PRISMA Flow Diagram of Literature Search

atic investigations of tourist behaviour, destination branding, and satisfaction-driven outcomes (Khoshkam et al., 2023).

The density visualization highlights the most influential and frequently occurring themes in gastronomy tourism research. The yellow and green zones indicate areas of high research intensity, while the blue zones represent less explored topics. The term ‘experience’ appears as the central and most dominant theme, surrounded closely by satisfaction, intention, tourist destination, model, and effect, underscoring the central role of experiential value in gastronomy tourism. Peripheral but significant areas include heritage, wine tourism, rural tourism, halal food, local product, and traditional food, which remain important but are less intensively studied compared to experience-driven

topics. This visualization confirms that gastronomy tourism research is anchored in the experiential economy, while cultural, heritage, and sustainability dimensions form complementary but secondary research streams (Khoshkam et al., 2023).

The PRISMA-based selection process was conducted in two stages:

1. Macro-level (Identification and Screening): The macro process ensured dataset breadth and quality. First, duplicates (n = 151), outdated studies (n = 254), and non-Scopus indexed records (n = 200) were removed. At the same time, 200 additional Scopus-indexed records were retrieved using Scopus API, resulting in 1,200 records for screening. After content screening, 642 not-in-

context records were excluded, leaving 558 studies. Of these, 495 records were removed because they were non-journal, non-peer-reviewed, or lacked abstracts. This process resulted in 63 eligible articles for further review.

2. **Micro-level (Eligibility and Inclusion):** At this stage, the 63 studies were assessed in detail following PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021). Each was screened for theoretical contribution, methodological rigour, and relevance to gastronomy tourism. Only those meeting the inclusion criteria were synthesized. This micro-level screening ensured that the final dataset reflected high academic reliability and thematic alignment. The final 63 studies formed the foundation for meta-synthesis and bibliometric mapping. *vosviewer* software was applied to conduct keyword co-occurrence, author co-citation, and bibliographic coupling analysis, while *Mendeley* facilitated reference management. This dual approach, combining systematic review and bibliometric analysis, provided both qualitative insights and quantitative mapping of the intellectual structure of gastronomy tourism.

Results and Discussion

Results

Intellectual Structure of Gastronomy Tourism Research

The temporal distribution of the 63 selected articles in Table 1 reveals distinct phases in gastronomy tourism research development from 1998 to 2025:

As displayed in Table 1, the intellectual structure of gastronomy tourism research has developed along interrelated thematic clusters that together shape the field as a distinct area of inquiry. The analysis of the 63 selected articles (1998–2025) reveals six dominant clusters, each anchored by key contributors whose works continue to influence the direction of gastronomy typology:

Cultural-Heritage Cluster

This cluster establishes gastronomy as an expression of cultural identity and heritage. Early foundational work by Bessière (1998) framed rural gastronomy as cultural capital, while Alonso (2013) linked wine her-

itage to regional identity and authenticity. More recent studies, such as Galarraga and Martinez de Albeniz (2025) on Basque cuisine and Murta et al. (2010) on seafood rituals, deepen the cultural heritage perspective. Collectively, these works form the intellectual foundation that situates gastronomy as a medium for preserving and communicating intangible heritage.

Event and Experiential Cluster

A second cluster emphasizes gastronomy as an experiential and performative practice, often tied to festivals, events, and immersive dining experiences. De Jong et al. (2024) conceptualized experimental dining as transformative, while Castillo-Manzano et al. (2021) analysed attributes of memorable dining. Castro-Palafox et al. (2024) examined Mexican food festivals as tools for place branding, and Cheng (2023) assessed Slow Food events as cultural-political practices. This cluster advances the understanding of gastronomy tourism as both leisure consumption and cultural performance.

Entrepreneurship and Economic Cluster

Another strong line of research situates gastronomy within entrepreneurship, market competitiveness, and destination branding. Recuero-Virto and Valilla Arróspide (2024) highlighted culinary entrepreneurs as catalysts of regional development, while Sio et al. (2024) and Suna and Alvarez (2021) analysed gastronomy as a branding mechanism. Baldwin (2018) and Yilmaz et al. (2020) focused on how food shapes urban and national identities in global branding strategies. Together, these works define gastronomy as an economic engine within tourism systems.

Sustainability and Food System Cluster

This cluster integrates sustainability principles into gastronomy. Bessière (1998) was among the first to link gastronomy to agritourism and local development, but the agenda became stronger with Skryl et al. (2018) on sustainable food trends, Pramezwaray et al. (2022) on sustainable gastronomy in Indonesia, and Giampiccoli and Mnguni (2022) on models of responsible food tourism. Aguilera and Rozzi (2024) introduced circular food practices in fragile ecosystems, while Moura

Table 1 List of Selected Articles

No	No. of Citations to Date	Author (s)	No	No. of Citations to Date	Author (s)
1	3	Galarraga and Martinez de Albeniz (2025)	32	5	Pilis et al. (2022)
2	0	Oğan (2025)	33	5	Huerta et al. (2022)
3	0	Castillo-Manzano et al. (2025)	34	4	Giampiccoli and Mnguni (2022)
4	0	Moura et al. (2025)	35	3	Aliyev (2022)
5	0	Carvache-Franco et al. (2025)	36	98	Batat (2021)
6	5	Zoran (2025)	37	95	Fusté-Forné (2021)
7	0	Baydeniz (2025)	38	28	Suna and Alvarez (2021)
8	0	Soonsan et al. (2025)	39	20	Pérez-Gálvez et al. (2021)
9	0	Ningsih et al. (2025)	40	15	Topole et al. (2021)
10	28	Kuhn (2024)	41	76	Pavlidis and Markantonatou (2020)
11	15	Recuero-Virto and Valilla Arróspide (2024)	42	33	Onorati and Giardullo (2020)
12	10	Kaur and Kaur (2024)	43	32	Rodríguez-Gutiérrez et al. (2020)
13	9	Gündüz et al. (2024)	44	23	Yılmaz et al. (2020)
14	6	Pai et al. (2024)	45	9	Mercer and Song (2020)
15	5	Castro-Palafox et al. (2024)	46	4	Nair (2020)
16	5	González-Moreno et al. (2024)	47	3	Pena et al. (2020)
17	4	Onat and Guneren (2024)	48	47	Balderas-Cejudo et al. (2019)
18	4	Yayla et al. (2024)	49	29	Nicoletti et al. (2019)
19	2	Jiménez-Arévalo and Barrera-Fernández (2024)	50	4	Jiménez-Beltrán et al. (2019)
20	2	Ginés-Ariza et al. (2024)	51	3	Oktay (2019)
21	1	Enríquez (2024)	52	36	Akdag et al. (2018)
22	1	Aguilera and Rozzi (2024)	53	34	Martínez de Albeniz (2018)
23	26	Putra et al. (2023)	54	21	Baldwin (2018)
24	9	Pérez-Priego et al. (2023)	55	8	Skryl et al. (2018)
25	7	Cheng (2023)	56	1	Eldarov et al. (2017)
26	6	Giampiccoli et al. (2023)	56	54	Jiménez-Beltrán et al. (2016)
27	2	Tendani et al. (2023)	57	20	Fusté Forné (2015)
28	26	Moral-Cuadra et al. (2022)	58	25	Alonso (2013)
29	19	Lee (2022)	59	288	Hornng and Tsai (2010)
30	9	Pramezwary et al. (2022)	60	2	Murta et al. (2010)
31	7	Corrado (2022)	61	2,512	Kivela and Crotts (2006)
			62	33	Segers (2005)
			63	768	Bessière (1998)

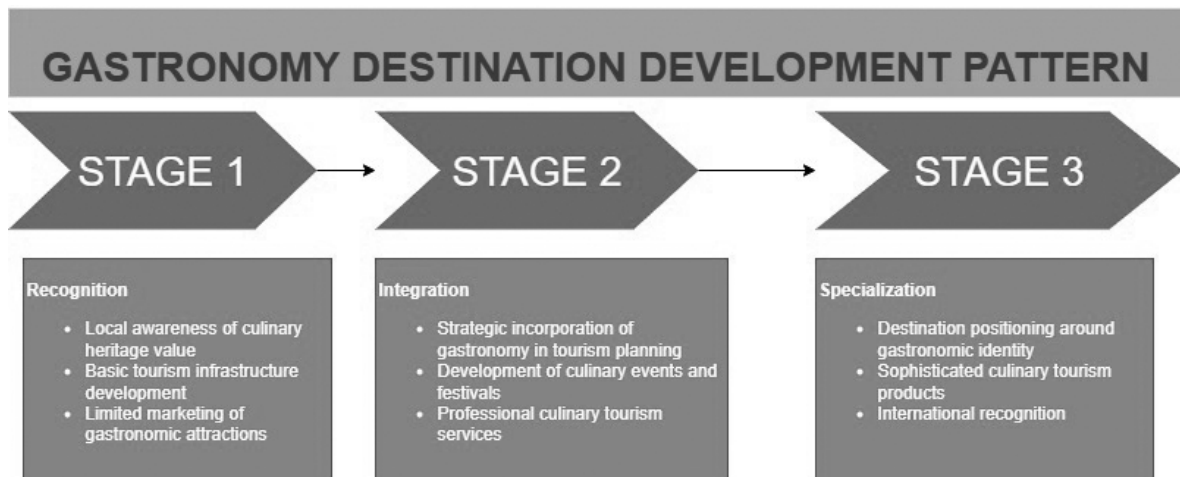


Figure 6 Gastronomy Destination Development Flow

et al. (2025) emphasized gastronomy’s role in community sustainability. This stream positions gastronomy within the broader sustainability discourse.

Social and Community Cluster

The social dimension of gastronomy tourism is represented by studies on identity, family traditions, and community empowerment. Eldarov et al. (2017) examined governance and participation in gastronomy, while Fusté Forné (2015) emphasized intergenerational food authenticity. Carvache-Franco and Carvache-Franco (2024) investigated senior travellers’ engagement with food, showing how gastronomy fosters memory and belonging. Castro-Palafox et al. (2024) demonstrated how festivals strengthen community ties. Segers (2005) on historical analysis of *Ons Kookboek* (1927–2000) further illustrates how culinary practices evolve alongside broader socio-economic transitions: from reinforcing rural identity and promoting simple, healthy, locally sourced dishes to embracing globalized tastes and more flexible food choices, yet still retaining cultural ties to farming communities. Taken together, these works highlight gastronomy’s power to construct social meaning and belonging.

Technological and Digital Cluster

The most recent intellectual development emerges within the domains of digital and smart tourism. Onorati and Giardullo (2020) mapped online food

discourses, Soonsan et al. (2025) studied social media food-sharing, and Yayla et al. (2024) examined digital nomads’ virtual gastronomy practices. Enríquez (2024) proposed smart gastronomy platforms for policy innovation, while Yilmaz et al. (2020) associates food branding with smart city strategies. This cluster reflects how digitalization is reshaping gastronomy tourism’s promotion, consumption, and governance.

The Evolution of Gastronomy Tourism

The evolution of gastronomy tourism demonstrates recognizable patterns that validate it as a distinct field within tourism studies. The three-stage development flow (Figure 6) provides a structural pathway for understanding this trajectory.

First, the recognition stage emphasizes gastronomy as a cultural and heritage marker. Destinations begin by raising awareness of local food traditions and embedding them in early tourism infrastructure. Studies such as Bessière (1998) and Alonso (2013) confirm that local cuisines act as cultural assets and foundations for destination identity. At this stage, gastronomy is primarily positioned as a component of heritage tourism.

Second, the integration stage reflects the typological diversification of gastronomy practices. Destinations incorporate food strategically into tourism planning through culinary festivals, cooking workshops, and beverage trails. Research by Cheng (2023),

Carvache-Franco and Carvache-Franco (2024), and Baydeniz (2025) illustrates how experiential dining and food-based events extend tourist engagement. This integration expands gastronomy beyond cultural memory, making it a functional and economic driver of tourism competitiveness.

Third, the specialization stage validates gastronomy as a discipline with distinct market orientation and global reach. Destinations consolidate branding around gastronomic identity, supported by professional services and sophisticated culinary products. Authors such as Yilmaz et al. (2020), Baldwin (2018), and Enríquez (2024) highlight how gastronomy-centred branding achieves international recognition, positioning food as a strategic pillar of destination competitiveness.

The typologies underpinning this process reinforce gastronomy's disciplinary standing. Cultural, experiential, economic, sustainability, social, and technological dimensions (Table 2) collectively frame gastronomy not as a sub-theme of tourism, but as a holistic system with theoretical and practical foundations. Gastronomy integrates heritage and innovation, combines local authenticity with global branding, and balances commercial viability with cultural preservation.

A recurring characteristic across stages is the tension between commodification and authenticity. As noted by Murta et al. (2010), Castro-Palafox et al. (2024), and Aguilera and Rozzi (2024), gastronomy must maintain its cultural integrity while adapting to market demands. This duality underlines why gastronomy requires distinct governance, policy, and research approaches, validating it as an autonomous tourism discipline.

The typology of gastronomy tourism can be explained across six dimensions, each reflecting how food has become a distinct field of study and practice within tourism, as explained below:

1. The cultural dimension emphasizes how gastronomy operates as heritage, festival practice, and ritual. Research demonstrates that cuisine is not only a consumable product but also a carrier of cultural memory. For example, Bessière (1998) and Alonso

(2013) linked food heritage and wine to local identity, while Galarraga and Martinez de Albeniz (2025) showed how Basque gastronomy represents intangible heritage. Food events and festivals, as discussed by Topole et al. (2021), Castro-Palafox et al. (2024), and Cheng (2023), serve both as tools of cultural preservation and as mechanisms for branding destinations. Similarly, studies by Murta et al. (2010), Fusté Forné (2015), and Aguilera and Rozzi (2024) confirm that ritual food practices reflect belonging and reinforce authenticity within communities.

2. The experimental dimension reflects the experiential turn in tourism where food becomes a central element of memorable encounters. De Jong et al. (2024), Castillo-Manzano et al. (2021), and Carvache-Franco et al. (2023) show how dining experiences contribute to tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Beyond dining, interactive practices such as cooking classes and workshops, examined by Carvache-Franco and Carvache-Franco (2024) and Kuhn (2020), highlight learning as a tourism motivator. Trails focused on beverages, including wine, craft beer, and coffee, further enrich the experiential appeal as demonstrated by Alonso (2013), Baydeniz (2025), and Yayla et al. (2024).
3. The economic dimension positions gastronomy as a driver of entrepreneurship, markets, and destination branding. Recuero-Virto and Valilla Arróspide (2024), Suna and Alvarez (2021), and Sio et al. (2024) show how gastronomy entrepreneurs act as catalysts of economic development and competitive advantage. Gündüz and Topaloğlu (2019), Kaur and Kaur (2024), and Onat and Guneren (2024) emphasize the role of food markets and street gastronomy in shaping urban tourism. Branding studies by Yilmaz et al. (2020), Baldwin (2018), and Enríquez (2024) underline how gastronomy builds destination images and strengthens tourism strategies.
4. The sustainability dimension highlights the increasing attention to green, slow, and circular gastronomy practices. Scholars such as Pramezwarly et al. (2022), Moura et al. (2025), and Giampiccoli

Table 2 Gastronomy Dimension

First-order categories	Second-order categories	Findings
Cultural Dimension	Gastronomy Heritage Tourism	Gastronomy heritage tourism studies highlight how cuisine preserves cultural memory. Bessière (1998) showed rural gastronomy as cultural capital. Alonso (2013) linked wine heritage to identity. Galarraga and Martinez de Albeniz (2025) explored Basque culinary identity as intangible heritage.
	Festival and Event-Based Gastronomy	Food events strengthen local identity and attract tourism. Topole et al. (2021) found Slovenian festivals integrate sustainability. Castro-Palafox et al. (2024) showed Mexican food festivals reinforce branding. Cheng (2023) analysed Taiwan's Slow Food festivals as cultural-political tools.
	Foodways and Ritual Practices	Food rituals embody community belonging. Murta et al. (2010) emphasized seafood rituals in coastal heritage. Fusté Forné (2015) linked ritualized foodways with authenticity. Aguilera and Rozzi (2024) discussed ritual aspects of gastronomy at the sub-Antarctic margins.
Experimental Dimension	Experimental Dining	De Jong et al. (2024) analysed how gastronomy reframes tourist experiences. Castillo-Manzano et al. (2021) identified experiential attributes shaping satisfaction. Carvache-Franco et al. (2023) highlighted memorable dining experiences driving loyalty.
	Cooking Class and Skill-Based	Carvache-Franco and Carvache-Franco (2024) noted cooking workshops as tools for niche markets like senior tourists. Kuhn (2020) found hands-on activities strengthen food tourist profiles.
	Wine, Coffee and Beverage Trails	Alonso (2013) studied wine routes as heritage. Baydeniz (2025) examined craft beer's destination appeal. Yayla et al. (2024) connected coffee consumption with digital nomad gastronomy journeys.
Economic Dimension	Gastronomy Entrepreneurship	Recuero-Virto and Valilla Arróspide (2024) framed food entrepreneurs as catalysts of culinary development. Suna and Alvarez (2021) highlighted gastronomy-led brand creation. Sio et al. (2024) segmented markets where entrepreneurship builds competitiveness.
	Food Market and Street Gastronomy	Gündüz and Topaloğlu (2019) showed street markets shape urban gastronomy experiences. Kaur and Kaur (2024) validated how local food images influence markets. Onat and Guneren (2024) analysed satisfaction in gastronomy-driven consumption.
	Gastronomy-Driven Destination Branding	Yilmaz et al. (2020) positioned food image in smart city branding. Baldwin (2018) analysed how East Asian governments use food in branding. Enríquez (2024) proposed gastronomy-centred strategic branding models.
Sustainability Dimension	Green Gastronomy Tourism	Pramezwaray et al. (2022) promoted sustainable gastronomy in Medan. Moura et al. (2025) highlighted gastronomy as a driver of sustainable local development. Giampiccoli and Mnguni (2022) proposed a sustainability-based gastronomic model.
	Slow Food and Farm Tourism	Cheng (2023) studied Slow Food as a political and cultural movement. Fusté Forné (2015) described authenticity through farm-based experiences. Bessière (1998) discussed gastronomy in agritourism as local development.

Continued on the next page

Table 4 Continued from the previous page

First-order categories	Second-order categories	Findings
	Circular Gastronomy Practices	Skryl et al. (2018) identified sustainable trends in Croatian gastronomy. Aguilera and Rozzi (2024) stressed food system circularity at the sub-Antarctic. Carvache-Franco et al. (2023) noted how circular food practices shape memorable experiences.
Social Dimension	Community-Based Gastronomy Tourism	Eldarov et al. (2017) linked food governance with community participation. Moura et al. (2025) showed food experiences as community empowerment. Castro-Palafox et al. (2024) proved festivals build community identity.
	Family and Generational Food Tourism	Carvache-Franco and Carvache-Franco (2024) examined senior travellers and food as generational memory. Kuhn (2020) showed families as food tourist clusters. Fusté Forné (2015) emphasized intergenerational authenticity.
	Culinary Identity and Belonging	Galarraga and Martinez de Albeniz (2025) emphasized food as a marker of belonging. Alonso (2013) positioned wine identity within regional belonging. Onorati and Giardullo (2020) showed social media talk as a new food identity platform.
Technological Dimension	Digital Gastronomy Tourism	Soonsan et al. (2025) explored Instagram and food-sharing. Onorati and Giardullo (2020) mapped TripAdvisor conversations. Baldwin (2018) analysed digital promotion of gastronomy.
	Virtual Gastronomy Experience	Yayla et al. (2024) found digital nomads engage virtually in gastronomy. Castillo-Manzano et al. (2021) suggested virtual previews enhance real dining. Oktay and Bahceleri (2020) highlighted bibliometric evidence of digital expansion.
	Smart Gastronomy Platforms	Yilmaz et al. (2020) tied smart cities with food image. Enríquez (2024) proposed smart gastronomy models for policy. Suna and Alvarez (2021) showed digital branding platforms shape food image.

and Mnguni (2022) argue that gastronomy fosters sustainable development pathways. The Slow Food and farm-to-table movements, discussed by Cheng (2023), Fusté Forné (2015), and Bessière (1998), underline authenticity and localism. Circular practices, as noted by Skryl et al. (2018), Aguilera and Rozzi (2024), and Carvache-Franco et al. (2023), show the role of gastronomy in resource efficiency and ecological responsibility.

- The social dimension positions food as a tool for community empowerment, family connection, and identity formation. Eldarov et al. (2017), Moura et al. (2025), and Castro-Palafox et al. (2024) show how gastronomy enhances community participation and social cohesion. Studies by Carvache-Franco and Carvache-Franco (2024), Kuhn (2020), and Fusté Forné (2015) highlight

family and generational aspects of food tourism, where food becomes both memory and practice across generations. At the same time, Galarraga and Martinez de Albeniz (2025), Alonso (2013), and Onorati and Giardullo (2020) illustrate how food marks identity and belonging, both in physical communities and through digital interactions.

- The technological dimension reflects the digital turn in gastronomy tourism. Soonsan et al. (2025), Onorati and Giardullo (2020), and Baldwin (2018) explored how platforms like Instagram and TripAdvisor transform food into digital cultural capital. Virtual experiences are increasingly relevant, with Yayla et al. (2024), Castillo-Manzano et al. (2021), and Oktay and Bahceleri (2020) demonstrating the role of online gastronomy in extending tourist engagement. Smart gastronomy platforms,

studied by Yılmaz et al. (2020), Enríquez (2024), and Suna and Alvarez (2021), show how technology integrates gastronomy into broader smart city and policy frameworks.

Taken together, these six dimensions demonstrate that gastronomy tourism has evolved from a niche interest into a multifaceted discipline that integrates cultural, experiential, economic, sustainable, society, and technological dimensions.

Quality Control

In conducting this systematic literature review, critical appraisal of the selected studies was essential to ensure rigorous evaluation and interpretation of findings. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) instrument (Long et al., 2020) was applied to assess the methodological quality of the 63 articles included in the review. CASP evaluates nine categories: (1) clarity of research objectives, (2) appropriateness of study design, (3) robustness of research methods, (4) adequacy of sampling strategy, (5) consideration of ethical issues, (6) transparency in results reporting, (7) alignment of results with research questions, (8) acknowledgement of study limitations, and (9) articulation of implications for theory and practice. Each category was rated as *yes*, *no*, or *not reported* to systematically assess both qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Spencer et al., 2003).

Applying the CASP criteria strengthened the credibility of the synthesis by ensuring only studies demonstrating sufficient methodological rigour were included. All 63 articles demonstrated clear research objectives, sound methodological design, and robust reporting practices. While a small subset showed limited discussion of ethical considerations and study limitations, the overall dataset was judged to be of high quality. This confirms that the synthesized findings rest on reliable and trustworthy evidence, thereby reinforcing the validity of this review's conclusions and recommendations.

Discussion

The findings from this study confirm that gastronomy has evolved into a distinct typology of tourism, characterized by unique patterns, typologies, and

intellectual foundations. Unlike generic cultural or experiential tourism, gastronomy tourism integrates heritage, experience, economy, sustainability, society, and technology into a consolidated framework. This integration validates gastronomy as an independent and mature tourism discipline.

Gastronomy as Cultural Heritage Tourism

The cultural dimension demonstrates that gastronomy preserves and communicates intangible heritage. Studies ranging from Bessière (1998) on rural gastronomy as cultural capital to Galarraga and Martínez de Albeniz (2025) on Basque culinary identity illustrate how food functions as a repository of memory and authenticity. Unlike broader heritage tourism, gastronomy mobilizes edible traditions, rituals, and festivals as both cultural symbols and tourism products. This makes gastronomy distinct in its embodiment of heritage through sensory and participatory practices.

Gastronomy as Experiential Tourism

The experiential cluster underscores gastronomy's ability to deliver transformative and memorable encounters. De Jong et al. (2024) and Castillo-Manzano et al. (2021) highlight the centrality of experimental dining, while Carvache-Franco and Carvache-Franco (2024) shows the appeal of skill-based workshops. These findings suggest that gastronomy operates as a laboratory of experience, where visitors actively construct meaning through cooking, tasting, and ritual participation. This differs from traditional experience tourism by emphasizing embodied, multisensory, and co-creative processes.

Gastronomy as Economic Engine

The economic dimension validates gastronomy as a driver of entrepreneurship, competitiveness, and branding. Research by Recuero-Virto and Valilla Aróspide (2024), Sio et al. (2024), and Baldwin (2018) demonstrates how gastronomy entrepreneurs and policymakers leverage food for market differentiation. Gastronomy not only sustains small enterprises such as street food markets (Gündüz & Topaloğlu, 2019) but also scales up to national branding strategies (Yılmaz et al., 2020). These findings indicate that gas-

tronomy is not a peripheral economic activity but a central mechanism for destination competitiveness.

Gastronomy and Sustainability Imperatives

Another defining feature is its strong alignment with sustainability. From Bessi ere's (1998) early link between gastronomy and agritourism to Aguilera and Rozzi's (2024) circular food practices, the literature illustrates gastronomy's capacity to bridge cultural integrity with ecological responsibility. Unlike other tourism sectors, gastronomy integrates food production, consumption, and waste management into a coherent sustainability agenda. This dual focus on preserving authenticity and promoting ecological responsibility reinforces its disciplinary uniqueness.

Gastronomy as Social Identity and Belonging

The social dimension highlights how gastronomy strengthens community ties and intergenerational belonging. Eldarov et al. (2017) and Castro-Palafox et al. (2024) show the role of festivals in community empowerment, while Carvache-Franco and Carvache-Franco (2024) emphasizes food as generational memory. This confirms that gastronomy is more than consumption; it is a mechanism of social cohesion and identity construction. Compared to other forms of social tourism, gastronomy uniquely ties social participation to food practices that are deeply embedded in local culture.

Gastronomy in the Digital and Technological Era

Finally, the technological cluster positions gastronomy at the frontier of digital transformation. Onorati and Giardullo (2020), Soonsan et al. (2025), and Enr iquez (2024) demonstrate how gastronomy tourism adapts to smart platforms, digital storytelling, and virtual experiences. This shift expands gastronomy beyond physical travel, allowing for hybrid consumption models that blend digital and embodied practices. Technological evolution signals a distinct future trajectory, where gastronomy will continue to innovate as both tangible and virtual tourism.

Consolidation as Distinct Typology

Taken together, the cultural, experiential, economic, sustainability, social, and technological dimensions

reveal that gastronomy tourism is not a subcategory of other forms of tourism but a typology. Its intellectual structure spans multiple disciplines, such as heritage studies, economics, sustainability science, sociology, and digital tourism, yet converges on food as the central medium of tourism value creation. The three-stage development model (recognition, integration, specialization) further shows that destinations institutionalize gastronomy in systematic ways, moving it from cultural recognition to global specialization.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that gastronomy has matured into a distinct typology of tourism, validated through its cultural, experiential, economic, sustainability, social, and technological dimensions. By drawing upon the intellectual structure of 63 scholarly contributions from 1998 to 2025, the findings confirm that gastronomy is not simply an extension of cultural or heritage tourism, but an autonomous field where food functions as heritage, experience, identity, and economic capital. The three-stage development model further illustrates that destinations systematically evolve from recognition of culinary value to integration in planning, and ultimately specialization, thereby solidifying gastronomy's role in shaping tourism trajectories.

The implications of this study are twofold. Theoretically, it advances the positioning of gastronomy as a standalone tourism discipline, bridging multiple fields such as heritage studies, sustainability science, and digital tourism. It emphasizes that gastronomy must be studied through interdisciplinary approaches, given its overlap with food systems, cultural politics, and technological innovation. Practically, the results provide clear direction for policymakers, entrepreneurs, and destination managers. The integration of gastronomy into tourism planning can increase competitiveness, sustain community identity, and enhance visitor loyalty, while digital and sustainable practices open pathways for long-term resilience.

Nonetheless, certain limitations are acknowledged. The dataset, while comprehensive, relies on selected published works, which may underrepresent emerging or non-English scholarship. The analysis also emphasizes academic findings rather than direct

empirical data from destinations, which may limit the immediate generalizability of results. Future studies should expand by integrating empirical fieldwork, cross-regional comparisons, and longitudinal assessments to capture how gastronomy continues to evolve across diverse cultural contexts.

In conclusion, gastronomy tourism has established itself as a distinct tourism typology that embodies authenticity, innovation, and sustainability. By linking cultural heritage with contemporary consumer demands and technological advances, gastronomy has the capacity to redefine destination identity and competitiveness in the global tourism landscape. The recognition of gastronomy as a disciplinary field not only enriches tourism scholarship but also equips practitioners with tools to design strategies that balance commercial growth with cultural integrity.

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Konceptualizacija gozdnega turizma: študija primera Kočevskega

Barbara Pavlakovič in Vita Petek

Gozdni turizem je nišna oblika turizma, ki nima celovite in splošno sprejete opredelitve. Namen tega članka je predstaviti teoretična izhodišča gozdnega turizma ter posplošiti dosedanja spoznanja o samem konceptu. Prispevek predstavlja opredelitev gozdnega turizma in tri vrste dejavnosti gozdnega turizma. Izvedena je bila empirična raziskava, ki je preučevala zaznavanje gozdnega turizma in gozdnih dejavnosti na študiji primera Kočevskega gozda v Sloveniji. Metoda triangulacije je vključevala anketo med slovenskimi turisti, intervjuje s turističnimi deležniki ter vsebinsko analizo promocijskih elementov destinacije Kočevsko. Podatki so pokazali, da turisti gozdne destinacije dojemajo kot zanimive, varne, neokrnjene ter primerne za mlade in družine. Gozdni turizem opisujejo z besedami medved, gozd in narava. Anketiranci večinoma dajejo prednost zunanjim dejavnostim v gozdu, nekoliko manj opazovanju prostoživečih živali, najmanj pa možnostim sprostitev. Pridobljeno znanje bi lahko pomagalo gozdnim destinacijam pri razvoju turističnih produktov ter pri oblikovanju ustreznega pristopa do obiskovalcev.

Ključne besede: gozdni turizem, turizem v naravi, upravljanje destinacij, prostoživeče živali, rekreacija na prostem, sprostitev v gozdu

Academica Turistica, 18(3), 227–244

Od ogledov do potencialnih vedenj: vloga potovalnih vlogov in digitalnega spodbujanja v obalnem turizmu na Hrvaškem

Lidija Nujčić Pečenec

Raziskava preučuje, kako lahko potovalni vlogerji preko digitalnega spodbujanja potencialno vplivajo na vedenje turistov, s poudarkom na štirih hrvaških obalnih mestih: Dubrovniku, Splitu, Zadru in Šibeniku. Z uporabo kvalitativne tematske analize namensko izbranega vzorca angleško govorečih potovalnih vlogov na platformi YouTube raziskava obravnava tri raziskovalna vprašanja: (1) s katerimi vrstami težav se vlogerji srečujejo na destinaciji, (2) kakšne nasvete ponujajo in kako ti lahko delujejo kot oblika digitalnega spodbujanja ter (3) kakšni so njihovi motivi za ustvarjanje vsebin. Ugotovitve kažejo, da vlogerji pogosto poročajo o težavah, kot so prenatrpanost, hrup in visoke cene, pri čemer jih pogosto predstavljajo kot izkustvena opozorila. Njihovi nasveti, ki segajo od strategij za izogibanje gneči do spodbujanja kulturne ozaveščenosti, lahko delujejo kot neformalna vedenjska usmeritev. Med identificiranimi tehnikami spodbujanja so poenostavljanje, okvirjanje, priming, izogibanje izgubi ter učinek prenašalca sporočila. Vlogerje k ustvarjanju vsebin motivirajo rast občinstva in promocija kanala, finančne spodbude ter informativni namen. Raziskava prispeva k rastočemu področju digitalnega spodbujanja s poudarjanjem potencialne vloge vlogerjev kot neformalnih vedenjskih vplivnežev v turizmu. Povezuje vedenjsko znanost, turistične raziskave in raziskave digitalnih medijev ter prikazuje, kako lahko vsebine, ki jih ustvarjajo vrstniki na digitalnih platformah, subtilno oblikujejo vedenje turistov. Z vidika prakse ugotovitve nakazujejo, da bi sodelovanje z vlogerji lahko destinacijskim organizacijam za upravljanje turizma (angl. *destination management organizations* – DMO) in turističnim

strokovnjakom ponudilo razširljiv in stroškovno učinkovit način spodbujanja trajnostnih in kulturno občutljivih potovalnih vedenj. Z vključevanjem spodbud v avtentične in razumljive vsebine bi destinacije lahko posredno naslavljale izzive, kot sta prekomerni turizem in degradacija okolja.

Ključne besede: digitalno spobujanje, turizem, vloge na družbenih omrežjih, vedenje turistov

Academica Turistica, 18(3), 245–263

Uporaba novega modela namere obiska v gastronomskem turizmu: empirična raziskave v Vietnamu

Bui Trong Tien Bao, Trinh Minh Chanh, Dang Thi Thuy Ngan,
Le Van Hoai in Phan Thi Thuy Phuong

Raziskava si prizadeva zapolniti raziskovalne vrzeli na področju gastronomskega turizma v Vietnamu z razvojem in validacijo novega modela namena obiska, ki temelji na teoriji načrtovanega vedenja (angl. *Theory of Planned Behaviour* – TPB). Model vključuje koncepta gastronomske podobe destinacije in iskanja novosti, da bi omogočil celovitejše razumevanje namena obiska domačih turistov v mestu Ho Chi Minh, vodilni gastronomski destinaciji v Vietnamu. Primarni podatki so bili s pomočjo anketnega vprašalnika zbrani med 417 domačimi turisti v obdobju od aprila do avgusta 2023. Za testiranje predlaganega modela in preučevanje odnosov med iskanjem novosti, gastronomsko podobo, stališči, subjektivnimi normami, zaznanim vedenjskim nadzorom in namenom obiska je bila uporabljena metoda delnih najmanjših kvadratov v strukturnem enačbenem modeliranju (angl. *Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling* – PLS-SEM). Ugotovitve kažejo, da imajo iskanje novosti, gastronomska podoba ter ključni konstrukti TPB pomembno vlogo pri razlagi namena obiska gastronomske destinacije. Model pojasnjuje 71,2 % variance namena obiska, pri čemer je namen obiska domačih turistov močno pogojen z željo po novih kulinaricnih doživetjih in s privlačnostjo gastronomske podobe mesta. Raziskava potrjuje uporabnost razširjenega okvira TPB pri razlagi namena obiska gastronomskih destinacij. Pomembne ugotovitve zagotavljajo empirične dokaze iz Vietnoma ter pojasnjujejo, kako iskanje novosti in gastronomska podoba krepita namen obiska. Poleg tega raziskava ponuja praktične usmeritve lokalnim oblastem in turističnim tržnikom za izboljšanje konkurenčnosti mesta ter podporo ciljem trajnostnega razvoja turizma (CTR 11).

Ključne besede: gastronomska podoba, iskanje novosti, model TPB (teorija načrtovanega vedenja), namen obiska, cilji trajnostnega razvoja (CTR 11 – trajnostna mesta in skupnosti), Ho Chi Minh City

Academica Turistica, 18(3), 265–283

Bibliometrični pogled na raziskave zdravstvenega, medicinskega in wellness turizma: trendi, teme in prihodnje usmeritve

Tayfun Arar and Ceren Dirik

Čeprav so se medicinski turizem, wellness turizem in zdravstveni turizem v zadnjih desetletjih močno razširili, so jih raziskave pogosto obravnavale ločeno, kar

omejuje celostno razumevanje njihovega skupnega razvoja, zlasti kot odziv na globalne zdravstvene težave. Pričujoča raziskava zapolnjuje to vrzel z izvedbo enotne bibliometrične analize, ki prikazuje tematski razvoj, intelektualne temelje in vzorce sodelovanja v zdravstveno usmerjenem turizmu. Skupno je bilo z iskanjem po naslovih iz baz Scopus in Web of Science pridobljenih 1.717 recenziranih znanstvenih člankov, objavljenih med letoma 1974 in 2025. Podatki so bili prečiščeni, združeni in analizirani s pomočjo platforme Biblioshiny-4.0, pri čemer so bili preučeni kazalniki uspešnosti, omrežja sopojavljanja, tematsko preslikovanje in mednarodno sodelovanje. Študija tudi primerja nedavne vzorce z zgodnejšimi bibliometričnimi raziskavami, da bi ocenila kontinuiteto in razlike v razvoju področja. Analiza prinaša tri ključne ugotovitve. Prvič, zanimanje med raziskovalci je po letu 2010 močno naraslo, zlasti po pandemiji covid-19. Drugič, tematski grozdi kažejo premik od na zdravljenje osredotočenega medicinskega/zdravstvenega turizma k wellnessu, duševnemu zdravju in preventivni oskrbi, kar nakazuje širši poudarek na proaktivnem dobrem počutju. Tretjič, analiza soavtorstva razkriva regionalno koncentrirana omrežja z omejeno integracijo med raziskovalci z globalnega severa in globalnega juga. Teoretično raziskava prispeva k *teoriji potiska in potega na primeru potovalne motivacije* z vključevanjem zdravstveno specifičnih dejavnikov, kot so dostopnost, varnost, zaznavanje tveganja in psihološko dobro počutje. Prav tako dopolnjuje literaturo o turizmu, občutljivem na krize, saj povezuje globalne težave s spreminjajočimi se motivacijskimi strukturami. V praktičnem smislu ugotovitve ponujajo uporabna izhodišča za oblikovalce politik in upravljavce destinacij, ki želijo uskladiti storitve s spreminjajočimi se prioritetami popotnikov v obdobju po pandemiji ter ponovno pozicionirati zdravstveno usmerjene destinacije v odpornejši globalni turistični ekonomiji.

Ključne besede: zdravstveni turizem, medicinski turizem, wellness turizem, bibliometrična analiza, covid-19

Academica Turistica, 18(3), 285–304

Potrjevanje gastronomije kot samostojne turistične tipologije: sistematični pregled z metasintezo

Tran Tuyenk

Soustvarjanje (angl. *co-creation*) v znanstveni literaturi pridobiva vse večjo pozornost kot pristop k vključevanju turistov, prebivalcev in drugih deležnikov v oblikovanje podobe destinacije. Kljub temu so obstoječe raziskave razdrobljene in jim primanjkuje celovit pregled konceptualnih temeljev, tematskega razvoja ter implikacij soustvarjanja. Namen pričujoče raziskave je zapolniti to vrzel z mapiranjem intelektualne strukture in nastajajočih trendov soustvarjanja ter podobe destinacij. Izvedena je bila bibliometrična in tematska analiza 72 recenziranih znanstvenih publikacij, indeksiranih v podatkovni bazi Scopus, pri čemer je bil za analizo socitiranja in sopojavljanja ključnih besed uporabljen program CiteSpace, analizo trendov pa je dopolnila uporaba orodja Scopus AI. Analiza je razkrila štiri tematske sklope: znamčenje destinacij, vključevanje deležnikov, čustveno doživetje in digitalno interakcijo. Rezultati kažejo, da soustvarjanje deluje kot večdimenzionalen in

večplasten proces, ki krepi čustveno navezanost, zvestobo destinaciji in vrednost blagovne znamke in ni zgolj posamezna dejavnost oblikovanja doživetij. Raziskava ugotavlja, da ima soustvarjanje strukturno pomembno vlogo pri znamčenju destinacij in vključevanju deležnikov, kar potrjujejo prevladujoči tematski sklopi v bibliometrični in tematski analizi. S sintezo obstoječega znanja in z identifikacijo raziskovalnih vrzeli prispevek predstavlja celovito referenco za akademike in praktike ter krepi zavedanje pomena soustvarjanja pri upravljanju destinacij.

Ključne besede: soustvarjanje, podoba destinacije, bibliometrična analiza, znamčenje destinacij, CiteSpace.

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Soustvarjanje in podoba destinacije: bibliometrična in tematska analiza z uporabo programa CiteSpace

Nyoman Cahyadi Wijaya, Budi Shantika, Caren Angellina Mimaki
in Ni Made Prasiwi Bestari

Pričujoča raziskava preučuje intelektualni razvoj gastronomskega turizma kot samostojne tipologije znotraj turistične vede. Z uporabo metasinteze 63 recenziranih znanstvenih člankov, objavljenih med letoma 1998 in 2025, raziskava identificira šest glavnih tematskih sklopov: kulturno dediščino, izkustvene prakse, gospodarsko podjetništvo, vključevanje trajnosti, družbeno identiteto in tehnološke inovacije. Ti tematski sklopi razkrivajo, kako se je gastronomija iz svoje tradicionalne vloge kulturnega dopolnila razvila v osrednji dejavnik identitete destinacije, konkurenčnosti in oblikovanja politik. Raziskava prav tako uvaja tristopenjski razvojni model – prepoznavanje, integracijo in specializacijo –, ki opisuje, kako destinacije skozi čas institucionalizirajo gastronomski turizem. Ugotovitve kažejo, da gastronomija deluje v več razsežnostih: ohranja dediščino, bogati izkušnjo obiskovalcev, spodbuja lokalna gospodarstva, promovira trajnost, krepi pripadnost skupnosti in se prilagaja digitalnim platformam. Ta večdimenzionalnost podpira trditev, da je gastronomija dozorela v samostojno turistično tipologijo. Raziskava k teoriji prispeva s sintezo razdrobljene literature, k praksi pa z oblikovanjem okvira za oblikovalce politik, načrtovalce destinacij in podjetnike, ki omogoča strateško vključevanje gastronomije.

Ključne besede: gastronomski turizem, turistična tipologija, metasinteza, sistematični pregled

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