

Tourist Destinations Under the Radar? A PRISMA-Driven Bibliometric Exploration of Tourism

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Abstract: Tourist destinations represent the fundamental arenas in which tourism activities are organized, governed, and experienced. Despite this central role, their explicit treatment within tourism business scholarship often remains underexplored. This study applies a PRISMA-guided bibliometric analysis to examine how destination-related concepts are positioned within tourism business, management, and marketing research published between 2000 and 2025. Bibliographic data were retrieved from the Web of Science Core Collection, resulting in an initial dataset of over 25,000 records. Following predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, a subset of highly cited publications was selected for detailed analysis. The data were processed using a custom Python script to construct co-word and co-citation networks, which were subsequently analyzed and visualized in Cytoscape. The results reveal a strong concentration of research around themes such as sustainability, consumer behavior, service quality, competitiveness, and digital transformation. In contrast, destination-focused perspectives—particularly destination management, destination governance, and smart destinations—remain comparatively underrepresented. These findings point to a structural and methodological imbalance in the intellectual landscape of tourism business research, explaining why destination-centered perspectives have largely remained under the radar and highlighting the need for stronger theoretical and empirical engagement with destination-centered and network-oriented approaches.

Keywords: tourism business; tourist destination; bibliometric analysis; PRISMA; destination management

JEL Classification: Z30; L83; O33

1. Introduction

Tourist destinations constitute the core spatial and organizational units of tourism systems (Leiper, 2000; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). They are the settings in which tourism demand and supply intersect, where experiences are co-created (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Buhalis, 2000), and where economic, social, cultural, and environmental processes converge. As such, destinations provide the primary context in which tourism businesses operate and interact with public authorities, residents, and visitors (Dredge, 2006). Despite this centrality, tourism business research has traditionally emphasized firm-level performance, consumer

behavior, and market-oriented strategies (Enright & Newton, 2004; Porter, 1990), leaving destinations frequently “under the radar” as explicit analytical objects.

At the same time, the concept of the tourist destination has undergone substantial theoretical evolution. Early approaches primarily conceptualized destinations as geographically bounded collections of attractions, facilities, and services (Burkart & Medlik, 1974; Mill & Morrison, 2012). Subsequent research reconceptualized destinations as complex systems of interdependent actors whose interactions shape destination performance and competitiveness (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Baggio & Sainaghi, 2011). This systemic perspective underscores the importance of coordination, governance, and collaboration among heterogeneous stakeholders, including tourism firms, public authorities, local communities, and visitors (Provan & Kenis, 2008).

Building on this systemic understanding, network-based approaches have become increasingly prominent in destination research, emphasizing relational structures, cooperation patterns, and knowledge exchange (Scott, Cooper & Baggio, 2008; Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). Destinations are now viewed as networked systems in which value creation emerges from interorganizational relationships rather than isolated business activities (Granovetter, 1985). Baggio (2011) demonstrates how network topology shapes collaboration patterns within destinations. More recently, these ideas have been extended through the concept of smart tourism destinations, which integrate digital infrastructures to support real-time information sharing, collective learning, and continuous co-creation of experiences (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Gretzel et al., 2015). Jovicic (2017) argues that smart destinations represent not merely a technological advancement but a qualitatively different mode of destination organization and governance.

Against this backdrop, questions arise regarding the extent to which tourism business scholarship has incorporated destination-centered and systemic perspectives. If destinations are the primary arenas of tourism activity, their limited visibility within highly cited tourism business research suggests a potential misalignment between the realities of tourism practice and the analytical focus of the field.

The present study addresses this issue by systematically examining how destination-related concepts are represented within tourism business, management, and marketing research. Specifically, it applies a PRISMA-driven bibliometric analysis to highly cited publications from 2000 to 2025 indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection. By mapping dominant research themes, intellectual structures, and collaboration patterns, the study identifies which destination perspectives have gained prominence and which remain underrepresented. In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing debates about the scope and future direction of tourism business research and highlights pathways for integrating destination management, governance, and network-oriented approaches into the core of the field.

2. Literature Background

Tourism business scholarship has long focused on issues such as competitiveness, productivity, marketing effectiveness, and consumer behavior (e.g., Porter, 1990; Enright &

Newton, 2004; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). While these research streams have generated valuable insights, they often approach tourism phenomena through a firm-centric lens, emphasizing individual organizational strategies and outcomes. Within this perspective, destinations are frequently treated as spatial backdrops or market contexts rather than as dynamic systems with their own internal structures and governance mechanisms (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

Destination-oriented research offers an alternative perspective by conceptualizing destinations as complex systems composed of multiple interdependent actors (Leiper, 2000; Baggio & Sainaghi, 2011). This view emphasizes that destination performance emerges from interactions among firms, public institutions, residents, and visitors rather than from isolated business decisions. Network-based approaches further advance this understanding by highlighting relational structures, collaboration patterns, and knowledge flows as key determinants of innovation and competitiveness (Granovetter, 1985; Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). Baggio (2011) demonstrates that the topology of stakeholder networks shapes collaboration capacity within destinations.

Empirical studies further show that innovation in tourism destinations is closely linked to the structure of inter-organizational networks (Hjalager, 2010; Denicolai et al., 2010). Actors occupying central or brokerage positions play a crucial role in facilitating knowledge exchange and coordinating collective action (Burt, 1992). Zach and Hill (2017) demonstrate that betweenness centrality is associated with innovation prominence, while collaboration intensity and shared knowledge stocks influence partner selection. These findings suggest that destination governance and coordination mechanisms are essential for translating individual firm capabilities into destination-level outcomes (Provan & Kenis, 2008).

More recently, the concept of smart tourism destinations has broadened the analytical lens of destination research by integrating digital technologies into systemic and network-oriented perspectives. Smart destinations rely on digital infrastructures that enable real-time data exchange, collective learning, and co-creation of experiences among stakeholders (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Gretzel et al., 2015). Jovicic (2017) conceptualizes smart destinations as knowledge-based systems in which ICT-enabled coordination reshapes governance and stakeholder interaction. This development reinforces the understanding of destinations as adaptive, knowledge-driven systems while simultaneously increasing their structural complexity.

Despite these advances, destination-centered and network-oriented perspectives remain unevenly integrated into tourism business scholarship. This gap raises important questions about the alignment between theoretical developments in destination research and the dominant analytical approaches employed within tourism business studies. It may also reflect a deeper structural divide between firm-level explanatory models and system-level analytical frameworks within the field.

3. Methodology

This study employs a bibliometric research design guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework (Page et al., 2021) to ensure transparency, systematic filtering, and reproducibility in the identification and selection process. Although PRISMA is traditionally associated with

systematic reviews, it is increasingly adopted in bibliometric research as a structured reporting framework that documents search strategies, screening procedures, and inclusion criteria transparently.

The methodological approach combines the systematic retrieval of bibliographic records from the Web of Science Core Collection (WoS CC) with bibliometric and network analysis. Bibliographic data were processed using a custom Python script, and network structures were analyzed and visualized in Cytoscape.

3.1. Data Source and Search Strategy

The WoS CC was selected as the primary data source due to its standardized metadata, robust citation indexing, and broad disciplinary coverage suitable for bibliometric and network analysis.

The search query was formulated as:

TS = ("tourism business" OR "tourism industry" OR "tourism management" OR "tourism marketing" OR "travel business" OR "hospitality industry")

The initial search yielded 25,518 records.

3.1. Filtering Procedure and Corpus Construction

A multi-stage filtering procedure was applied.

First, a time filter (2000–2025) was introduced to reflect the consolidation of tourism business research, the rise of digital transformation, and improved metadata reliability after 2000, reducing the dataset to 25,138 records.

Second, the document type was restricted to "Article," resulting in 19,192 records.

Third, the dataset was limited to relevant Web of Science categories to ensure disciplinary coherence while preserving interdisciplinary breadth. The included categories were:

- Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism,
- Business,
- Business, Finance,
- Management,
- Environmental Studies,
- Geography,
- Regional & Urban Planning,
- Computer Science, Information Systems,
- Information Science & Library Science.

After category filtering, 13,609 records remained.

From this refined corpus, 204 Highly Cited Papers (HCPs) were identified using the WoS citation classification system.

The focus on HCPs is based on the assumption that highly cited publications represent influential contributions that shape the intellectual structure of a field (Bornmann, 2014). In bibliometric research, HCPs are commonly used as proxies for agenda-setting and field-

defining scholarship (Bornmann & Daniel, 2008; Tahamtan & Bornmann, 2019). Although citation counts reflect scientific impact rather than intrinsic research quality, they provide an established indicator of intellectual influence.

The 204 HCPs constitute the final analytical corpus.

3.2. Inclusion Criteria and PRISMA Screening

Inclusion criteria were:

- publication years 2000-2025,
- document type: Article,
- thematic relevance to tourism business, management, marketing, or destination-related research,
- availability of complete metadata in English.

Duplicate records were removed during export from WoS. No additional exclusions were made after screening titles, abstracts, and metadata of the 204 HCPs.

The selection process followed the four-stage PRISMA 2020 structure (Identification, Screening, Eligibility, Inclusion) and is documented in Figure 1.

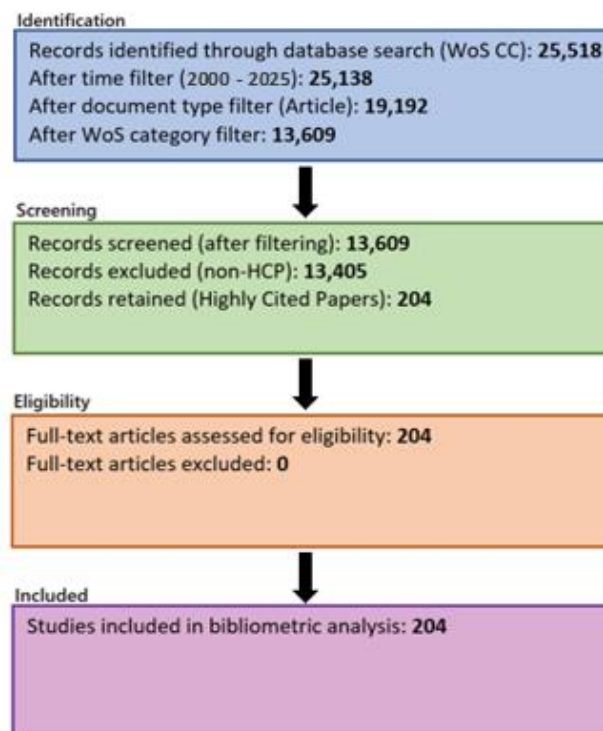


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram illustrating the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion process of the bibliometric study (2000–2025)

3.3. Bibliometric and Network Analysis

Bibliographic metadata were exported in plain-text format and processed using a custom Python script to generate adjacency matrices for:

- co-word analysis (keyword co-occurrence),
- co-citation analysis.

These networks were subsequently analyzed and visualized in Cytoscape. Standard network metrics were applied to examine structural properties and to identify thematic clusters, intellectual linkages, and collaboration patterns within tourism business scholarship.

4. Results

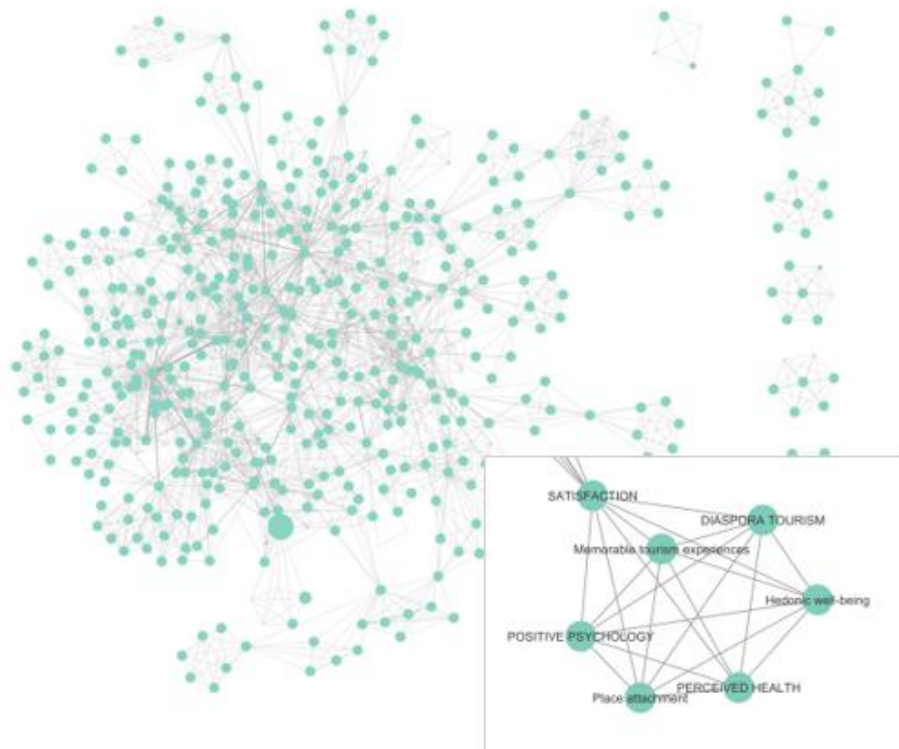


Figure 2. Global co-word semantic network (561 nodes; 2,456 edges); visualized in Cytoscape

Community detection using the Louvain modularity algorithm identified 17 thematic clusters. At the aggregated level, the meta-network of communities demonstrates relatively high interconnectivity (density = 0.404), suggesting the presence of integrative research trajectories. In particular, sustainability-related concepts and digitally oriented research streams (e.g., big data, smart tourism, precision marketing) function as bridging clusters that connect otherwise distinct thematic areas (Figure 3). These domains appear to constitute dominant integrative pillars within the field.

In contrast, destination-focused concepts occupy more peripheral positions within the co-word structure. Terms related to destination management, destination governance, and smart destinations occur less frequently and show weaker structural embeddedness compared to firm-level and consumer-oriented constructs. Rather than functioning as central organizing nodes, these concepts tend to appear within small subclusters or at the margins of broader thematic communities.

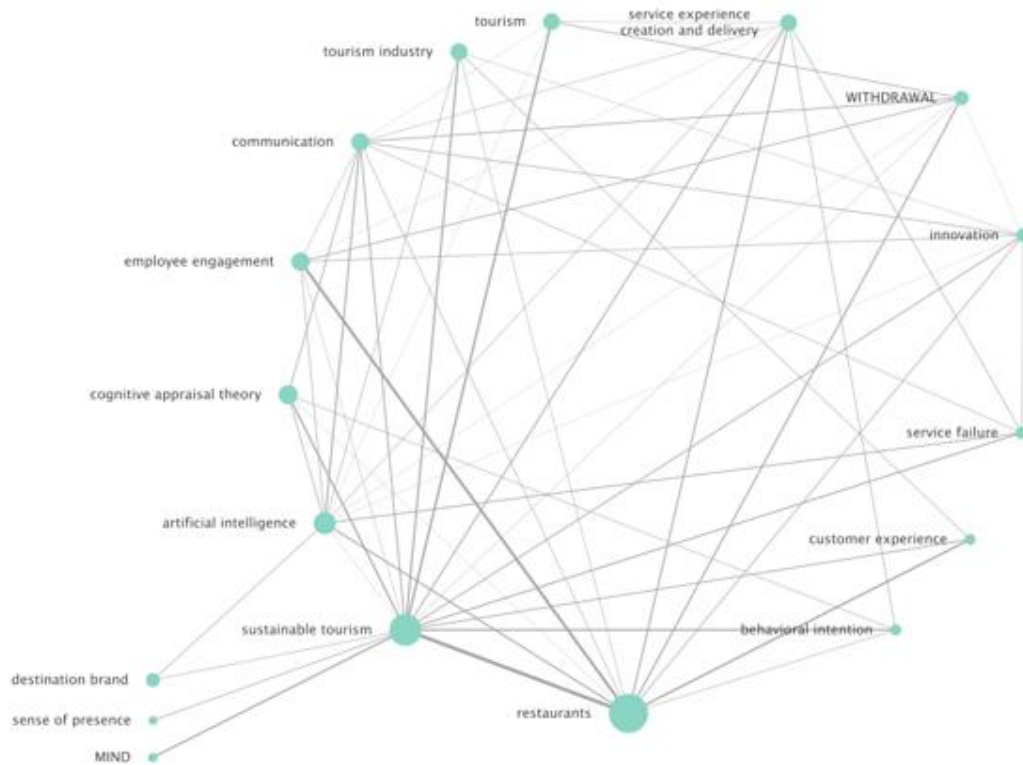


Figure 3. Meta-network of 17 thematic communities detected using the Louvain algorithm; visualized in Cytoscape

This peripheral pattern is clearly illustrated by Community 24, shown in Figure 4 (note: community numbers such as “24” are internal IDs automatically assigned by the Louvain algorithm and do not reflect sequential ordering). Community 24 consists of three disconnected dyads—tourism industry-virtual experiences, emotional message cues-social presence cues, and impulsive travel intention-tourism marketing—indicating maximal structural fragmentation and an absence of bridging links to core thematic areas. Such structurally isolated micro-clusters exemplify why destination-related concepts remain only weakly embedded within the dominant intellectual architecture of tourism business research.

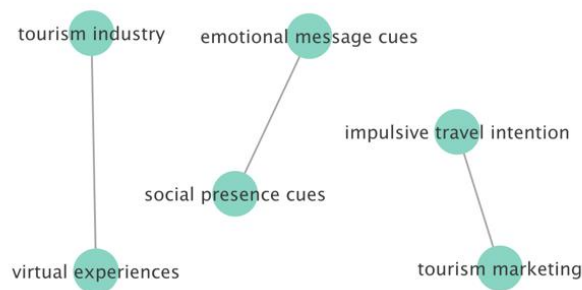


Figure 4. Structure of Community 24, showing three disconnected dyads; visualized in Cytoscape

Co-citation analysis reinforces this observation. Foundational works conceptualizing destinations as complex systems or stakeholder networks are less frequently co-cited within

tourism business journals compared to research focused on competitiveness, marketing performance, and consumer behavior. This indicates that destination-oriented theoretical frameworks are not fully integrated into the core citation structure of highly cited tourism business scholarship.

Taken together, the results reveal a clustered but asymmetrical intellectual structure. Firm-centric and market-oriented research streams dominate both semantic and citation networks, whereas destination-centered and system-based perspectives remain comparatively peripheral. This structural positioning provides empirical support for the study's central argument that destination-related concepts remain "under the radar" within the core body of highly cited tourism business research.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the marginal position of destination-focused perspectives within tourism business scholarship cannot be attributed solely to thematic preferences. Rather, they reflect deeper methodological tendencies that privilege firm-level, descriptive, and cross-sectional analyses over relational and system-level approaches (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Baggio, 2011).

Much of the highly cited tourism business literature relies on analytical frameworks well suited to examining individual organizational performance or consumer behavior but less effective in capturing the complexity of destination systems (Porter, 1990; Enright & Newton, 2004). As a result, destinations are frequently treated as contextual environments rather than as analytical units with their own governance structures, coordination mechanisms, and evolving network dynamics.

Recent methodological research in destination studies proposes more differentiated analytical frameworks capable of capturing destinations as complex systems. For example, a ten-dimensional framework distinguishes network-based studies according to their analytical focus (description, hypothesis testing, dynamics), level of analysis (node, ego, whole network, temporal), and practical purpose (visualization, prediction, strategic application) (Toman et al., 2025). Application of this framework reveals a dominance of descriptive and nodal approaches, while dynamic and strategic models remain comparatively rare.

This methodological imbalance mirrors the conceptual underrepresentation of destination management and governance observed in the co-word and co-citation structures of the dataset. In other words, the peripheral structural position of destination-centered concepts is not only thematic but also methodological. This dual thematic-methodological marginality is consistent with the fragmented and weakly connected structures identified in peripheral communities (e.g., Community 24). Collectively, these patterns indicate that destination-focused research remains insufficiently integrated into the theoretical and empirical mainstream of tourism business scholarship.

Addressing this imbalance requires a closer integration of destination-centered theories with advanced analytical approaches. Network-based methodologies, in particular, offer strong potential for bridging tourism business research with destination governance,

innovation, and sustainability studies (Provan & Kenis, 2008). Such approaches can help move the field beyond predominantly descriptive analyses toward more comprehensive, system-level understandings of how destinations function, adapt, and evolve.

6. Conclusions

This study examined the position of tourist destinations within tourism business scholarship through a PRISMA-guided bibliometric analysis of highly cited publications from 2000 to 2025. The findings indicate that, despite the central role of destinations within tourism systems, destination-focused perspectives remain structurally peripheral within the dominant intellectual architecture of the field.

The prominence of business-oriented themes such as sustainability, consumer behavior, and digital transformation reflects important research priorities but also reveals a structural and methodological imbalance. Firm-centric and predominantly descriptive approaches continue to shape research agendas, limiting the visibility of destination management, governance, and network-based perspectives.

Future research would benefit from explicitly conceptualizing destinations as networked and governed systems and from adopting analytical frameworks capable of capturing relational structures, dynamic processes, and strategic interactions. Strengthening the integration of destination-centered and tourism business research holds significant potential for advancing theoretical understanding and enhancing the practical relevance of tourism scholarship.

Importantly, the methodological imbalance identified in this study is consistent with prior network-oriented reviews of destination research, which similarly highlight the predominance of descriptive and nodal analytical approaches over dynamic and strategic models. This convergence of findings reinforces the need for more sophisticated, system-level methodologies within tourism business scholarship.

Conflict of interest: none

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