



## RURAL TOURISM RESEARCHES: A CO-CITATION ANALYSIS

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### KEYWORDS

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*Science mapping*  
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*Rural tourism*

### ABSTRACT

The contributions of tourism to the economic, social, and cultural development of rural areas have been attracting the attention of researchers since 2005. Nonetheless, the scopes and intellectual structures of those studies are uncertain. Therefore, this study presents the most influential research groups, journals, and the most effective inter-research associations in the field of rural tourism within the last 20 years, employing the bibliometric mapping method. To this end, Web of Science Core Collection database was used to retrieve relevant data for the period of 2000-2020. Also, the data are limited to the English language. Articles, books, book chapters, proceedings papers were included in the analysis. Analysis of co-citation was carried out using VOSviewer.

The results of the Analysis of 864 documents indicate that rural tourism studies are categorized into 5 groups. Besides Tourism Management; Annals of Tourism Research and Journal of Sustainable Tourism are the most essential journals in the related field. Moreover, Richard Sharpley, Bernard Lane, Gunjan Saxena, and Collin Michael Hall are the most influential researchers in this field. The results of the study are crucial in that they reveal the line of progress and potential areas of improvement in this field to the researchers who are interested in rural tourism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism provides preservation of rural areas, prevention of migration from rural to urban areas, maintenance of traditional lifestyle, and contributes to economic development in addition to basic economic activity. It facilitates a balanced distribution of national income by playing a role in mitigating inequality between rich and poor regions (Karagöz et al., 2021; Koscak et al., 2021; Lekovic et al. 2020; Dogru et al., 2019; Işık et al., 2018-21). Also, the recent COVID-19 outbreak has caused a change in tourist demands, which has further accelerated the interest in rural tourism. As a matter of fact, rural tourism offers great opportunities to fulfill the demands of post-pandemic tourists who wish to relieve stress and rejuvenate or participate in physical and psychological relaxation activities in a nature-based environment (Ahmad et al., 2021; Rosalina, Dupre, and Wang 2021).

The aforementioned significance of rural tourism has attracted the attention of researchers and this type of tourism has become one of the research topics that have been attracting more and more attention (Ruiz-Real et al. 2020). Nevertheless, the extent to which rural tourism studies have reached is not certain (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). Moreover, the dispersal of existing studies over time as well as their contribution to the literature are not clear. There are quite a few studies that depict the intellectual development process of the rural

tourism field employing the bibliometric mapping method (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). In addition, these studies have investigated the development of the field mostly based on the number of documents and citations. Revealing the bibliometric studies conducted on the subject, the leading researchers in the field, and the cooperation structures in the field is important (Bozok, Kılıç, and Özdemir 2017). Such studies are valuable in terms of indicating the significance of the field, the development trend, determining which subjects need to be studied in the future, and guiding the improvement of the field. Furthermore, bibliometric studies would assist in revealing the research trend in that field. This also guides new researchers who wish to collaborate in that field (Durán-Sánchez et al. 2019).

The performances and intellectual aspects of the rural tourism research are delineated in this study. For this purpose, the answers to the following questions are sought:

RQ1. How have the studies in rural tourism performed throughout the last 20 years?

RQ2. What are the most crucial studies in the field?

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RQ3. What do network structures among the most important studies look like?

RQ4. Which of the journals publish the most crucial research studies in the field?

RQ5. What is the association among the journals in which the most crucial research studies in the field have been published?

RQ6. Who are the most crucial researchers in the field?

In order to answer these research questions, 864 published articles in the WoS database over the period 2000 - 2020 were included in the co-citation analysis by utilizing the VOSviewer (version 1.6.17) software. Thus, the most influential research articles in the field, the status of authors, and journals (common citation and cluster structures) were determined. The obtained results are essential in such a way that they would guide the researchers who conduct studies as well as the young researchers who would cooperate in this field. Besides, the obtained results would contribute to the intellectual development process of the field by encouraging academic discussions on contributing to the improvement of rural tourism. The remaining part of the research study consists of the literature, research methodology, and the research results of bibliometric studies conducted in the field of rural tourism.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural tourism studies are not actually new. Rural tourism has been perceived as an exciting, pioneering, and simple field that was studied by researchers and rural practitioners throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s in developed countries. For instance, rural tourism activities have been conducted in various famously scenic areas of Europe and North America since the end of the 19th century, due to the keen interest in romantic rural areas and the improvement of the railway network towards rural areas (Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015). On the other hand, the main research studies in the tourism literature began with the special issue of the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism (JoST)* published in 1994. In that issue, the study entitled 'What is rural tourism?' written by Lane was especially groundbreaking. In this study, the researcher's analysis of rural tourism typology and characteristics of rural areas constitute the main reference source for the subsequent research studies (Sharpley & Roberts, 2004).

However, studies conducted on rural tourism have attained an important place in the academic literature following the year 2004 (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). Various studies have been conducted on the conceptualization of rural tourism (Lane, 1994), the basic motivations of rural tourists (Park & Yoon, 2009), the problems encountered in rural tourism diversification (Sharpley, 2002), the characteristics of rural tourism enterprises (Getz & Carlsen, 2000), and the economic impacts of rural tourism (Rosalina et al., 2021).

Some bibliometric studies on rural tourism have been conducted in recent years. For instance, some studies have investigated postgraduate theses in Turkey (Alımanoğlu & Ayazlar, 2017; Gül & Gül, 2018). Bozok et al. (2017) state that the academic studies on rural tourism date back about 20 years ago. Lekovic et al. (2020) determined the leading

journals in the field of rural tourism as *Tourism Management*, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, and *Annals of Tourism Research*. Besides, rural tourism, tourism development, tourist satisfaction/loyalty, attitudes/perceptions of local people, and social tourism benefits were seen as the most remarkable research areas according to the study. An and Alarcón (2020) analyzed 76 articles conducted on sustainable rural tourism and asserted that Sustainability and *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* were the journals with the highest numbers of publications and found that rural tourism and agriculture were the most used words. Another study (Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015) indicated that over the period 2000 - 2015, the highest number of articles in the field of rural tourism were published by *Tourism Management*, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *Tourism Geographies*, *Annals of Tourism Research* and *Current Issues in Tourism*. The USA, England, Spain, and China have the highest numbers of publications. Also, this study found that tourism management and development, economy, rural/regional development, sustainability, society, cultural heritage, agriculture, eco-tourism are the most frequently used terms. Ruiz-Real et al. (2020) included 892 studies in the WoS database for bibliometric analysis and found that rural tourism studies were, in general, focused on China, Spain, and Romania. The most prolific writers, however, came from Portugal, China, England, and the USA.

## 3. METHOD

Bibliometric analysis is an approach that assesses the development of disciplines by employing statistical techniques to classify data including citations, author links, keywords, and topics discussed for studies published in the disciplines. It is utilized to map the development of the scientific field. It also offers a more objective approach to research analysis rather than a conventional literature review (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). In other words, bibliometrics enables the quantitative assessment of all types of bibliographic data. Along with quantitative methods based on bibliometric data, the scientific literature can be presented visually and scientific maps serving different purposes may be generated (Benckendorff & Zehrer, 2013). Bibliometric mapping is the visual representation of bibliometric data. In these maps, it is possible to notice not only the objects but also the mutual relationships among the objects. If the research subject involves journals, documents, and authors; the relationships among the objects are measured by the citation relation. One of the most utilized attributions approaches in determining the relationships among objects is co-citation. This approach indicates how many times two objects are co-cited. The increase of the cases in which two sources are co-cited concurrently can be interpreted as the relationship between these two sources (Zan, 2019).

In this study, the bibliometric mapping of rural tourism research studies was conducted based on the co-citation relationship. Document, author, and journal relationships were visualized. The Web of Science Core Collection database was utilized to access the data. This database is one of the two most crucial databases besides Scopus. Moreover, this database includes indexes of journals with high standards such as SCI-EXPANDED, SSCI, A&HCI (Garrigos-Simon, Narangajavana-Kaosiri,

and Narangajavana 2019). The keyword “rural tourism” was entered as a title in the search section to obtain WoS data. The data were limited to the period between 2000 and 2020 and to the English language. In this phase, a total of 892 documents were obtained. At the next phase, since the inclusion of more comprehensive studies in the analysis was aimed, documents such as meeting abstract, correction, and editorial material were excluded from the analysis, which yielded 864 documents that were included in the analysis.

VOSviewer (version 1.6.17) software was utilized to visualize the data based on co-citation relationships. Following the transfer of the data to the VOSviewer software, 3 common citation maps indicating the document, journal, and author relationships according to the co-citation relationship were generated. Co-citation analyses are frequently used in bibliometric studies (Garrigos-Simon et al., 2019). In co-citation maps, nodes indicate authors, journals, and documents; whereas links indicate co-citation relationships. The size of a node indicates that the weight of that node is large, such as the article, author, document represented by that node. Nodes of the same color constitute a cluster, and the elements of this cluster are closely associated with each other. Thicker lines indicate intense collaboration (Seguí-Amortegui et al. 2019).

#### 4. RESULTS

Excel and Publish or Perish (Harzing, 2007) software were used to answer RQ1. The numbers of documents included in the research study by years and their citations are illustrated in Figure 1. Accordingly, the number of documents published over the years 2000-2020 tends to fluctuate. However, there has been a steady increase in the number of citations, especially following the year 2007. Besides, the h-index and g-index for 864 documents were found to be 49 and 79, respectively.

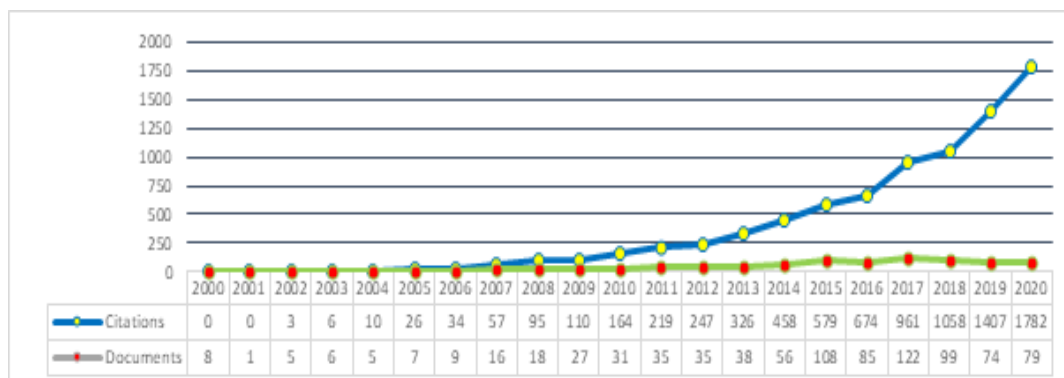


Figure 1: Number of articles and citations by year

##### 4.1. Co-citation Analysis

Co-citation is the frequency at which two units are co-cited. It is used to identify similarities among documents, authors, or journals. It takes the relationships among the cited documents into consideration. Accordingly, the analysis is based on the assumption that the co-cited documents are similar to each other. Three types of co-citation analysis can be performed: reference, author, and journal (Zupic & Cater, 2015).

##### 4.2. Co-citation of References

Reference co-citation analysis was performed to answer RQ2 and RQ3. Figure 2 illustrates the reference co-citation relationship. Accordingly, out of 22,394 references, 35 documents with at least 20 citations were identified. The total strength of the link of each document with other documents was calculated. These documents were categorized into 5 clusters. The first cluster is red and consists of 9 references. In this cluster, the study entitled “Integrated rural tourism: Concepts and practice” (Total link strength 47, Citation 49, citations per year 4.08) by Mary Cawley and Desmond A. Gillmor and published in the Annals of Tourism Research as of 2008, ranks first. The study entitled “Re-conceptualising rural resources as countryside capital: The case of rural tourism” (Total link strength 37, Citation 42, citations per year 3.00) by Brian Garrod, Roz Wornell, and Ray Youell, which was published in the Journal of Rural Studies as of 2006, ranks second. The study entitled “Conceptualizing Integrated Rural Tourism” (Total link strength 38, Citation 34, citations per year 2.61) by Gunjan Saxena, Gordon Clark, Tove Oliver & Brian Ibery which was published in Tourism Geographies as of 2007, takes the third rank. Gunjan Saxena and Brian Ibery’s study entitled “Integrated Rural Tourism a Border Case Study”, which was published in the Annals of Tourism Research as of 2008 (Total link strength 33, Citation 36, citations per year 3.00), ranks fourth. These studies mostly concentrate on integrated approaches concerning sustainability and stakeholder cooperation in the development of rural tourism.

The second cluster is green and consists of 9 references. In this cluster, the study entitled “Rural tourism and the challenge of tourism diversification: the case of Cyprus” (Total link strength 43, Citation 49, citations per year 2.72) by Richard Sharpley which was published in Tourism Management as of 2002, ranks first. The article entitled “Rural Tourism in Israel” by Aliza Fleischer and Abraham Pizam which was published in Tourism Management as of 1997 (Total link strength 28, Citation 31, citations per year 1.55) ranks second. Martin Oppermann’s article entitled “Rural tourism in Southern Germany” which was published in the Annals of Tourism Research as of 1996 (Total link strength 28, Citation 30, citations per year 1.50) ranks third. Agnes Gannon’s study entitled “Rural tourism as a factor in rural community economic development for economies in transition”, which was published in the Journal of Sustainable Tourism as of 1994 (Total link strength 28, Citation 29, citations per year 1.45) ranks fourth. Studies in this cluster have been conducted on the difficulties encountered in rural tourism development.

The third cluster is blue-colored and contains 7 references. The study entitled “What is Rural Tourism” by Bernard Lane which was published in the Journal of Sustainable Tourism as of 1994 (Total



link strength 73, Citation 82, citations per year 4.01) ranks first in this cluster. The book entitled “Rural Tourism and Recreation Principles to Practice” by Lesley Roberts and Derek Hall which was published in 2001 (Total link strength 38, Citation 45, citations per year 2.36) ranks second. The study entitled “Rural Tourism in China” written by Baoren Su in 2011 (Total link strength 22, Citation 26, citations per year 2.88) ranks third. Murray C. Simpson’s study entitled “Community Benefit Tourism Initiatives—A conceptual oxymoron?” which was published in *Tourism Management* as of 2008 (Total link strength 25, Citation 23, citations per year 1.91) ranks fourth. Studies in this cluster have been conducted on the conceptualization of rural tourism.

The fourth cluster in yellow contains 5 references. The study entitled “Tourism routes as a tool for the economic development of rural areas—vibrant hope or impossible dream?” by Jenny Briedenhann and Eugenia Wickens which was published in *Tourism Management* as of 2004 (Total link strength 40, Citation 47, citations per year 2.93) ranks first in this cluster. The second most commonly cited study entitled “Cultural rural tourism - Evidence from Canada” by Roberta MacDonald and Lee Jolliffe, which was published in the *Annals of Tourism Research* as of 2003 (Total link strength 31, Citation 31, citations per year 1.82) ranks second. The study entitled “Rural tourism in Spain: an analysis of recent evolution” by Gemma Cánoves and her colleagues, which was published in *Geoforum* as of 2004 (Total link strength 25, Citation 29, citations per year 1.81) ranks third. These studies concentrate on rural tourism development.

Finally, the purple-colored fifth cluster consists of five items. The study entitled “A benefit segmentation of tourists in rural areas: a Scottish perspective” by Isabelle Frochot, which was published in *Tourism Management* as of 2005 (Total link strength 35, Citation 35, citations per year 2.33) ranks first in this cluster. The study entitled “Segmentation by motivation in rural tourism: A Korean case study” by Duk-Byeong Park and Yoo-Shilk Yoon, which was published in *Tourism Management* as of 2009 (Total link strength 29, Citation 30, citations per year 2.72), ranks second. A joint study of María Devesa, Marta Laguna, and Andrés Palacios entitled “The role of motivation in visitor satisfaction: Empirical evidence in rural tourism”, which was published in *Tourism Management* as of 2010 (Total link strength 23, Citation 24, citations per year 2.40), ranks third. Upon examining these studies, it is seen that they concentrate on the categorization of rural tourists

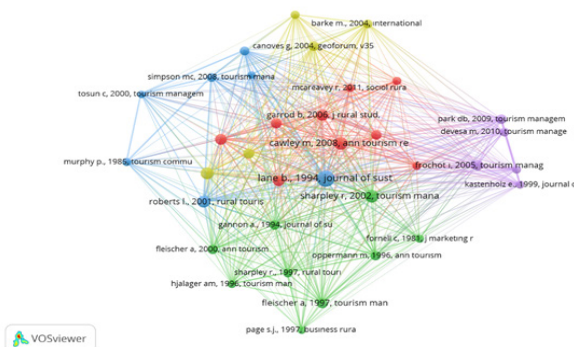


Figure 2: Co-citation network of documents (2020-2021)

### 4.3. Co-citation of Journals

For RQ4 and RQ5, the co-citation relationships among journals were investigated. Out of 11,669 journal sources, 131 sources with at least 20 publications were identified. The total strengths of the co-citation links of each source with other sources were calculated. Figure 3 illustrates the co-citation relationships of journals. Accordingly, *Tourism Management*, *Annals of Tourism Research*, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *Journal of Rural Studies*, and *Journal of Travel Research* are the prominent journals in this field. Five clusters with co-citation relationships were detected. Similar research topics are studied in the journals of the same cluster. The first cluster is red. In this cluster, the *International Journal of Tourism Research* ranks first in terms of co-citation and link strength (Total link strength 319.17, Citation 343). The *Journal of Marketing* (Total link strength 130.46, Citation 146) and *International Journal of Hospitality Management* (Total link strength 113.32, Citation 119) rank second and third, respectively. The second cluster is green. *Annals of Tourism Research* (Total link strength 1132.15, Citation 1388) ranks first in this cluster. It is followed by the *Journal of Rural Studies* (Total link strength 394.81, Citation 457) and *Tourism Geographies* (Total link strength 224.45, Citation 238), respectively. The third cluster is blue. *Tourism Tribune* (Total link strength 147.95, Citation 225) and *Sustainability* (Total link strength 169.96, Citation 204) journals rank first and second in this cluster, respectively. In the yellow-colored fourth cluster, the journal with the most common citation and link strength (Total link strength 738.07, Citation 890) is the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*. Finally, the fifth cluster is purple. In this cluster, *Tourism Management* ranks first in terms of co-citation and link strength (Total link strength 1530.28, Citation 1,950). The *Journal of Travel Research* (Total link strength 346.53, Citation 383) ranks second.

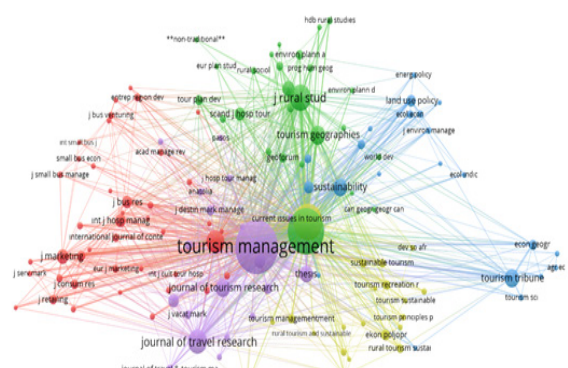


Figure 3: Co-citation network of journals (2020-2021)

### 4.4. Co-citation of Authors

In order to answer RQ6, the author co-citation relationship was analyzed and 101 out of 1,551 authors with at least 20 citations were detected. The total strengths of each author’s co-citation link with the other authors were calculated. As can be seen in Figure 4, these authors constitute 5 clusters. Publications of the same cluster have

higher similarity rates. The red-colored first cluster is pioneered by Bernard Lane, as well as Elisabeth Kastenholtz, Duk-Byeong Park, Isabelle Frochot, and Martin Oppermann. The second cluster is green. Bill Bramwell, Richard W. Butler, Mary Cawley, Jennifer Briedenhann, and Cevat Tosun are in the top four places in this cluster. The blue-colored third cluster is pioneered by Gunjan Saxena, Collin Michael Hall, Anne-Mette Hjalager, and Brian Garrod. The fourth cluster is yellow. Donald Getz, European Commission, and Raija Komppula are the most active authors of this cluster. Consequently, in the purple-colored fifth cluster, the most cited researchers, besides Richard Sharpley, are Lesley Roberts, Aliza Fleischer, OECD, and Derek Hall.

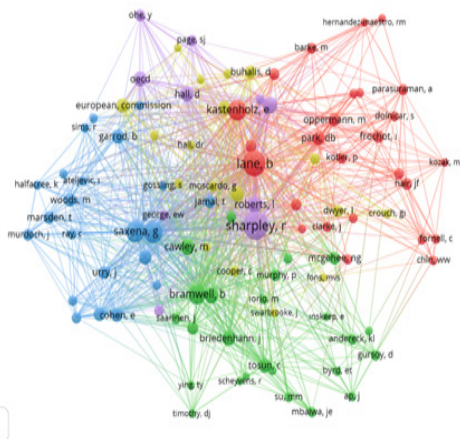


Figure 4: Co-citation network of authors (2020-2021)

## 5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Research conducted on rural tourism and its development is attracting more and more attention and the number of research studies regarding this subject is constantly increasing (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). Nonetheless, to what extent the journals and academics in this field have been influential is not clear. To fill this gap in the literature, the current study performed a bibliometric analysis to reveal the development and trend of research studies regarding rural tourism. By performing co-citation analysis, the most influential documents, authors, and journals in the field were determined. Consequently, the following conclusions can be drawn from the findings:

First, rural tourism studies increased over the period from 2005 to 2015 (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). After that period, a fluctuation was observed. Following 2017, a decrease in the number of publications was observed. Undoubtedly, the fact that many enterprises suspended their activities throughout the COVID-19 epidemic accounts for the occurrence of such a situation (Rosalina et al., 2021; Wen et al., 2021), which renders it difficult for researchers to collect data. In terms of the number of citations, there is an increase every year compared to the previous years. Therefore, the concept of rural tourism continues to attract the attention of academics. This may be stemming from the fact that rural tourism attracts tourists in pursuit of authentic experiences (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004).

Secondly, it is possible to categorize the rural tourism literature into five distinct groups according to the most influential studies within the last 20 years. These groups include sustainable approaches that

support rural tourism development, rural tourism development (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004), challenges in rural tourism development (Sharpley, 2002), the conceptualization of rural tourism (Lane, 1994), and classification of rural tourists (Frochot, 2005). These results are also consistent with the results of previously conducted bibliometric studies (Lekovic et al. 2020; Leong et al. 2021; Ruiz-Real et al. 2020).

Thirdly, Tourism Management, Annals of Tourism Research, and Journal of Sustainable Tourism are the journals with the strongest co-citation links. It means that the most influential studies in the field of rural tourism have been published in these journals. It was also confirmed in previous studies that the Tourism Management journal has been the leading journal in this field (Lekovic et al., 2020; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). On the other hand, these studies ranked the journals by the number of documents. This study evaluates journals according to co-citation analysis.

Lastly, this study indicates that the most influential researchers in the field are Richard Sharpley, Bernard Lane, Gunjan Saxena, Collin Michael Hall, Bill Bramwell, and Elisabeth Kastenholtz. This result differs from that of the previous bibliometric studies (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). It is due to the fact that this study, unlike the previous ones, deals with the author effect according to the co-citation analysis.

This study contributes to the related field and practice in the following ways; firstly, performing co-citation analysis, this study reveals the intellectual structure of rural tourism research and expands the scope of the previously conducted bibliometric studies in this field (An & Alarcón, 2020; Bozok et al., 2017; Lekovic et al., 2020; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). It also contributes to the knowledge of rural tourism and reveals the improvement line of this discipline (Gül & Gül, 2018). Secondly, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, this is the only study that categorizes research studies of rural tourism which have been conducted over the course of the last 20 years employing the bibliometric method based on co-citation analysis. These categories are crucial in terms of indicating heavily researched topics in the field or niche research domains that have not yet been studied. Thus, new researchers aiming to conduct research in this field can clearly comprehend the knowledge structure of the field and identify new research topics. Thirdly, this study provides the researchers with an idea in the process of journal selection by determining which of the journals accept higher quality publications in the field of rural tourism. For instance, being able to publish articles in journals such as Tourism Management, Annals of Tourism Research, and Journal of Sustainable Tourism would increase the awareness of researchers in the field. Furthermore, this study is valuable in terms of indicating the most influential researchers and researcher groups in the field. This makes it easier for early-career researchers who wish to collaborate in the field and prefer to belong to a certain group.

As in every study, this study was conducted under certain constraints. The research data consists of the articles published in journals included in the WoS database indexes. Important research has also been conducted in other indexes that are not included in this database. Due to the difficulties encountered in rendering the studies in these indexes appropriate for analysis using the VOSviewer software, these

studies could not be analyzed. Moreover, this study only includes documents written in English. Readers and researchers should evaluate this research by considering these constraints. It is recommended that those who plan to conduct similar research studies in this field should design their research by taking these issues into account. Furthermore, upon obtaining data from the WoS database, merely the keyword "rural tourism" was searched in this study. Nevertheless, rural tourism may also include all tourism activities in rural areas such as nature-based tourism, farm tourism, wellness tourism, agri-tourism, nostalgia tourism, and eco-tourism (Rosalina et al., 2021). Therefore, future studies should also consider these terms in obtaining data.

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