

RESEARCH TRENDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN RURAL TOURISM: A BIBLIOMETRIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the research trends on environmental sustainability in rural tourism using a bibliometric approach. The study employs the VOSviewer software to conduct author keyword co-occurrence analysis, co-citation analysis, and bibliographic coupling analysis on 919 articles published in English-language journals from the Scopus database. These methods are chosen to provide a comprehensive view of the field's intellectual structure, core themes, influential works, and emerging topics, in line with the research objective. The author keyword co-occurrence analysis reveals eight research themes reflecting the multifaceted nature of sustainable rural tourism, including community involvement, ecotourism, organic farming, cultural heritage management, and post-COVID-19 recovery. The co-citation analysis identifies five foundational research clusters, focusing on integrated rural tourism, agritourism sustainability, destination competitiveness, tourist segmentation, and rural tourism development. The bibliographic coupling analysis highlights six emerging research topics, bridging tourism with sustainable resource management, community resilience, and integrative planning. The findings can guide scholars, practitioners, and policymakers in developing innovative solutions and holistic frameworks to foster sustainable rural tourism development.

Keywords: Environmental sustainability, Rural tourism, bibliometric analysis, VOSviewer.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism is increasingly seen as a means to promote economic growth and sustainable development in rural areas. This form of tourism not only creates jobs and income but also contributes to the preservation of local culture, heritage, and environment [1, 2]. However, the rapid development of rural tourism also poses many challenges, especially in terms of the environment, such as increased pressure on natural resources, pollution, and ecosystem degradation [3]. The concept of environmental sustainability in rural tourism has attracted growing attention from academics and policymakers. This concept emphasizes the importance of responsible management of natural resources and minimizing the negative impacts of tourism activities [4]. Although achieving environmental sustainability brings many long-term benefits, it also poses significant challenges due to conflicts between the different goals and interests of stakeholders [5-7].

To better understand the main research trends and drivers in this field, bibliometric studies play an important role. This method allows for the analysis of a large volume of scientific works using quantitative and statistical techniques [8]. By examining the relationships between publications, authors, and research topics, bibliometric analysis can help

identify key patterns and trends, contributing to shaping the future research agenda [9, 10]. With the support of advanced computer tools and software, bibliometric analysis has become an increasingly popular method for synthesizing and visualizing scientific knowledge [8, 11, 12].

This study applies bibliometric analysis to explore research trends on environmental sustainability in rural tourism. Using the VOSviewer software, we perform author keyword co-occurrence analysis, co-citation analysis, and bibliographic coupling analysis. The aim is to provide an overview of the intellectual structure and main research drivers in this field. Insights from the study can support the development of integrated theoretical frameworks, new evaluation indicators and tools, as well as identify new directions for future research. Ultimately, we hope the results of this study will contribute to the development of more effective strategies and policies to promote sustainable rural tourism that delivers economic benefits, protects the environment, and enhances the quality of life for local communities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Environmental sustainability in rural tourism

Rural tourism has emerged as an important driver of economic development in rural areas, providing opportunities for cultural exchange, economic diversification, and environmental conservation [2, 13]. Defined as tourism that takes place in a rural context, rural tourism typically includes activities such as farm stays, ecotourism, and community-based tourism [14]. While delivering significant socio-economic benefits, the rapid expansion of rural tourism also poses major environmental challenges, particularly in terms of resource consumption, waste generation, and landscape degradation [1, 3, 13].

Environmental sustainability in rural tourism refers to the responsible management of natural resources and ecosystems to ensure long-term viability while minimizing negative impacts [4]. This concept aligns with the broader principles of sustainable tourism, emphasizing a balance between economic benefits, ecological conservation, and social equity [15]. However, achieving environmental sustainability in rural tourism is a complex challenge due to conflicting interests among stakeholders. For example, while local authorities and businesses may prioritize economic profits, local residents often desire to maintain the integrity of ecosystems and cultural identities [5-7].

Yang, et al. [13] identified three main pressures that hinder the sustainable development of rural tourism: social norm pressure, value structure pressure, and resource allocation pressure. Social norm pressure stems from the dominance of traditional agricultural lifestyles and resistance to change, which can limit the adoption of sustainable tourism practices. Value structure pressure arises from inconsistencies in how stakeholders perceive the value of rural tourism, leading to short-term economic strategies rather than long-term sustainable initiatives. Finally, resource allocation pressure encompasses land use conflicts and inadequate infrastructure, which can constrain the development of environmentally friendly tourism models.

2.2. Bibliometric analysis

Bibliometric analysis is a way to study a large amount of research data using numbers and statistics [16]. It helps researchers find trends, understand the main ideas, and identify important works in a specific field [9]. Bibliometric studies often look at how much different researchers, universities, countries, and journals have published and how often their work is mentioned by others [12]. There are different methods used in bibliometric analysis, such as seeing how papers are connected to each other based on who mentioned them, what papers they mention, what words they use, and who wrote them together [10]. These methods, along

with tools for analyzing networks, grouping similar things, and making visual charts, provide a useful way to summarize and make sense of the research in an area [11]. While bibliometric analysis has some drawbacks, like data problems and the fact that some explanations can be a matter of opinion, it has become very popular in recent years because of computer programs and databases that make it easier to do [8]. When done carefully, bibliometric studies can help build a strong base for making new and meaningful advances in a field [8, 12].

3. METHOD

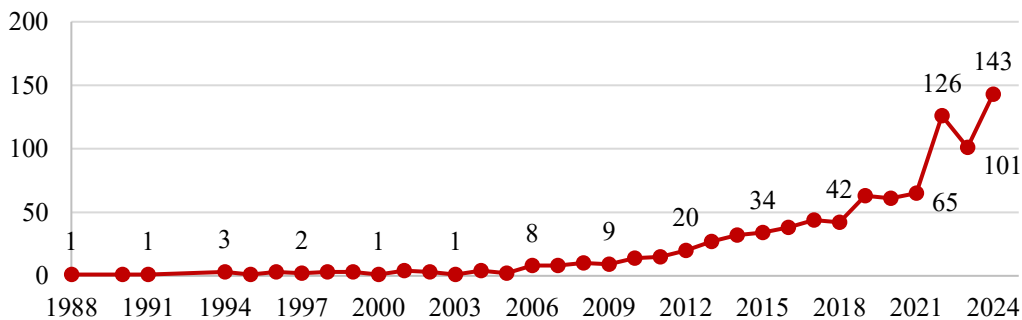
To explore the research trends in environmental sustainability in rural tourism, a bibliometric analysis was conducted using the VOSviewer software. VOSviewer is a powerful tool for bibliometric analysis that enables researchers to create visual maps and analyze large scientific datasets [17]. It offers various analysis techniques, including network mapping, clustering, text analysis, and the creation of specialized bibliometric networks [18, 19]. VOSviewer is particularly effective in revealing patterns within research fields and identifying key authors, journals, and concepts [20, 21].

The data for this study was collected from the Scopus database using the following search query: "(TITLE-ABS-KEY ("rural tourism" OR "agritourism") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (green OR environmen*)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE , "j"))". The search was limited to articles published in English-language journals, resulting in a total of 919 documents. Three types of analyses were performed using VOSviewer: author keyword co-occurrence analysis, co-citation analysis, and bibliographic coupling analysis. Author keyword co-occurrence analysis examines the relationships among topics by focusing on the keywords provided by the authors. Co-citation analysis explores the relationships among cited publications to understand the foundational themes in the research field. Bibliographic coupling analyzes the relationships among citing publications to reveal the current thematic trends.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Year of publication

Prior to 2000, only a few scattered studies were published (Figure 1), indicating that environmental sustainability in ecotourism was not a field that attracted significant academic attention at that time. However, from 2000 onwards, particularly during the period from 2022 to the present, the number of articles has increased remarkably (over 100 papers per year), reflecting the growing interest of the scientific community in the issue of rural tourism development associated with environmental protection.



Source: Scopus database.

Figure 1. Year of publications

Table 1. Author keyword co-occurrence themes

Cluster	Representative keywords	Research Theme	Research Direction
1	Rural tourism, Sustainable rural tourism, Community participation, Cultural tourism, Place attachment	Rural tourism and community-based sustainable development	Exploring community engagement, cultural heritage conservation, and sustainable rural tourism practices.
2	China, Satisfaction, Social capital, Destination image, Theory of planned behavior, Homestay	Tourists' perceptions and behavioral influences in rural tourism	Analyzing factors affecting tourist satisfaction, destination image, and behavioral intentions.
3	Rural development, Agriculture, Farm tourism, Case study, Multifunctionality	Rural development through agricultural and farm tourism	Investigating the role of farm tourism in rural economic development and agricultural diversification.
4	Sustainability, Environment, COVID-19, Resilience, GIS, Environmental impact	Environmental impact and resilience in rural tourism	Assessing the impact of tourism on the environment and exploring strategies for resilience.
5	Ecotourism, Agrotourism, Environmental sustainability, Economic sustainability, Organic agriculture	Ecotourism and organic agriculture in sustainable rural tourism	Examining the intersection of sustainable tourism, ecological conservation, and organic farming.
6	Sustainable development, Rural revitalization, Cultural heritage, Economic development, Management	Sustainable development and rural revitalization	Studying rural revitalization strategies, heritage management, and sustainable development policies.
7	Tourism, Rural areas, Development, Entrepreneurship, Innovation	Economic and entrepreneurial aspects of rural tourism	Understanding the impact of entrepreneurship and innovation on rural tourism growth.
8	Sustainable tourism, Climate change, Community involvement, Authenticity	Climate change and community involvement in sustainable tourism	Evaluating the effects of climate change on rural tourism and community-driven sustainability initiatives.

Source: Analysis results from VOSviewer

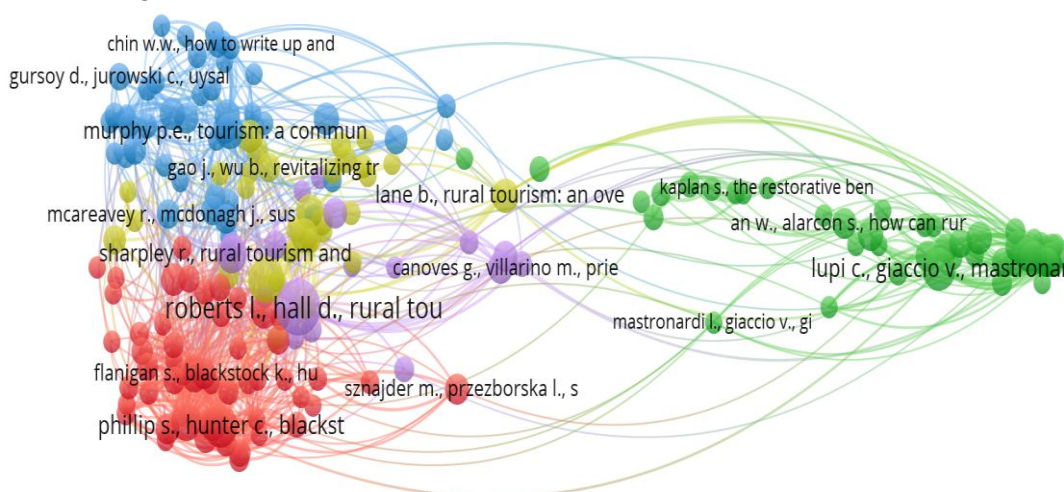
4.3. Co-citation analysis

The co-citation analysis was conducted with references cited at least 5 times. Out of a total of 44,293 cited references, 195 references met this criterion and were included in the detailed analysis. Among the most cited documents are:

- Lane, B. (1994). What is rural tourism?. *Journal of sustainable tourism*, 2(1-2), 7-21.
- Phillip, S., Hunter, C., & Blackstock, K. (2010). A typology for defining agritourism. *Tourism management*, 31(6), 754-758.
- Lupi, C., Giaccio, V., Mastronardi, L., Giannelli, A., & Scardera, A. (2017). Exploring the features of agritourism and its contribution to rural development in Italy. *Land use policy*, 64, 383-390.

- Busby, G., & Rendle, S. (2000). The transition from tourism on farms to farm tourism. *Tourism management*, 21(6), 635-642.
- Sharpley, R. (2002). Rural tourism and the challenge of tourism diversification: the case of Cyprus. *Tourism management*, 23(3), 233-244.

The results also reveal five research clusters in the field of environmental sustainability in rural tourism (Figure 2). Each cluster represents different research interests (Table 2). The first cluster focuses on understanding and developing integrated rural tourism, emphasizing the shift from agriculture to tourism and the impacts of landscapes on tourism. The second cluster discusses the benefits and sustainability of agritourism, especially its economic, social, and environmental impacts. Cluster three highlights destination competitiveness and the role of local communities in tourism development. Cluster four studies rural tourists' interests and behaviors, and how governments manage rural tourism. Finally, cluster five explores the development and diversification of rural tourism over time, including its interaction with traditional agriculture.



Source: Analysis results from VOSviewer

Figure 2. Visualized co-citation network

Table 2. Co-citation themes

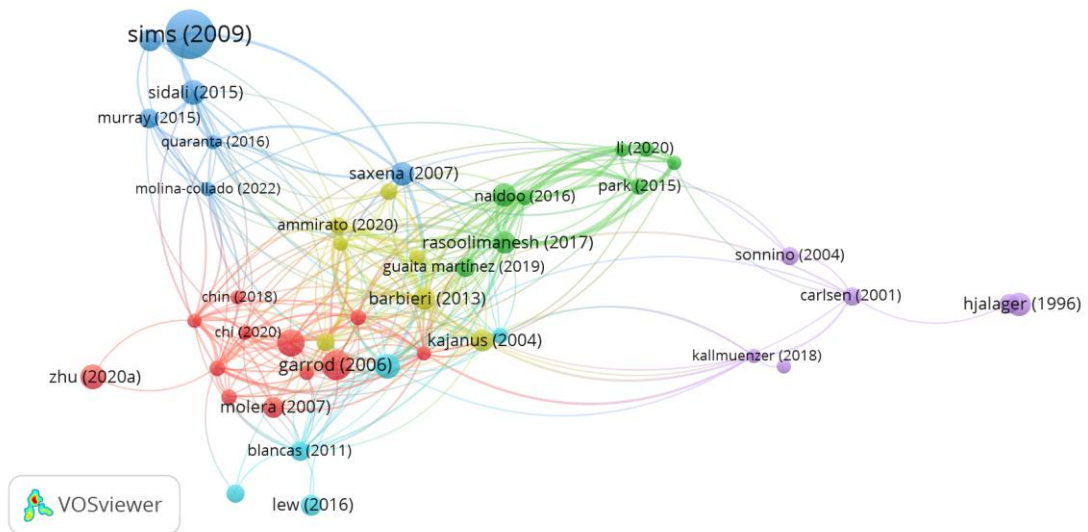
Cluster	Themes	Research Directions	Representative citations
1	Conceptualizing and Developing Integrated Rural Tourism	- Theoretical frameworks for agritourism and integrated rural tourism - Transition processes from agriculture to farm tourism - Landscape negotiation and rural tourism dynamics	Phillip, et al. [22] Busby and Rendle [23] Daugstad [24] Ollenburg and Buckley [25] Saxena, et al. [26]
2	Benefits and Sustainability of Agritourism	- Economic, socio-cultural, and environmental benefits of agritourism - Assessing sustainability of agritourism ventures - Provider perspectives on agritourism's impacts	Lupi, et al. [27] Tew and Barbieri [28] Barbieri [29] Rosalina, et al. [30] An and Alarcón [31]
3	Destination Competitiveness	- Indicators of destination competitiveness - Community perceptions and participation in tourism development	Dwyer and Kim [32] Sharpley [33] Cawley and Gillmor [34]

	and Community Participation	- Challenges of community involvement in developing contexts	Tosun [35] Lee [36]
4	Market Segmentation and Governance in Rural Tourism	- Segmentation of rural tourists by motivations and behaviors - Role of governments in rural tourism development - Comparative studies of rural tourism strategies	Lane [37] Frochot [38] Su [39] Liu, et al. [40] Gao and Wu [41]
5	Diversification and Evolution in Rural Tourism Development	- Diversification strategies for rural tourism products and markets - Evolutionary processes of rural tourism development (case studies) - Interaction between agriculture and rural tourism	Sharpley [42] Cánoves, et al. [43] Oppermann [44] Fleischer and Tchetchik [45] Randelli, et al. [46]

Source: Analysis results from VOSviewer

4.4. Bibliographic coupling

The bibliographic coupling analysis identified six research clusters focusing on rural and agritourism (Figure 3). Each cluster highlights specific topics and research directions (Table 3). Cluster 1 emphasizes rural resources and their role as assets ("countryside capital") for sustainable tourism development. Cluster 2 explores local residents' attitudes and factors influencing their support for sustainable tourism. Cluster 3 compares agritourism and other tourism types, highlighting their economic, social, and environmental benefits. Cluster 4 identifies different tourist groups visiting rural areas and the unique features of agritourism operations. Cluster 5 examines agricultural diversification into tourism, highlighting both potential benefits and challenges faced by rural tourism enterprises. Finally, Cluster 6 presents integrated approaches and indicators to measure sustainability and resilience in rural tourism planning. These clusters collectively provide a comprehensive view of current rural tourism research and underline its diverse contributions to sustainable rural development.



Source: Analysis results from VOSviewer

Figure 3. Visualized bibliographic coupling network

Table 3. Bibliographic coupling themes

Cluster	Themes	Research Directions	Representative citations
1	Rural Resources and Sustainable Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rural tourism and countryside capital management - Entrepreneurial role in rural tourism competitiveness - Risk management in rural tourism (e.g., COVID-19 impact) 	Garrod, et al. [47] Komppula [48] Zhu and Deng [49] Molera and Albaladejo [50] Ciolac, et al. [51]
2	Residents' Perceptions and Community Well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attitudes of residents toward sustainable rural tourism - Effects of tourism on community satisfaction and well-being - Social capital as a moderator of tourism development 	Muresan, et al. [52] Rasoolimanesh, et al. [53] Martínez, et al. [54] Park, et al. [55] Naidoo and Sharpley [56]
3	Sustainability and Agritourism Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contributions of agritourism vs. enclave tourism - Comparative sustainability analysis of rural/agri-tourism ventures - Socioeconomic and cultural sustainability 	Sims [57] Sidali, et al. [58] Saxena, et al. [26] Zhang, et al. [59] Murray and Kline [60]
4	Market Segmentation and Agritourism Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Profiling rural tourists and market segments - Economic, structural characteristics of agritourism businesses - Contributions of agritourism to rural development 	Kajanus, et al. [61] Barbieri [29] Lupi, et al. [27] Ammirato, et al. [62] Choo and Jamal [63]
5	Tourism Diversification and Community Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Agricultural diversification into tourism - Sustainable rural tourism strategies and community well-being - Sustainability management practices in rural family businesses 	Hjalager [64] Bramwell [65] Sonnino [66] Carlsen, et al. [67] Kallmuenzer, et al. [68]
6	Integrated Rural Tourism and Sustainability Indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Models for integrated rural tourism - Community resilience and sustainability indicators - Practical application of sustainability indicators in rural tourism planning 	Cawley and Gillmor [34] Lew, et al. [69] Blancas, et al. [70] Rebollo and Baidal [71]

Source: Analysis results from VOSviewer

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This bibliometric analysis of research trends in environmental sustainability in rural tourism provides valuable insights that align with and extend previous studies in this field. The rapid growth of research interest since 2000, particularly after 2022, corroborates the

observations of Yang and Phan [1] and Lun, et al. [3] regarding the increasing global awareness of the need to balance tourism development with ecological conservation.

The diverse research themes identified through the author keyword co-occurrence analysis reflect the multifaceted nature of sustainable rural tourism. The emphasis on community involvement, ecotourism, organic farming, cultural heritage management, and other themes aligns with key theories in sustainable tourism development, such as stakeholder theory, social capital theory, and integrated rural development theory. For instance, the focus on engaging local stakeholders [51, 56] underscores the importance of stakeholder collaboration, which is central to stakeholder theory. Similarly, the attention to ecotourism and organic farming [62, 63] highlights the potential of these practices to promote sustainability, echoing the principles of social capital theory and integrated rural development.

The co-citation analysis reveals foundational works that have shaped the conceptual and empirical underpinnings of this field. Lane's [37] seminal article on defining rural tourism and Sharpley's [42] examination of tourism diversification in Cyprus have been particularly influential, laying the groundwork for subsequent research. The identified research clusters, such as integrated rural tourism [34], agritourism benefits and sustainability [27-29], and destination competitiveness [32], align with key themes and theories in the literature, providing a coherent framework for understanding the complex dynamics of sustainable rural tourism.

However, this study also highlights emerging trends that extend beyond the scope of previous research and reflect new directions in research and policy. The growing emphasis on countryside capital [47], residents' perceptions and community well-being [52-55], and the integration of sustainability indicators into rural tourism planning [70, 71] suggests a shift towards more holistic, interdisciplinary approaches. These frontier topics bridge tourism with sustainable resource management, community resilience, and integrative planning, indicating a recognition of the need for more comprehensive and participatory frameworks in both research and practice. These trends have significant implications for future studies and policies, as they underscore the importance of engaging diverse stakeholders, valuing local assets, and developing robust sustainability assessment tools.

While prior bibliometric studies in tourism have examined various aspects of sustainability [12, 16], this study is one of the first to focus specifically on environmental sustainability in rural tourism. The use of multiple bibliometric techniques provides a comprehensive view of the field's intellectual structure and evolution, revealing the complex relationships among themes, authors, and documents. The VOSviewer software, employed in several recent bibliometric studies [17-21], enables powerful visualizations that facilitate the interpretation of these relationships.

In conclusion, this bibliometric analysis makes significant contributions to the study and practice of sustainable rural tourism. By mapping out the field's intellectual structure, identifying core themes and influential works, and highlighting emerging trends, it provides a valuable foundation for future research and policy development. The insights gained from this study can guide scholars, practitioners, and policymakers in advancing knowledge and practices that balance economic benefits, community well-being, and ecological conservation. Key priorities include developing participatory planning approaches, promoting sustainable tourism practices, building local capacity, and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders. As the field continues to evolve, it is crucial to build on these insights and develop integrative frameworks, rigorous assessments, and innovative solutions that can support the sustainable development of rural tourism in diverse contexts worldwide. By doing so, we can contribute to the creation of a more sustainable, equitable, and resilient future for rural communities and their environments.

The findings of this study have significant practical implications for various stakeholders in rural tourism, such as local tourism authorities, NGOs, and community organizations. They can use the insights from the emerging research topics to develop appropriate strategies and policies that promote sustainable rural tourism. For example, the growing focus on post-COVID-19 resilience shows that practitioners need to concentrate on building the adaptability of rural tourism destinations through diversification, innovation, and community empowerment. Similarly, the increasing attention to digital transformation in rural tourism highlights the importance of investing in digital infrastructure, skill development, and online marketing to enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of rural tourism businesses. Local tourism authorities can collaborate with researchers and community stakeholders to test and evaluate creative solutions in these under-researched areas, contributing to the creation of more sustainable and resilient rural tourism ecosystems. By connecting research with practice, practitioners can play a crucial role in translating research findings into practical benefits for rural communities and their environments.

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TÓM TẮT

XU HƯỚNG NGHIÊN CỨU VỀ BỀN VỮNG MÔI TRƯỜNG TRONG DU LỊCH NÔNG THÔN: TIẾP CẬN BẰNG PHÂN TÍCH TRẮC LƯỢNG THƯ MỤC

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Bài viết nhằm khám phá xu hướng nghiên cứu về bền vững môi trường trong du lịch nông thôn thông qua phương pháp phân tích trắc lượng thư mục. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phần mềm VOSviewer để thực hiện phân tích đồng xuất hiện từ khóa tác giả, phân tích đồng trích dẫn và phân tích ghép cặp thư mục với 919 bài báo được công bố trên các tạp chí tiếng Anh từ cơ sở dữ liệu Scopus. Các phương pháp này được lựa chọn nhằm cung cấp cái nhìn toàn diện về cấu trúc lý thuyết, chủ đề cốt lõi, công trình có ảnh hưởng và các chủ đề mới nổi để hướng đến mục tiêu nghiên cứu. Phân tích đồng xuất hiện từ khóa tác giả cho thấy tám chủ đề nghiên cứu phản ánh bản chất đa chiều của du lịch nông thôn bền vững, bao gồm sự tham gia của cộng đồng, du lịch sinh thái, canh tác hữu cơ, quản lý di sản văn hóa và phục hồi sau COVID-19. Phân tích đồng trích dẫn xác định năm cụm nghiên cứu nền tảng, tập trung vào du lịch nông thôn tích hợp, bền vững trong du lịch nông nghiệp, năng lực cạnh tranh điểm đến, phân khúc du khách và phát triển du lịch nông thôn. Phân tích ghép cặp thư mục làm nổi bật sáu chủ đề nghiên cứu mới nổi, kết nối du lịch với quản lý tài nguyên bền vững, khả năng phục hồi của cộng đồng và quy hoạch tích hợp. Những phát hiện này giúp các nhà nghiên cứu, người làm du lịch và nhà hoạch định chính sách xây dựng giải pháp mới và cách tiếp cận toàn diện để phát triển du lịch nông thôn bền vững.

Từ khóa: Bền vững môi trường, du lịch nông thôn, phân tích trắc lượng thư mục, VOSviewer.