

Sustainable Tourism: Systematic Literature Review and Future Research Agenda

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Abstract

Sustainable tourism has become a prominent topic in both academic and policy debates because of its ability to harmonize economic growth with environmental protection and socio-cultural advancement. It is a responsible way of developing tourism activities by considering environmental, social, and economic impacts of tourism. The aim of the research is to probe the key trends of sustainable tourism research through reviewing existing literatures. The present study also tries to explore the challenges existing in the current research on sustainable tourism. The information search for the study was carried out in the Scopus database from 2020-2024 via systematic search of keywords such as “Sustainable tourism”, “Green tourism” and “Eco tourism”. The identified research studies were screen using inclusion and exclusion criteria by using Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines. Nine articles were included for the study after a critical appraisal and screening. The results reveal dominant research areas, such as ecotourism, community- based tourism, and responsible tourism and also highlighting underexplored research areas like the digital transformation, climate resilience strategies, and stakeholder collaboration.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, Green tourism, Ecotourism, Systematic Literature review, PRISMA Protocol, Future research Agenda

Introduction

Tourism sector is considering as a major sector which contributing to World’s GDP. Even though tourism sector has been struggling to attain sustainability, as its swift expansion frequently results in environmental damage and social inequalities(Alonso-Muñoz et al., 2023). The concept of sustainable tourism is more important for the development of environmentally integrated tourism. The existing research in the area of tourism shows that sustainability as a complex concept and it requires comprehensive and critical analysis (Butler, 1999). As the tourism sector strives to align with 2020 Agenda for Sustainable Development, there is an urgent need to comprehensively address the research gaps and identify sustainable tourism practices that can advance these global goals (Alonso-Muñoz et al., 2023).

The present study is carried out to get the answers for the following research questions through a systematic literature review using PRISMA Protocol.

RQ1: What are the key themes and trends in the existing literature on sustainable tourism?

RQ2: What gaps and challenges exist in the current research on sustainable tourism?

RQ3: What is the future research agenda of sustainable tourism?

The results of systematic review are presented in Table 1. Nine research studies were selected for the current research from the Scopus database from 2020-2024. Table 1 includes information such as objective of the study, author and nature of the review.

Table 1: Summary of Extent Reviews in the Sustainable Tourism Domain

Sl.No.	Author (Year)	Objectives	Method Applied
1.	(Nunkoo et al., 2023)	The objective of the study is to critically Assess the interdisciplinary nature of Sustainable tourism research and it's implications for the SDGs.	General Review
2.	(Khanra et al., 2021)	The purpose of the study is to analyse the the evolution and trends in ecotourism.	Bibliometric Review
3.	(Rani et al., 2024)	The primary objective of the study is to Explore and analyse tourist's perception of Rajgir as a destination for green tourism.	General Review
4.	(Talwar et al., 2023)	The objective of the study is to provide insights into the potential of Virtual tourism as a sustainable alternative in the post- pandemic world.	General Review
5.	(Madanaguli et al., 2023)	The purpose of the study is to analyse the environmental sustainability practices and strategies within the rural tourism and hospitality sector	Systematic Review
6.	(Agarwal et al., 2024)	The research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolution and implication of sustainable tourism research	General Review

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| 7. (Markose et al., 2022) | The purpose of the study is to explore and
And analyse different aspects of responsible
Tourism initiatives in the context of sustainable
Tourism development. | General
Review |
| 8. (Khizar et al., 2023) | The objective of the study is to evaluate the
existing literatures related to the United
nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
Within the context of tourism. | Systematic
Review |
| 9. (Sharif et al., 2020) | The purpose of the study is to analyse the intricate
relationship between tourism and, energy use,
and CO2 emissions in china, with a focus on
sustainability. | General
Review |
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Materials and Methods

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to analyze existing research on Sustainable Tourism and outline a future research agenda. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol is used to ensure a rigorous and transparent review process. The methodology consists of the following steps:

PRISMA Protocol

The Preferred Reporting items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) protocol is an evidence-based statements which is designed to provide transparency and complete reporting of systematic reviews (Sarkis-Onofre et al., 2021). Improving the reporting of systematic reviews and Meta-analysis for help the researchers is the primary goal of PRISMA statement. PRISMA protocol also helpful for critical and comprehensive appraisal of systematic reviews which was already published (Moher et al., 2009).

Resources

The study carried out the review procedure by using the documents relating to Sustainable tourism or Green tourism or Ecotourism from the Scopus database. The reason for selecting Scopus database is it covers more than 25 subject area and it has a wide range of acceptability. Therefore, the present study carried out by a manual search of articles in the Scopus database.

Systematic search strategy

The selection procedures of documents include three important systematic searching stages. They are Identification, Screening and Eligibility.

Identification of Documents

The selection of relevant documents is the most important step for a systematic literature review. For this

process the researcher makes a search string in the Scopus database by using appropriate keywords relating to the study. The present study uses the keywords such as “Sustainable tourism” or “Green tourism” or “ecotourism”. From this search the researcher got 11329 documents in different discipline.

Table 2: The search String

Database	Search String
Scopus	(TITLE-ABS-KEY ("sustainable tourism") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Green tourism") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Eco tourism"))

Screening

After getting 11329 documents in the identification phase, the researchers filter the documents based on their requirements and relevancy of the study. The current research concentrated only on articles relating to Sustainable tourism from period of 2020 to 2024 to know the relevant trends and challenges of sustainable tourism research. All other documents such as conference papers, book chapters, reviews, comments, editorials etc. were excluded for the study. The researcher considered only the articles in the subject area of Business, Management and accounting in English language. The present analysis carried out by using only nine all open access journal article.

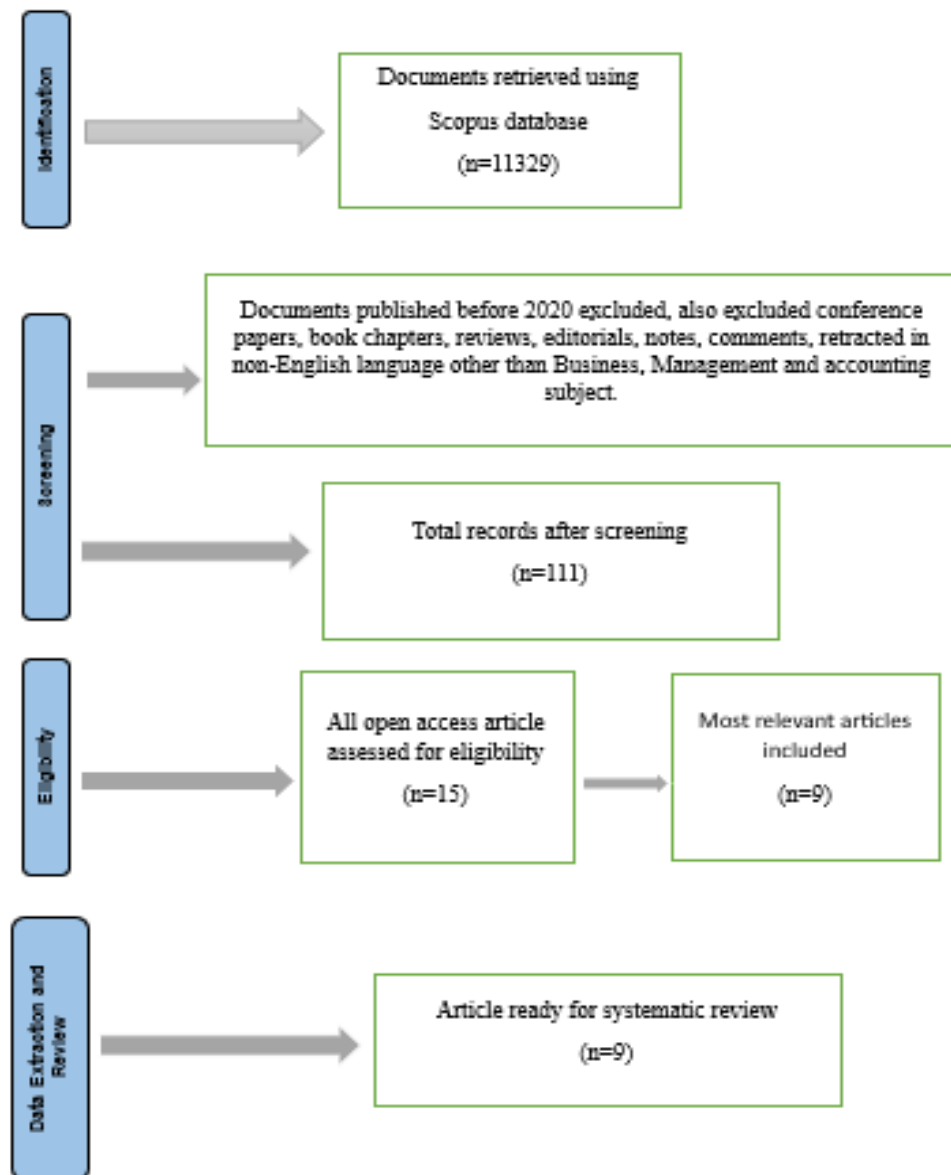
Table 3: Inclusion Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Document Type	Article	Conference papers, Book chapters, editorials, comments, reviews, letters, erratum
Subject	Business, Management and Accounting	All other Subjects
Language	English	Non-English
Year span	2020 to 2024	<2020

Eligibility

In the third phase of systematic search and selection procedure, the researcher concentrated only all open access journal article. From that process the researcher selected fifteen articles. At the last stage the researcher excluded six articles which are not relevant for the current study, and only none articles were selected for the SLR.

Figure 1: PRISMA Protocol



Results and Discussions

Key Trends in Sustainable Tourism Research

There is a significant trend in sustainable tourism research with the SDGs. Researchers are encouraged to view the SDGs as interconnected targets, which can increase the relevance of their studies (Nunkoo et al., 2023). Recent studies have increasingly examined tourists' attitudes and behaviours toward sustainability, indicating a growing interest in understanding how consumer behaviour impacts sustainable tourism. Ecological preservation of tourist destinations, emphasizing the importance of environmental conservation in sustainable tourism practices are the evolving themes in sustainable tourism (Khanra et al., 2021). Sustainable tourism encourages travellers to respect local customs and traditions, which fosters cross-cultural understanding and supports local artisans. By promoting responsible travel practices, green tourism can create jobs, support small businesses, and contribute to sustainable livelihoods for local communities (Rani et al., 2024). Growing awareness of the environmental impacts of tourism, including waste generation, emissions, and ecological footprints are important trends in sustainable tourism research.

The integration of technology, particularly virtual reality (VR), is emerging as a trend in sustainable tourism (Talwar et al., 2023). There has been a growing emphasis on environmental sustainability within the field of rural tourism (RT) in recent years, as evidenced by an increasing number of studies dedicated to this topic over the past decade. This shift signifies a wider awareness of the negative effects that tourism can have on both the environment and local communities (Madanaguli et al., 2023).

Themes like eco-tourism and rural tourism have shown diminishing trend in research. This change suggests a movement towards exploring more innovative ideas and themes in sustainable tourism marketing (Agarwal et al., 2024). The integration of CSR into tourism practices is a significant trend. The literature discusses how tourism service companies are adopting CSR initiatives to enhance their corporate image and contribute positively to the environment and local communities (Markose et al., 2022). Effective governance structures and administrative practices are essential for implementing sustainable tourism policies and ensuring compliance with SDGs (Khizar et al., 2023). The rise of ecotourism is a notable trend, reflecting a shift towards more sustainable practices in the tourism sector. This trend is driven by increasing awareness of environmental issues and the depletion of natural resources (Sharif et al., 2020)

Challenges in Sustainable Tourism research

The existing literatures show a risk of fragmentation in sustainable tourism research. The studies may focus narrowly on specific SDGs without considering their interconnections. It will lead to a lack of theoretical and practical value in the findings (Nunkoo et al., 2023). There is a scarcity of research exploring the connections between sustainable tourism and other disciplines, such as healthcare and advanced technologies, which could provide valuable insights. Certain topics, such as financing options for ecotourists and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumer behaviour, are not well-studied, indicating a need for further exploration (Khanra et al., 2021). Reliable standards for assessing the implementation of safety and green policy efforts are lacking in the existing literatures. This disparity makes it difficult to evaluate how well sustainable tourism practices are working (Rani et al., 2024).

The affective and non-economic aspects of tourism behaviour such as emotional reactions to sustainability concerns and shifts in purchasing preferences, have not been adequately covered by previous research (Talwar et al., 2023). The geographical bias may overlook unique challenges and opportunities for sustainable tourism in diverse settings (Madanaguli et al., 2023). The adoption of innovative technologies such as blockchain and artificial intelligence to enhance the practices of sustainable tourism is an underexplored area of research (Agarwal et al., 2024). The literature on sustainable tourism is widespread and fragmented, which complicates the ability to draw comprehensive conclusions about its overall impact on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This fragmentation can lead to inconsistencies in findings and a lack of cohesive understanding within the field (Khizar et al., 2023).

Future research Agenda for Sustainable tourism research

Future studies in the area of sustainable tourism should aim to be transformative and solution oriented. Social and environmental challenges while linking sustainable tourism with broader development agendas, especially SDGs should be addressed (Nunkoo et al., 2023). Researchers are encouraged to perform meta-analyses of existing literature to aggregate knowledge on ecotourism destinations and tourists' attitudes, which can enhance the understanding of sustainable tourism practices (Khanra et al., 2021). The Creation of robust frameworks to assess the success of green tourism efforts is necessary. This could contribute in

creating standards and best practices for environment friendly travel (Rani et al., 2024). Future studies should concentrate on the psychological and emotional aspects that influence consumer behaviour toward sustainable travel, especially as the relate to pandemic related anxiety and eco-guilt (Talwar et al., 2023). Research should also focus on the implications of policies aimed at promoting sustainable tourism, examining how these policies affect stakeholder satisfaction and the overall sustainability of rural tourism initiatives (Madanaguli et al., 2023). Multidisciplinary research that incorporates theories from psychology, marketing, and sociology can help understand individual and community behavioural responses. This can lead to effective nudges that promote sustainability in tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019), (Agarwal et al., 2024). The impact of media on tourism behaviors and trends presents an opportunity for research, particularly in understanding how popular culture can drive sustainable tourism practices (Agarwal et al., 2024).

Future research should investigate how responsible tourism initiatives can enhance the livelihoods of local communities and contribute to social equity is essential. This includes understanding the economic impacts on marginalized groups (Markose et al., 2022). There is a need for interdisciplinary research that combines tourism studies with environmental science, economics, and energy policy. This approach can lead to more holistic solutions to the challenges faced in sustainable tourism (Sharif et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This systematic literature review on sustainable tourism highlights the critical need for an integrated approach that balances environmental, economic, and social dimensions in tourism development. The review reveals that while substantial progress has been made in sustainable tourism research, challenges persist in achieving effective sustainability practices within the tourism sector. Key themes such as stakeholder collaboration, policy integration, and the role of technology in promoting sustainability emerged as central areas for future research. The study also identifies the importance of understanding the complex interplay between local communities, tourists, and the environment in driving sustainable practices. Moving forward, it is crucial to explore new models of sustainable tourism that incorporate resilience, adaptability, and equity, alongside developing robust frameworks for evaluating sustainability impacts. Future research should focus on interdisciplinary approaches, innovative technologies, and contextual solutions that address the specific challenges faced by different regions and communities. By doing so, we can ensure the long-term viability of tourism as a driver of economic growth and cultural preservation while minimizing its negative environmental and social impacts.

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