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Revisiting sustainable tourism research: bibliometric insights and future research agenda

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ABSTRACT

This bibliometric review synthesizes sustainable tourism research over the past three decades, focusing on its alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Based on 1,383 journal articles from the Web of Science database, the RStudio Bibliometrix package analysed bibliometric performance, thematic maps, and co-occurrence networks. The findings highlight the role of sustainable tourism in advancing different SDGs. Findings also indicate three broader thematic areas for future research, including regenerative tourism ecosystems, responsible tourism behaviours, and right-sizing tourism. Through this review, we propose future research directions to enhance knowledge on sustainable tourism and its contribution to the SDGs, providing a strategic roadmap for researchers and policymakers.

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map; future research
directions

Introduction

In recent years, sustainable tourism has gained significant traction in academic literature and the industry (Rahmadian et al., 2022). Hall (2011) demarcated sustainable tourism as “one of the great success stories about tourism research and knowledge transfer” (p. 649). Sustainable tourism not only contributes to economic growth but also addresses social and environmental aspects, focusing on mitigating the economic, social, and ecological impacts (Gao et al., 2023; Peng et al., 2023; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023; Zuo & Huang, 2018). There are numerous drivers of sustainable tourism, such as climate change (Alizadeh et al., 2021), pro-environmental tourism behaviour (Mandić et al., 2023), eco-friendly initiatives (Özkan et al., 2023), and circular economy (Manniche et al., 2021; Sorensen & Bærenholdt, 2020), among others.

A critical yet underexplored aspect of sustainable tourism is its integral role in contributing to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNWTO, 2018, 2005). The global tourism industry collectively contributes to generating more employment opportunities and addressing issues such as unemployment and poverty, which makes it one of the fastest-growing industries globally. However, the tourism industry faced severe disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Milano & Koens, 2022), which imposed rigorous travel restrictions, lockdowns, and reduced customer trust, profoundly impacting tourism activities and highlighting vulnerabilities in the sector (Barker & Rodway-Dyer, 2023; Gössling et al., 2020).

There is increasing recognition of the need for sustainability within the tourism sector. Yet, scholars such as Butler (2015) and Moyle et al. (2020) have pointed out the industry's slow adoption of sustainable practices. Sustainable tourism practices are crucial but remain underexplored, necessitating more comprehensive research to build a solid scientific foundation (Geng et al., 2024; Kapoor & Jain, 2024) to promote future research opportunities that drive sustainable tourism practices. While some efforts have been made to expand the however knowledge on sustainability in tourism, significant gaps persist, given its relevance with SDGs (Miller & Torres-Delgado, 2023). For instance, Harish and Rao (2024) provide insights into sustainable tourism and biodiversity through bibliometric analysis but lack a comprehensive future research agenda. Despite these scholarly efforts, there are still challenges towards encouraging sustainable tourism practices across the globe (Collins & Potoglou, 2019; Tosun, 2001).

Addressing these gaps is essential, particularly in the context of the SDGs. There is a pressing need for targeted research that not only explores sustainable tourism development but also critically examines its contributions to achieving the SDGs. The fragmented yet multidisciplinary literature on sustainable tourism made it more complicated to understand the larger corpus. Accordingly, reviewing sustainable tourism literature holistically needs a robust and bibliometric-based review to comprehend relevant literature, identify thematic areas and propose future research directions. He et al. (2021) suggest that bibliometric-based reviews could be used to assess research trajectories in various scholarly fields. Therefore, using bibliometric analysis makes it easier to examine individual research aspects, temporal trends unique to different disciplinary domains, and the intellectual structures that shape a research field (Donthu et al., 2021).

Previous reviews on sustainable tourism address different facets of sustainable tourism, such as Steiger et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review of literature on climate change and its impact on mountain tourism, Go and Kang (2023) highlighted metaverse tourism as a potential contributor of sustainable tourism. However, bibliometric-based reviews on sustainable tourism lack a holistic overview of sustainable tourism literature with reference to its contribution to SDGs. Building on these research gaps, this bibliometric review aims to revisit and synthesize sustainable tourism literature from the last three decades (1994–2023), with a specific focus on its contributions to SDGs. Accordingly, the research questions supporting this study are:

RQ1. What are the bibliometric performance measures in sustainable tourism research over the three decades?

RQ2. What are thematic maps and co-occurrence networks in sustainable tourism research?

RQ3. What are the future directions for the development of sustainable tourism research?

In summary, this bibliometric review thoroughly analyses tourism sustainability research, covering all the relevant journals in the Web of Science database between 1994 and 2023. By outlining theme developments in sustainable tourism over the previous three decades and analysing how well they match the SDGs, this study intends to advance current knowledge and offer insightful information for scholars and policymakers.

Methodology

Scholars from different disciplines adopted various methods for conducting literature reviews, including systematic literature reviews, bibliometric approaches, and meta-analyses. There is a gradual move in evaluating the current literature reviews from a business and management research perspective, as Zupic and Čater (2015) suggested. For our study, bibliometric analysis provides an overview with a deeper understanding of sustainable tourism research between 1994 and 2023. Accordingly, the research questions for this study direct and guide methodological

choices, for example, to understand bibliometric performance, thematic map, and co-occurrence are embedded in bibliometric analysis (Donthu et al., 2021).

As evidenced, bibliometric analysis provides an objective view of research productivity and impact, which means how a specific topic is growing and impacting the discourse on a particular topic of study: sustainable tourism (Donthu et al., 2021; Mukherjee et al., 2022). Prior bibliometric studies also followed a similar approach, such as sustainable tourism (Harish & Rao, 2024; Moyle et al., 2020), ecotourism (Rafi et al., 2024), and customer experience/engagement in tourism and hospitality (Rehman et al., 2023), organizational learning and knowledge management in tourism (Abdollahi et al., 2023), and environmental, social, governance literature in tourism (Legendre et al., 2024), medical tourism (Habibi et al., 2022; Karadayi-Usta, 2024), and smart destinations (Soares et al., 2022), among others.

For this study, we follow the guidelines for bibliometric review by Donthu et al. (2021) and the guidelines of systematic literature review to outline the scope of the review, search string, evaluation of databases for metadata of publications, and accessing metadata from databases (Xiao & Watson, 2019). For data acquisition, the PRISMA protocol is used to identify, screen, and eligibility of the data for final inclusion (Moher et al., 2015). As shown in Figure 1, the search string “sustainable tourism” OR “sustainable travel*” searched in titles of the published documents in the literature collection of the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) at the Web of Science database yielded 3,291

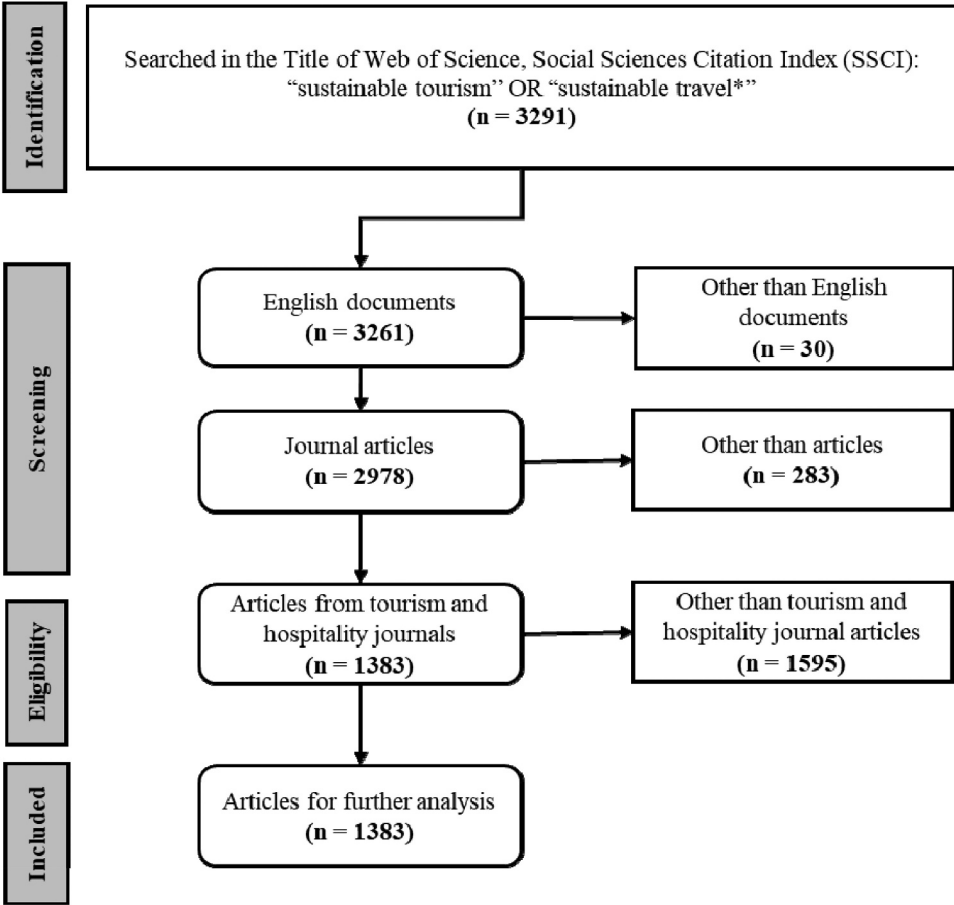


Figure 1. Data acquisition. Source: authors [adapted from Moher et al. (2015)].

papers (including journal articles, book chapters, conferences, etc.), at the screening stage, we excluded publications which are published other than English.

Book chapters, conferences, and editorials were removed, resulting in 2,978 papers. At the eligibility stage, we filtered journal articles published in tourism and hospitality journals; these criteria resulted in 1,383 papers that discussed either sustainable tourism or sustainable travel. These papers were carefully selected to bring relevant literature on sustainable tourism. The metadata of these selected was downloaded from the Web of Science for further analysis. The metadata was used to analyse these papers to understand the bibliometric performance measures (annual production of articles, most influential journals, most influential articles, prolific authors), thematic evolution, thematic map, and co-occurrence analysis using Biblioshiny (R software), a bibliometrics package for detailed bibliometric analyses (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). Bibliometric studies in tourism are increasingly mapping the different domains of tourism research, including heritage tourism (Bhowmik, 2021), medical tourism (Habibi et al., 2022), sustainability and tourism marketing (Cavalcante et al., 2021), sustainable tourism progress (Kumar et al., 2024) tourism well-being and nature (Font-Barnet & Nel-Lo Andreu, 2023).

Results

Annual scientific production

Figure 2 shows the number of peer-reviewed journal articles published per year. For reference, sustainable tourism as a concept for investigation started in 1994. Gradually, as the heightened awareness of globalization emerged, the tourism and hospitality industry flourished with ideas around socio-cultural and socio-economic exchanges (Liburd et al., 2023). By examining the 1,383 peer-reviewed journal articles, we found sustainable tourism research gained double-digit publication growth from 2008 to 2016. From 2017, we found a strong push towards triple-digit growth, with half-year data in 2023 reaching 124 publications with an estimation of closing the 2023 year with more than 250 publications, using criteria used for the present study.

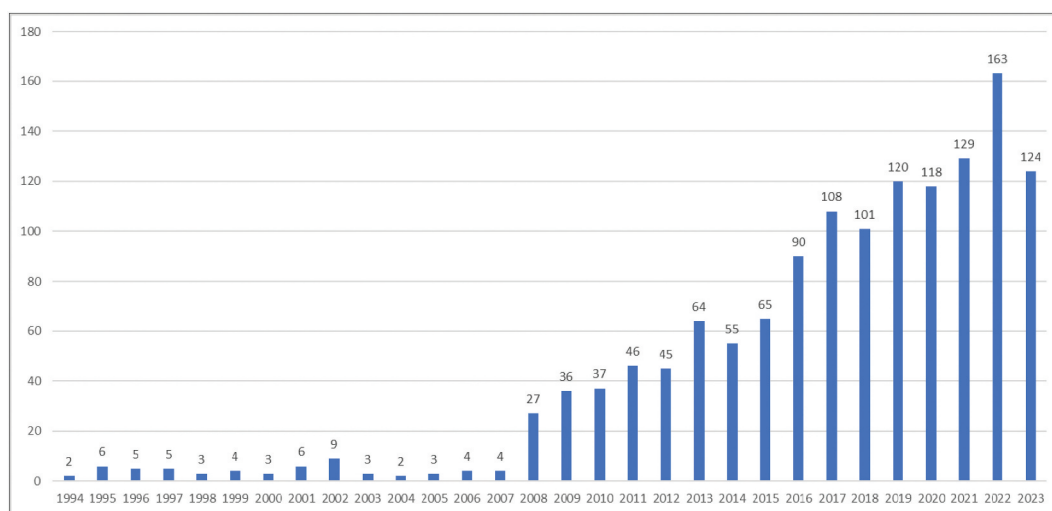


Figure 2. Annual publication output. Source: authors.

Table 1. Most influential journals.

Journal	TP	TC	TC/TP
Annals of Tourism Research	82	8,158	99
Tourism Management	143	13,046	91
Tourism Geographies	49	3,115	64
Journal of Sustainable Tourism	509	22,164	44
Journal of Travel Research	55	2,240	41
Tourism Management Perspectives	62	1,708	28
Journal of Destination Marketing and Management	40	893	22
Current Issues in Tourism	92	1,990	22
International Journal of Tourism Research	42	883	21
Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research	47	821	17

TP = Total Publications; TC = Total Citations

Most influential journals

There are several measures to examine the most influential journals publishing a specific topic. Several publications alone or isolated citations might not provide the correct measure. We used the average citations per publication to examine the most influential journal, *Annals of Tourism Research* and *Tourism Management* (refer to Table 1), with 99 and 91 citations per publication, respectively. Conversely, the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* is among the journals publishing more articles on sustainable tourism.

Most cited articles

Table 2 shows the most cited articles in sustainable tourism. Seminal work suggests that research fields emerge, as evidenced by citations. Since 1994, sustainable tourism as a paradigm shift has received significant attention (Hunter, 1997), which gradually evolved from environmental and tourism development issues (Camilleri, 2022; Mihalič, 2000; Miller, 2001). Localization and the value of local food have become more meaningful for sustainable tourism (Sims, 2009), and tourism development has been grounded through community and social support (Law et al., 2022; T. H. Lee, 2013; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011). The tourist-centric approach towards responsible tourism choices to foster ideas around sustainable tourism development emerged (Gössling et al., 2012; J. W. Lee & Brahmasrene, 2013), and most recently, the global pandemic reshaped how we see tourism and hospitality developments and pathways towards sustainable tourism (Hall et al., 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021).

Prolific authors

Heading the list of prolific authors for multiple publications (Figure 3) were Wang et al. (2023). The study by Wang et al. (2023) is particularly noteworthy, having received 632 citations. It is the most often referenced in their body of work. The study by Hall (2001) titled “*Trends in ocean and coastal tourism: the end of the last frontier?*” is found to be the most significant contribution to the field of tourism sustainability and follows in second place in terms of h-index (Donthu et al., 2021). C.M. Hall started a trajectory of scholarly contributions focused on tourism sustainability in 1999 and peaked in 2022 when Hall’s scholarly was marked by producing an impressive corpus that included 11 academic works. Weaver and Lawton’s (2007) study “*Twenty years on: the state of contemporary ecotourism research*” is considered their most significant contribution to the sustainable tourism field. Weaver has 18 publications related to sustainable tourism; his most cited paper in this domain is the study, *Using Emotional Solidarity to Explain Residents’ Attitude about Tourism and Tourism Development*. Woosnam, KM and Font, X have 18 and 17 publications, respectively.

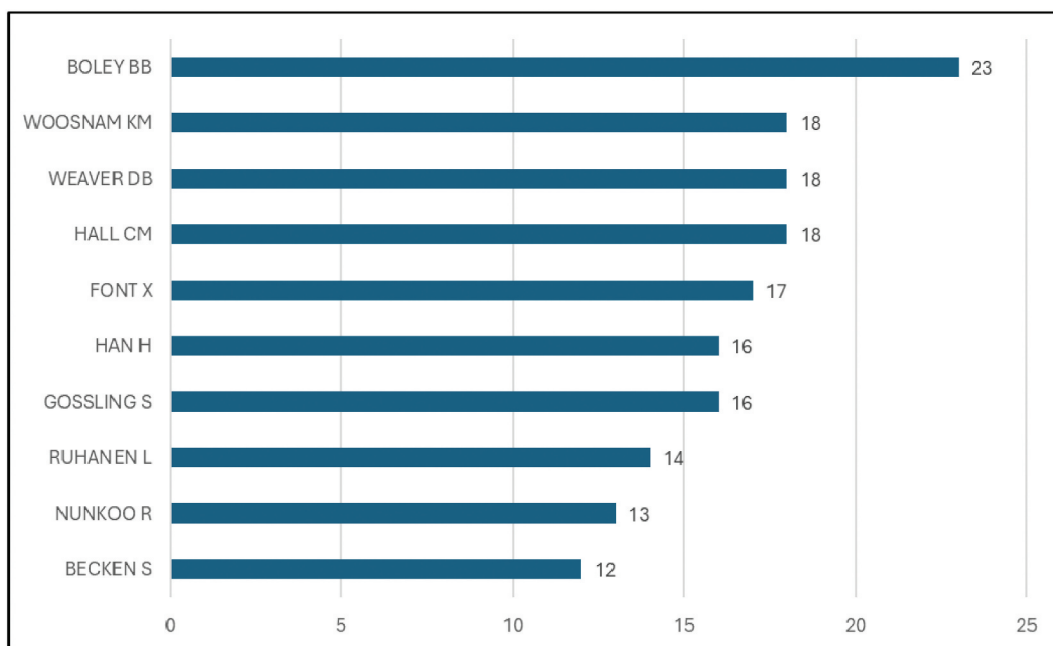


Figure 3. Prolific authors. Source: authors [output from Biblioshiny].

Table 2. Most cited articles.

Source	Article title	Journal	TC
Sims (2009)	Food, place and authenticity: local food and the sustainable tourism experience	Journal of Sustainable Tourism	693
Hall et al. (2021).	Pandemics, transformations, and tourism: Be careful what you wish for	Tourism Geographies	519
T. H. Lee (2013)	Influence analysis of community resident support for sustainable tourism development	Tourism Management	503
Higgins-Desbiolles (2021)	Socialising tourism for social and ecological justice after COVID-19	Tourism Geographies	444
Hunter (1997)	Sustainable tourism as an adaptive paradigm	Annals of Tourism Research	432
Gössling et al. (2012)	Consumer behaviour and demand response of tourists to climate change	Annals of Tourism Research	411
Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2011)	Developing a community support model for tourism	Annals of Tourism Research	405
Mihalič (2000)	Environmental management of a tourist destination – A factor of tourism competitiveness	Tourism Management	394
J. W. Lee and Brahmastreene (2013)	Investigating the influence of tourism on economic growth and carbon emissions: Evidence from panel analysis of the European Union	Tourism Management	384
Miller (2001)	The development of indicators for sustainable tourism: results of a Delphi survey of tourism researchers	Tourism Management	376

TC = Total Citations

Stephan Gössling has the most citations overall with 3,482 and is in third place. With an astonishing 796 citations, Gössling's (2002) paper "*Global Environmental Consequences of Tourism*" stands out as the most cited work. This paper conducts a thorough investigation into the ecological effects of global tourism (Ruan et al., 2022), focusing on five key areas: changes in land use, energy consumption and its impact, exchange of biota and the risk of species extinction,

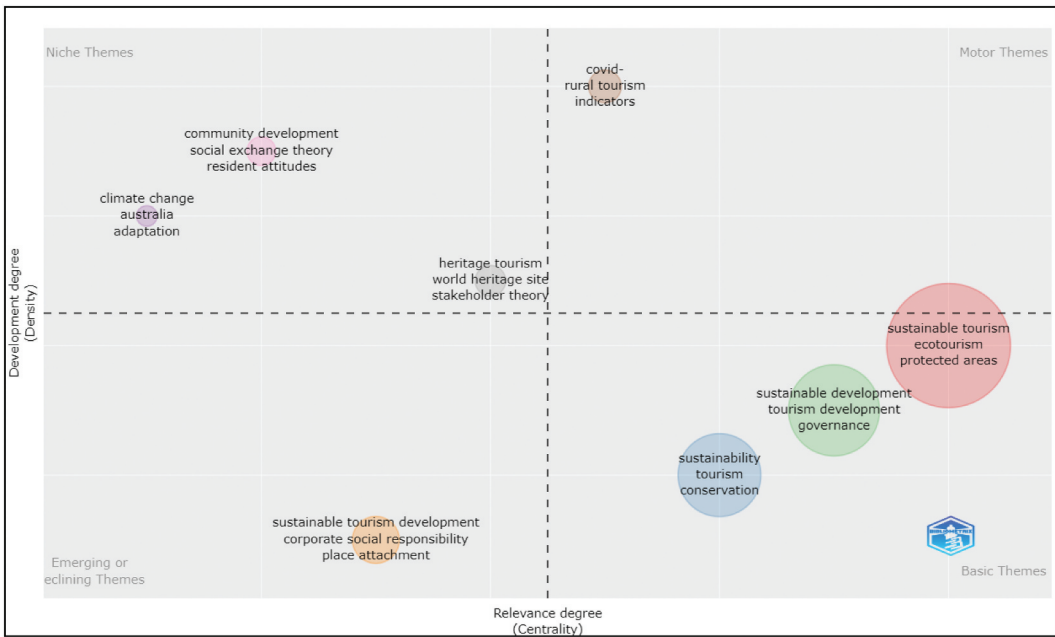


Figure 4. Thematic map in sustainable tourism research. Source: authors [output from Biblioshiny].

transmission and dispersal of diseases, and the psychological effects resulting from changes in environmental perception and comprehension due to international tourism.

Thematic maps

Figure 4, shown below, is a thematic map in sustainable tourism research and highlights the most prominent cluster theme as sustainable tourism theme. The map emphasizes how important it is to adopt sustainable practices in the tourist industry, where the diverse interests of stakeholders are considered together with the mitigation of problems related to destination management (Roxas et al., 2020). The terms “sustainable development,” “sustainable tourism,” “sustainable tourism development,” and “green tourism” all fall under the thematic umbrella of sustainable tourism. The theme components accentuate the necessity of balancing economic, social, and environmental aspects to create long-term viability, elaborating on the inherent significance of sustainable paradigms within the tourism industry.

Stone and Stone (2020) investigate the difficulties involved in conceptualizing, planning, and carrying out community-based tourism activities in the context of Botswana concurrently. The writers explore issues such as the establishment of community boundaries, the development of economic insight, and the fair sharing of revenue created. García-Melón et al. (2010) present a novel multicriteria framework customized to decision-making procedures relevant to sustainable tourism inside Venezuelan coastal national parks. This paradigm is an essential tool for tackling the complex interplay of elements characterizing such parklands’ long-term management. In the meantime, Pereira et al. (2012) investigate the complex interactions between consumers’ adoption of sustainable purchasing practices and the corresponding cognitive frameworks, evaluative paradigms, and belief systems of those consumers in a different vein. The study of Pereira et al. (2012) focused on situations in which customers carefully considered buying tourist-related goods and everyday items.

Other basic themes shown in the primary themes cluster(s) are (sustainable tourism development), niche themes of (community development), emerging themes including corporate social responsibility



Figure 5. Co-occurrence network in sustainable tourism research. Source: authors [output from Biblioshiny].

(Camilleri, 2022; Zengeya et al., 2023) and most importantly, virtual tourism with the help of artificial intelligence, virtual realities and metaverse.

Co-occurrence network

Figure 5, presented below, illustrates the co-occurrence network of sustainable tourism research. The first and most prominent cluster is “sustainable tourism”. Notably, Gössling and Peeters (2015), titled “Assessing Tourism’s global environmental impact 1900–2050”, is the most significant paper in the prominent cluster. By assessing global resource use and using the idea of resource use intensity (RUI) to determine the resources needed per unit of consumption, this study evaluates the global environmental effects of tourism. Buckley’s (2012) study, which explores the socioeconomic and ecological impacts of the well-established international tourism sector, is notably highlighted. The work by Waligo et al. (2013) explores stakeholder engagement in sustainable tourism. It uses a case study from the UK to analyse stakeholder involvement in sustainable tourism management and is the second most referenced paper.

The second-largest cluster is titled “sustainable development” and has 114 members. Hall’s (2021) study exploring the impact of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on policies and practices in the sector is another significant work that records 589 citations. Despite the 2030 Agenda’s lack of a specific tourism section, this article discusses how SDGs affect the sector and calls for a more thoughtful approach to sector management and knowledge. The third-largest cluster shown in dark green is “sustainable behaviour”. This cluster’s key citing item is the Khan et al. (2021) paper, “Sustainable tourism policy, destination management and sustainable tourism development: A moderated-mediation model”. The findings of this study demonstrate how destination social responsibility, destination management, and sustainable tourism policy all have a substantial impact on the growth of sustainable tourism (Zhang, 2021).

The next notable cluster in the domain of sustainable tourism is the use of virtual tourism. The theoretical foundations of planned behaviours can be partly responsible for the uptake of virtual tourism. Markedly, virtual tourism significantly influences people's physical travel destination choices, acting as a powerful tool for destination promotion and a marketplace for selling goods and souvenirs. Moreover, virtual tourism is an enjoyable leisure activity that allows people to have an immersive experience, like visiting the location, even when physically removed from it (Lu et al., 2022).

A recent study by Higgins-Desbiolles (2021) establishes a corroborated connection between the ecological effects of traditional tourist travel and the anxiety caused by pandemic-related travel concerns, as well as the cognitive experience of eco-guilt, through the analysis of a dataset consisting of 359

responses obtained from users of virtual reality (VR) technology via the Prolific Academic platform. Interestingly, this study revealed that one's propensity for virtual reality (VR) tourism relates to the pandemic travel fear (T. H. Lee & Jan, 2023; Talwar et al., 2022). A noteworthy conclusion indicates a favourable association between people's opinions towards VR tourism and their propensity to give up the satisfaction gained from actual on-site tourism experiences. This attitude towards VR tourism also strongly relates to intentions to continue participating in VR-based tourism projects.

Sustainable tourism and its contribution to SDGs

Sustainable tourism contributes not only a sustainable growth of the tourism and hospitality industry, however, it also has societal impact on a larger scale, this paper demonstrates how sustainable tourism significantly advances a number of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). According to Seeler et al. (2021), digital technologies are essential for increasing resource efficiency, boosting visitor experiences, and minimizing environmental footprints. These actions promote economic growth (SDG 8), responsible consumption (SDG 12), and the preservation of aquatic life (SDG 14). Another important factor is wildlife tourism, which addresses SDGs 8, 10, 13, and 14 and promotes economic growth, reduces inequality by incorporating local people, raises awareness of climate change, and protects aquatic life (2023). Additionally, as Go and Kang (2023) argue, switching to virtual tourism aligns with SDGs 8 and 14 by lowering carbon emissions, safeguarding marine habitats by limiting visitor inflow in critical places, and creating economic possibilities without physical travel.

Furthermore, according to Bianchi and de Man (2021), sustainable tourism contributes to SDGs 8 and 16 by fostering inclusive economic growth and peaceful, inclusive communities by promoting social fairness within tourism contexts. In addition, it addresses SDGs 4, 8, and 15 by promoting economic growth, providing educational opportunities, and assisting in the protection of biodiversity by integrating cultural experiences with learning (Lyon & Hunter-Jones, 2021). Lastly, in support of SDG 5, Alarcón and Cole (2021) stress the significance of attaining gender equality and putting sustainable tourism strategies into reality. These papers highlight the diverse ways sustainable tourism contributes to advancing international agendas for sustainable development.

Future research directions

As a valuable instrument for gathering trustworthy indications relevant to the improvement within a particular study subject, bibliometric reviews have shown an upward trend in recent years. Our analysis highlighted insightful contributions from prominent academic writers, citation spikes, and co-citation clusters. These findings have various theoretical and managerial ramifications that should be considered in the context of the following research projects. Sustainability has only been briefly and superficially researched within tourism, especially considering its complex interactions with business and its potential to move it more sustainably.

Additionally, these theoretical findings have significant managerial implications that call for incorporating sustainable practices into the framework of the tourism business. Stakeholders must understand that a region's social, cultural, and natural characteristics must be preserved and improved if sustainable tourism is to be successful. In places reliant on tourism, destination management strategies and policy development are likely ineffective if these characteristics are not embraced. As a result, the findings encourage stakeholders to make more thorough plans and strategies. We propose many viable directions for future research projects that have the potential to advance the conversation about sustainable tourism resulting from our findings. These research trajectories, shown in Table 3 below, have the potential to make a substantial impact on the development of practice and knowledge in this field.

Table 3. Future research directions.

Proposed broader theme	Proposed research question
<i>Regenerative tourism ecosystems</i>	• What are the most effective practices of regenerative tourism? • How can tourism and hospitality organizations actively contribute to restoring socio-cultural, socio-economic, and geo-political resources? • How can stakeholders in the tourism ecosystem promote sustainable tourism and grow together for social good? • How does value co-creation among tourists, tourism providers, and government organizations fuel sustainable tourism initiatives? • How regenerative tourism may affect sustainable tourism practices keeping in mind the stakeholder initiatives? • How regenerative tourism is different with respect to other wellbeing facets?
<i>Responsible tourism behaviors</i>	• What are the most psychological factors influencing the responsible tourism behaviours of tourists? • How can tourism and hospitality organizations incentivize responsible tourism behaviours with sustainable choices? • What is the role of advanced technologies in promoting sustainable tourism? • To what extent different stakeholders of tourism ecosystem influence responsible tourism behaviours? • What are the different facets of responsible tourism behaviours? • How responsible tourism behaviour affects sustainability-oriented practices?
<i>Right sizing tourism</i>	• What does it mean to be a solo traveller? • How can tourism and hospitality organizations ensure a balance between the demands of tourists and optimization of the resources of travel destinations? • What are the organizational factors contributing to the right sizing of the tourism destination? • How do individual and group tourism practices differ in its impact on environmental wellbeing? • How sustainable tourism stakeholders may assess the visible effect of sizing?

Research on sustainable tourism has extensively increased in recent years (Geng et al., 2024; Harish & Rao, 2024). This study investigates the development of research on sustainable tourism from the past three decades (i.e. 1994 to 2023). The area of sustainable tourism is obtaining recognition, as revealed by the increasing figure of research publications as well as citations (RQ1). The global COVID-19 outbreak has extensively affected the tourism industry and produced novel research projections. Regarding the research with the more substantial impact on sustainable tourism, the most influential (top 10) peer-reviewed journals including “*Annals of Tourism Research*”, “*Tourism Management*”, followed by “*Tourism Geographies*”, “*Journal of Sustainable Tourism*” and “*Journal of Travel Research*” (Table 1), while the most ten cited publications include conceptual frameworks and foundational studies (Table 2). These findings are coherent with those of authors such as Kapoor and Jain (2024) and Rasoolimanesh et al. (2023), who examined sustainable tourism with a focus on sustainable development.

The thematic map and co-occurrence analysis uncovers the recurrently utilized keywords (RQ2). The key themes 1) Basic themes shown in primary themes/clusters, including sustainable tourism development, sustainable tourism conservation, or ecotourism 2) Niche themes such as community development, heritage tourism, or residents’ attitudes. 3) Emerging themes, including corporate social responsibility and, most importantly, virtual tourism with the help of artificial intelligence, virtual realities or metaverse and 4) Motor themes, including COVID-rural tourism indicators. These findings are in harmony with the results of Alizadeh et al. (2021), Peng et al. (2023) and Gao et al. (2023), which uncovered a considerable increase in academic studies on sustainable tourism and pro-environmental tourism behaviour. Similarly, Barker and Rodway-Dyer (2023) and Kuščer et al. (2022) exposed a noteworthy upsurge in academic attention and collaboration in sustainable tourism and COVID-19.

These clusters encompass sustainable tourism development, pro-environmental behaviour, environmentally responsible behaviour, place attachment, and climate change (Liu et al., 2022). The findings align with studies that examined and identified related themes in sustainable

tourism, such as Geng et al. (2024) pro-environmental behaviours and Kapoor and Jain's (2024) ecotourism studies. Finally, rooted in our analysis, we identified critical research gaps. We recommended many potential future research opportunities in sustainable tourism research (RQ3), as discussed in the above section. To conclude, sustainable tourism is a fundamental approach that maintains the needs of society, the environment, and/or the economy in the tourism/travel context. By employing sustainable practices, tourism destinations, sites, or attractions may reduce their harmful effects, protect cultural/natural heritage, and generate a resilient and equitable tourism/travel industry.

Conclusion

We investigate the growth of studies on sustainable-tourism-research over three decades (i.e. 1994 to 2023). Our bibliometric analysis was based on 1,383 articles taken from Web of Science databases, explicitly focusing on tourism and hospitality journals. This study spawns many substantial contributions by advancing the current knowledge of sustainable tourism and offers valuable insights for researchers and policymakers by outlining theme developments in this context over the past three decades and examining how well they matched with the SDGs. Our research might offer researchers, academicians, or policymakers an increased knowledge of the various themes, concepts, or trends, in addition to the important future research opportunities for investigation offered by emerging areas.

The results showed that sustainable tourism research shifted from tourism policy to tourism sustainable policy. This study provides a research agenda that enables future tourism and hospitality scholarship to inculcate a thought process of right-sizing tourism. An industry characterized by consistent gradual growth, sustainable tourism maximizes beneficial effects on local communities while mitigating adverse effects on the environment, culture, and local surroundings (Agarwal et al., 2024; Pedrana, 2013). Several contemporary developments in ecotourism are progressively growing. These significant developments include Regenerative Tourism, Eco-Friendly Accommodations, VR Tourism, Responsible Wildlife Tourism, Local and Authentic Experiences, and Digital Detox and Slow Travel.

Theoretical implications

The present study formulates various vital contributions to academic research. Sustainable tourism research has developed significantly that calls for more synthesis and integration of the widespread amount of extant research data (Agarwal et al., 2024; Bogren & Sörensson, 2021; Geng et al., 2024; Zengeya et al., 2023) to determine clear themes, trends and concepts. Thus, we observed an opportunity to adopt vigorous bibliometric analysis (i.e. bibliometric performance, thematic maps, and co-occurrence networks) to uncover conceptual structures and intellectual- underpinnings of current scientific knowledge developed during the past three decades. For our study, bibliometric analysis provides an overview with a deeper understanding of sustainable tourism research between 1994 and 2023. Accordingly, the research questions for this study direct and guide methodological choices. For example, to understand bibliometric performance, thematic maps and co-occurrence are embedded in bibliometric analysis (Donthu et al., 2021).

From a scholarly perspective, our bibliometric analysis contributes towards the prerequisite of multiple answers to critical research questions that researchers might consider while examining sustainable tourism. Theoretically, we assemble novel knowledge in this area, assisting a clearer, more transparent, more vivid, and quicker comprehension of the structure and framework of sustainable tourism research. This study contributes to enhancing the existing literature on sustainable tourism research, thus extending recent studies, including Gao et al. (2023), Geng et al. (2024), Kapoor and Jain (2024), and Peng et al. (2023). This research underscores the most prominent authors, influential articles, and significant research studies on sustainable tourism. We, thus,

adopted the bibliometric technique to obstruct this research gap by recognizing the top journals, authors, and, more significantly, the theoretical (sub)-domains/areas that would be critical for potential research on sustainable tourism, like regenerative tourism ecosystems (e.g. restoring socio-cultural, socio-economic, and geo-political resources), responsible tourism behaviours (e.g. psychological factors influencing tourists responsible tourism behaviours, the role of advanced technologies in promoting sustainable tourism), and right-sizing the tourism (e.g. organizational factors contributing to right-sizing of tourism destination).

This bibliometric review offers researchers and academicians new knowledge about various concepts/themes and the opportunities for examination provided by basic and emerging domains/areas. Tourism sustainability is a long-term process that needs evaluation to ensure positive consequences in pertinent areas. Thus, the present article underlines the need for additional research in sustainable tourism, recommending that many domains/areas still need future investigation.

Practical implications

The article offers critical implications for tourism marketers, managers, and policymakers. Sustainable tourism underscores visiting destinations/places, whereas protecting the environment and supporting residents has become more prevalent in recent years. Tourists are searching for authentic/positive experiences, which has encouraged the development of narrated tours, eco-friendly lodging, and outside pursuits, which puts robust importance on environmental preservation and education (Liburd et al., 2023; Moyle et al., 2020). In 2022, more than 80% of international tourists noted that “*sustainable tourism*” has been essential and eager to employ sustainable travel incentives, which may lead to achieving a global market size of about USD172.4 bn within the ecotourism industry (Statista, 2024). While adopting tactics and practices that equalize tourism’s environmental, economic, and socio-cultural elements, sustainable tourism has significant managerial importance. These insights are critical for policymakers, managers, marketers, and industry stakeholders to formulate informed decisions and employ efficient, sustainable tourism practices or initiatives. Tourism organizations should communicate with potential travellers frequently about the value and benefits of sustainable tourism (Bogren & Sörensson, 2021; Kapoor & Jain, 2024). Tourism managers should cautiously design their marketing programmes/campaigns to attract travellers by offering and exploring them with novel objects that unravel physically or emotionally and stimulate social development (Agarwal et al., 2024; Geng et al., 2024).

Due to the recognition of novel trends, advanced techniques/technologies, and market projections for sustainable tourism, we encourage tourism industry innovations. Our study findings might persuade the formation of fresh/green products, service offerings, and viable strategies/practices that stick to sustainability standards. The implications of such industry-led methods may assist tourism firms and destinations to stick out from competitors, attract tourists who may be concerned regarding the community or environment and obtain competitive benefits. Destination/tourism marketers might encourage the enduring viability of tourist destinations/sites, nurture satisfying ties with different stakeholders, and ensure the protection of cultural/natural resources for forthcoming generations by captivating these managerial consequences. Thus, it is imperative to consider that the tourism industry has been continually transforming, and as tourist needs/desires and sustainable practices are altering, contemporary trends might emerge. This research provides researchers and tourism policymakers with timely implications that will help them better understand the current research trends and structural contours.

Limitations

This review also comes with a few limitations. First, we extracted bibliometric data only from the Web of Science databases; some important publications that appeared in other

databases have been missed. Future research could consider other databases to bring a more comprehensive dataset on sustainable tourism. Second, we only focused on tourism and hospitality journals; given the multidisciplinary nature of sustainable tourism literature, we also suggest future researchers go beyond the category of tourism and hospitality journals. Fourth, we primarily focused on bibliometric insights to objectively review the extant literature on sustainable tourism. However, future research could also bring the automated content analysis of such a larger corpus using topic modelling and concept mapping, Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Leximancer, respectively. Finally, while technological developments and COVID-19 have revolutionized and transformed the strategies/tactics of various industry contexts, future research might examine whether there are any prevailing modifications in sustainable tourism, thus providing researchers towards a comprehensive perspective.

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