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SCIENCE MAPPING THE THEMES AND TRENDS OF SOCIAL INCLUSION AND TOURISM: A SCIMAT BIBLIOMETRIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The significance of social inclusion for achieving sustainable development goals in tourism is widely recognized. However, there is a lack of bibliometric analysis of the scientific evidence in this domain. This study used the SciMAT bibliometric analysis software to examine 145 publications from 2001 to 2023. It has identified dominant themes and their evolution over time, creating strategic diagrams and performance indicators for various periods. The results showed that the research in this field has expanded beyond the limited aspects related to social inclusion, encompassing more advanced subjects such as disability, ecotourism, and tourism development. This study provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature on social inclusion and tourism research and predicts how this field will evolve in the future. It aims to contribute to the knowledge base by identifying common themes and gaps in the research domain, developing new research themes, and suggesting areas for further investigation.

Keywords: Social inclusion, tourism, bibliometric analysis, analysis of science mapping, SciMAT.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is among the fastest-growing industries worldwide (Türk et al., 2025), however it is also one of the most affected by global challenges and crises (Mohd Suib & Mohd Salleh, 2021). Over the past decade, this industry has undergone rapid changes, driven by rising living standards on the one hand and increasingly stressful lifestyles on the other. The demand for varied and appealing tourism facilities and services has increased, as has the attention to sustainable tourism development. The COVID-19 pandemic and the potential for future pandemics have presented new challenges to sustainable tourism development

(Pratiwi & Nugroho, 2022). The United Nations has established indicators for its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), comprising 17 global objectives that advocate for more integrated policies to achieve sustainable development across various dimensions, including the eradication of poverty, promotion of well-being and prosperity for all, and the protection of the planet.

The SDGs are a core element of the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations, and it was adopted to promote sustainable development. This agenda fosters sustainable development by managing and conserving natural resources, creating job opportunities for local communities while safeguarding their culture and products, and utilizing sustainable resources to enhance economic benefits for both developed and developing nations. Therefore, the SDGs are crucial for studying the contribution of tourism to sustainable development. It is necessary to integrate national and local policies to maximize the impact of tourism on the goals of the 2030 Agenda (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023).

Tourism can be sustainable only if it protects the environment and provides equal opportunities to communities where it is promoted. However, environmental issues are not the only aspects of concern in sustainable development. Social factors are also important, as many researchers have pointed out. Therefore, sustainable tourism must be a key component of national plans that promote economic growth, social inclusion, and the preservation of cultural and natural heritage (Mitrică et al., 2021).

Social inclusion is a proactive approach to human development to achieve social well-being (Haluza-DeLay & Fernhout, 2011). Tourism can help promote social inclusion by creating opportunities for expanding limited social boundaries and fostering interactions and social networks. According to Morgan et al. (2015), tourism positively impacts various groups of people who face economic disadvantages, including low-income households, individuals with health impairments and disabilities, and their caregivers.

Social inclusion is a process which will allow individuals to participate actively in society. It is related to the social aspect of sustainability. It aims to reduce economic, social, and cultural barriers and promote diversity, particularly in the following three key dimensions: recognizing all individuals as members of society, considering the concerns and needs of diverse groups in policy-making, and providing rights and resources that enable full participation in society (Cloquet et al., 2018).

Tourism development sometimes neglects broader goals that can improve people's living standards and will create a balanced growth between the economy and other sectors. In many cases, tourism development exacerbates existing social inequalities and disparities. Social inclusion involves creating equal opportunities for all citizens and providing access to various aspects of well-being and quality of life. The inclusion process should be a two-way street in which society and its different sectors seek balanced solutions which will ensure equal opportunities and rights (Dreher et al., 2013).

Tourism can contribute to global sustainable development, a current topic widely discussed in the academic field. There is a lot of tourism research on sustainability, but its alignment with the SDGs has not been adequately assessed. However, tourism is a way to achieve the United Nations SDGs, which aim to end poverty, protect the environment, and promote social inclusion (Moyle et al., 2022).

The impact of tourism and its development on creating social inclusion in destinations is still under-researched, and the relationship between the two has only recently been explored in research (Valente et

al., 2022). To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no bibliometric analysis of scientific evidence on social inclusion and tourism has used performance analysis and science mapping. These tools can help examine the evolution of the field. Therefore, this study aims to address this research gap. Given the expansion of social inclusion, it is beneficial for researchers to be aware of the current state of scientific production in this field.

This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of social inclusion in tourism across various periods by employing co-word analysis and examining key themes in the field. The study utilizes SciMAT (a science mapping analysis software), a powerful tool for science mapping; it helps to identify and visualize themes, and to produce a strategic diagram and an evolution map that categorize the themes of the field under study (Viedma et al., 2020). The science map helps researchers identify the sources and direction of a field's scientific flow and in turn, will enable them to choose the right path for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social inclusion is the opposite of social exclusion. It refers to the relationship between deprivation, injustice, and resource waste (Vranken et al., 2003). Social exclusion is caused by unequal power relations at various levels of society, including interpersonal, intergroup, social, national, and global levels, which will impact the quality of life of the individual and the issue of fairness in society (Kohon, 2018; Hussain et al., 2017). These dynamics underscore the fact that social exclusion is not merely an economic issue, but a structural and systemic challenge that affects multiple layers of society.

Social inclusion and exclusion are multidimensional concepts that involve more than just poverty and inequality (Oxoby, 2009). Therefore, as these researchers have emphasized, the concern about social exclusion and inclusion involves aspects beyond income and material issues. Economic and material factors play a significant role in social exclusion; however, other cultural, social, and political factors should also be considered, such as one's sense of belonging and being part of a society or a group (Kastenholz et al., 2015). Thus, social inclusion must be understood as a complex process shaped by cultural, social, political, and economic dimensions, all of which jointly determine who can participate fully in society.

Social inclusion is hard to define because it is widely used in public opinion and political discourse, and there is no consistent definition (Kastenholz et al., 2015; Liang et al., 2023). However, social inclusion is basically having access to the opportunities and resources necessary to fully participate in the economic, social, and cultural life, thereby enhancing individual well-being. Feelings of social inclusion and acceptance often increase well-being and satisfaction with life (Liang et al., 2023). In other words, social inclusion should be understood as encompassing both tangible access to resources and intangible experiences of belonging and recognition, which together form the foundation of individuals' well-being and their full integration into society.

Reducing inequalities and social inclusion is important for achieving social sustainability. Based on the United Nations SDGs, social inclusion is a crucial metric of social sustainability (Kohon, 2018; Carnemolla et al., 2021; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). Moreover, the implementation and achievement of the SDGs are significant for indigenous peoples to maintain a sustainable way of life that is intrinsically connected to their territory, livelihood, and natural environment (Wang & Wang, 2019). Social sustainability, therefore,

focuses on development that encourages social interaction, social inclusion, and cultural enrichment (Bahadure & Kotharkar, 2012). This highlights that tourism sustainability cannot be achieved without embedding equity and inclusion into policy and practice, as these elements serve as the foundations for the fair distribution of benefits, social acceptance, and the long-term effectiveness of development strategies.

In the 1980s, the social and political situation experienced change as some countries had started to recognize the specific rights of indigenous peoples, especially those who were marginalized and living in deplorable conditions. Given the persistent inequalities and the need to reduce high poverty levels, the tourism economic sector has often been viewed as a catalyst for social inclusion and development, capable of reaching the most disadvantaged groups (Arellano, 2011). Tourism therefore, emerged as a potential driver of empowerment and equity, providing historically excluded populations with economic opportunities, as well as avenues for social recognition and active participation.

Sustainability is a central concept in assessing tourism's contribution to society. Today, sustainable development aims to enhance and improve the quality of life, promote economic progress, foster social inclusion, and protect the environment (Iashvili et al., 2019). This integrated perspective positions tourism as a key vehicle for achieving balanced progress across social, economic, and environmental domains, ensuring that sustainability outcomes are comprehensive and mutually reinforcing.

The Manila Declaration on World Tourism emphasizes social inclusion in contemporary tourism and recognizes the fundamental human right to leisure and recreation (Thomas, 2018). Focusing on tourism development that considers social inclusion means paying attention to the role of community members in decision-making about tourism and ensuring the wider distribution of tourism benefits (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). Such an approach ensures that tourism development not only generates economic growth, but also embeds principles of equity and fairness, thereby enhancing its legitimacy and long-term sustainability within society.

METHODOLOGY

One of the recent innovations in research is the use of methods that can capture the changes and continuity of a scientific field over time. This study applied a bibliometric analysis with SciMAT, which provides an objective, systematic, and quantitative means of evaluating published research. Through this approach, it is possible to examine the intellectual structure, evolution, and emerging trends within a specific field of knowledge, thereby offering deeper insights into the process of knowledge accumulation and its practical applications (Gürol et al., 2024). As a comprehensive science mapping tool, SciMAT enables researchers to examine social, intellectual, and conceptual developments in a scientific field, based on examining a series of scientific publications (Cobo et al., 2012). SciMAT creates a knowledge base in which each publication and its various elements (keywords, journals, references, etc.) are stored. It uses co-word analysis and the h-index to measure the relevance and impact of publications. Importantly, SciMAT covers the entire workflow, from data preprocessing to visualization and interpretation. Unlike other bibliometric tools, such as VOSviewer or CiteSpace, which primarily focus on mapping and visualization, SciMAT integrates all essential stages, including data cleaning, time slicing, network construction, normalization, clustering, and longitudinal performance analysis. One of its distinctive advantages is its powerful

preprocessing module that detects duplicates and misspellings, reduces data noise, and divides the dataset into comparable periods.

Furthermore, SciMAT enriches the analysis with bibliometric measures (e.g., h-index, g-index), allowing a more rigorous evaluation of the impact of each cluster. It also offers a configuration wizard that enables researchers to select different algorithms, similarity measures, and clustering techniques, thereby providing flexibility and robustness in the analysis. Finally, SciMAT supports longitudinal science mapping, enabling the tracking of the conceptual and thematic evolution of research areas over time through strategic diagrams, cluster networks, and evolution maps (Cobo et al., 2012; Viedma et al., 2020; Díaz-López et al., 2019). These features make SciMAT particularly suitable for analyzing the development of social inclusion research in tourism.

SciMAT follows the method proposed by Cobo et al. (2012), consisting of steps that allow the analysis of a research context (Díaz-López et al., 2019), and they are as follows:

Step 1: Identification of Research Themes

SciMAT identifies the research themes for each period by performing a co-word analysis on the raw data of all the documents published in the research field. Then, it uses an equivalence index to create a normalized bibliometric network of keywords, and finally, it applies a simple center algorithm to cluster the keywords into themes.

Step 2: Mapping Research Themes in a Two-Dimensional Space

SciMAT maps the research themes using two-dimensional strategic diagrams based on centrality (the degree of interaction of a theme with other themes) and density (the value of the internal strength of a theme). A strategic diagram is divided into four quadrants as follows:

- Motor themes (upper right quadrant): The themes in the upper right quadrant are well-developed and important for a research area. They have high centrality and density.
- Highly developed but isolated themes (upper left quadrant): They have high density but low centrality. They are less important for a research area.
- Emerging or declining themes (lower left quadrant): They have low density and centrality. They may represent emerging or disappearing themes that have not gained much attention or impact.
- Basic and transversal themes (lower right quadrant): They have high centrality but low density. They may represent transversal and general themes covering a research field's basic aspects.

Step 3: Visualization of Research Themes

SciMAT also utilizes thematic networks to illustrate the relationships between each theme in the strategic diagrams and the associated keywords and their connections. Each thematic network is named after the most relevant keyword in the theme.

Step 4: Evolution Map of Research Themes

SciMAT also uses an evolution map to show the changes in research themes over time. This map shows the themes that have a conceptual relationship across different periods. It uses the inclusion index to measure the strength of the connection between themes. Solid lines indicate that the themes are related and share some keywords. Dotted lines indicate that the themes are unrelated, meaning they have no common keywords. The line's thickness is proportional to the inclusion index, while the circle's size is proportional to the number of documents associated with each theme (Díaz-López et al., 2019).

This study collected and analyzed the bibliometric characteristics and the science map of documents related to social inclusion in tourism. It excluded journals or other literature from other fields, such as education, health, or sports, as well as research notes. It retrieved 225 documents from Scopus, the most reliable and comprehensive database, spanning the years 2001 to 2023. This database contains the most influential and cited research. It also covers over 16,000 sources of journals, conference papers, and books, which offer a wide range of research on various academic, medical, and social topics (Abdullah, 2021). Table 1 shows the study's search strategy used to retrieve data from the Scopus database.

Table 1

Scopus Database Search Strategy

Keywords	"social "inclusion" AND "tourism" OR "hospitality" OR "travel"
Research context	Title-Abstract-Keywords
Year	Unlimited
Inclusion criteria	Language: English Document type: Article, Conference paper, Book Chapter
Exclusion criteria	Subject area: Engineering, Energy, Arts & Humanities, Psychology, Computer Science, Medicine, Decision Sciences, Earth & Planetary Science, Health Professions, Agricultural & Biological Sciences, Nursing, Biochemistry, Genetics & Molecular Biology, Mathematics

The search results were refined by reviewing the titles, keywords, and abstracts of the retrieved documents and then eliminating those irrelevant to the research topic. This reduced the number of documents from 225 to 145. Among them, 114 (79%) were journal articles, 11 (7.5%) were conference papers, and 20 (13%) were book chapters. The data from the retrieved records, including all citation information, bibliographic information, abstract and keywords (abstract, authors' keywords, and indexed keywords), and recovered sources, was saved in a CSV file format.

After importing this raw data into SciMAT, some features of the SciMAT software, such as “finding similar keywords with a certain distance,” were used to improve the data quality and group the keywords with the same meaning. Then, to prevent data homogeneity, all the years were divided into consecutive periods. Then, to prevent data homogeneity, the study period was divided into consecutive time intervals. Although bibliometric analyses commonly use time periods of equal length, the limited number of publications in the early years justified dividing the study timeframe into comparable periods. Therefore, the study period (2001-2023) was divided into the following four consecutive periods: 2001-2011, 2012-2015, 2016-2019, and 2020-2023, yielding 22, 23, 34, and 64 documents, respectively.

RESULTS

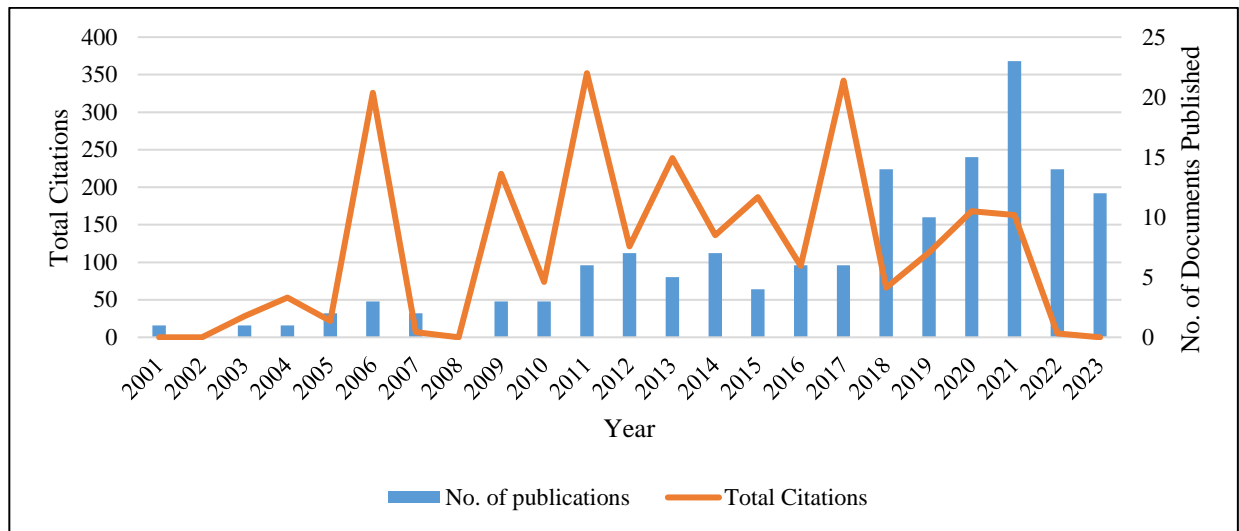
Number of Documents and Citations per Year

Figure 1 shows the distribution of published documents and citations related to social inclusion in tourism for each year, indicating that the number of articles published in this area has increased since 2018, reflecting the growing interest in social inclusion in recent years. The highest number of articles was 23, which were published in 2021.

Since the data for 2023 only covered the first few months of the year, the publication trend in this field was expected to continue to rise. Due to the time lag between publication and citation, the most cited publications were usually those published in earlier years. It has been estimated that the optimal time frame for a publication to achieve its maximum number of citations ranges from 3 to 7 years (Viedma et al., 2020). Therefore, the highest number of citations was 350, achieved in 2011, and it has been declining in the last two or three years.

Figure 1

Time Trend of Articles Published



Main Publications in the Research Field

Table 2 lists journals with the most publications on social inclusion in tourism. Some of the leading journals in this field, such as Sustainability, Journal of Sustainable Tourism, and Current Issues in Tourism, are ranked at the top of the list based on the number of articles they had published. The top three journals based on the average citations per document were Annals of Tourism Research, Transportation, and Journal of Sustainable Tourism, with 62.67, 56, and 39.5 citations per document, respectively. There is a slight correlation between the number of publications and citations, as only one of the core journals ranked among the top three in terms of citation count. The sources with the highest number of citations did not necessarily have the most impact on the research field.

Table 2

Journals with the Most Publications on Social Inclusion in Tourism

Journals	No. of Documents	Citations	Average of citations in the document
Sustainability (Switzerland)	10	87	8.7
Journal of Sustainable Tourism	8	316	39.5
Current Issues in Tourism	4	23	5.75
Social Inclusion	4	151	37.75
Tourism, Culture & Communication	3	27	9
Transportation	3	168	56
Annals of Tourism Research	3	188	62.67

Highly Cited Documents

Table 3 presents the five articles with the highest citation counts, totaling 675 citations. The most cited articles had focused on how tourism could foster the social inclusion of people with disabilities. The article with the highest citation count discussed the concept of inclusive tourism. Inclusive tourism can serve as a tool or catalyst for social inclusion, as it creates economic opportunities, enhances social cohesion and cultural diversity, and empowers marginalized communities (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018).

Table 3

List of the Five Most Cited Articles

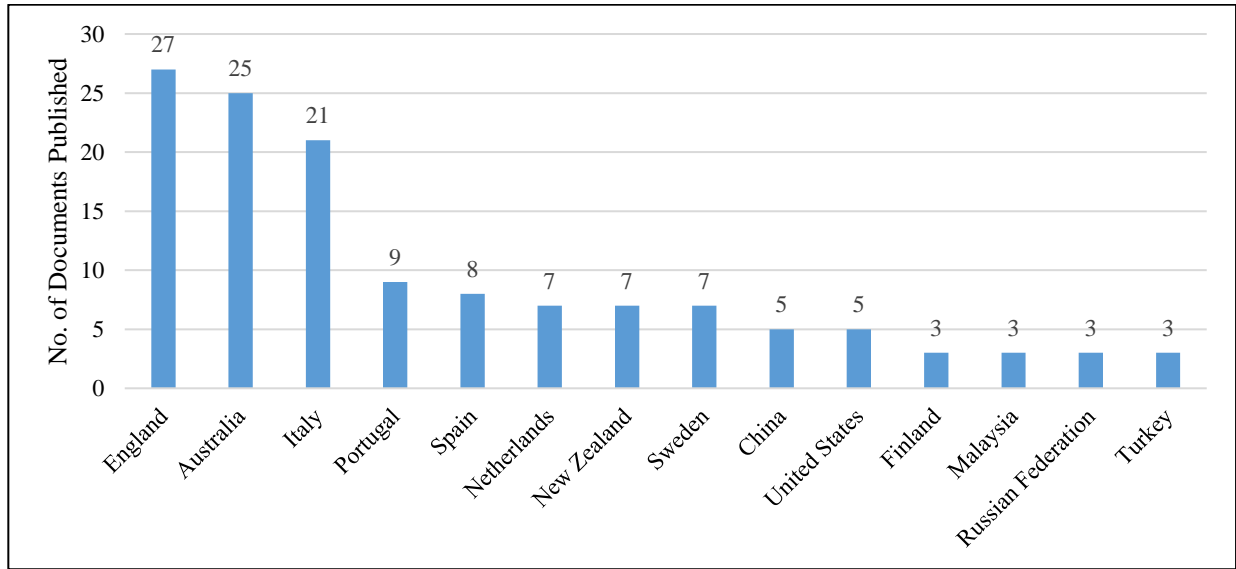
Title	Authors	Source	Date	Citations
Inclusive tourism development	Scheyvens, R., & Biddulph, R.	Tourism Geographies	2018	157
Social tourism and well-being in later life	Morgan, N., Pritchard, A., & Sedgley, D.	Annals of Tourism Research	2015	131
Contributions of tourism to social inclusion of persons with disability	Kastenholz, E., Eusébio, C., & Figueiredo, E.	Disability & Society	2015	89
Justice and ethics: Towards a new platform for tourism and sustainability	Jamal, T., & Higham, J.	Journal of Sustainable Tourism	2021	75
Behavioral intentions of disabled tourists for the use of peer-to-peer accommodations: An application of fsQCA	Olya, H. G., Altinay Gazi, Z., Altinay Aksal, F., & Altinay, M.	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	2018	54

Number of Country Publications

Figure 2 shows the most productive countries in social inclusion research in tourism from 2001 to 2023. During this period, England was the most prolific country with 27 articles, followed by Australia and Italy with 25 and 21 articles, respectively. It seems that Asian countries have yet to explore the topic of social inclusion in tourism.

Figure 2

Most Productive Countries in Terms of Documents Published



Analysis of the Science Map of Social Inclusion in Tourism

The analysis has provided an overview of the key themes in the field of social inclusion research in tourism. These findings were based on the analysis of a science map derived from the content analysis of published articles, as well as the identification of themes and their evolution in the literature for each period. For bibliometric analysis in SciMAT, keywords were chosen as the unit of analysis. Keywords identified by the database and the keywords defined by the authors were also used for the keyword analysis.

The following figure includes strategic diagrams for analyzing the themes of social inclusion in tourism for each period. Research themes are categorized into four groups based on their centrality and density. In strategic diagrams, the number inside or near each circle indicates the number of publications related to different topics (Abdullah, 2021). Table 4 presents the performance measures obtained for each theme and period, including the number of documents, H-index, and values of centrality and density. The analysis of the results obtained for each period is presented below.

Period 1 (2001–2011)

The strategic diagram in Figure 3a shows two research themes in 22 selected articles: PUBLIC-POLICY and TOURISM. PUBLIC-POLICY is a motor theme (i.e., exhibiting high centrality and density in the thematic map), and has been extensively researched in this period, while Tourism is one of the most developed and isolated themes. The performance analysis related to each theme is a complementary source of information presented in the diagram (see Table 4). It highlights the themes with the highest performance indicators, which during this period were PUBLIC-POLICY, with over 500 citations and an H-index of 8, compared to TOURISM.

Period 2 (2012-2015)

As illustrated in Figure 3b, SOCIAL-EXCLUSION became the motor theme in this period, supported by a well-developed literature. This indicates that research attention is increasingly focused on exclusion as a foundation for understanding social inclusion in tourism.

Period 3 (2016-2019)

According to the strategic diagram shown in Figure 3c, there were four themes in the 34 selected articles: INCLUSION as a motor theme, TRAVEL-BEHAVIOR and CULTURAL TOURISM as well-developed and isolated themes, which still did not have a significant role in the field of social inclusion in tourism in this period, and may need to be more connected to this field of knowledge. SUSTAINABLE-TOURISM is a transversal and general theme, but it has not developed well in this period and is likely to grow. INCLUSION and TRAVEL-BEHAVIOR themes had more citations and a higher H-index than others (Table 4).

Period 4 (2020-2023)

According to the strategic diagram in Figure 3d, seven themes were found in the 64 selected articles. Four of them were driving themes (DISABILITY, TOURISM-DEVELOPMENT, SUSTAINABLE-MOBILITY, and ECOTOURISM) and three of them were emerging themes (TOURISM, HERITAGE-TOURISM, and TRANSPORTATION-POLICY), which may either gain more attention in future research or fade away from the research area.

Figure 3

Strategic Diagrams of Research Themes across Four Periods: (a) 2001–2011, (b) 2012–2015, (c) 2016–2019, and (d) 2020–2023

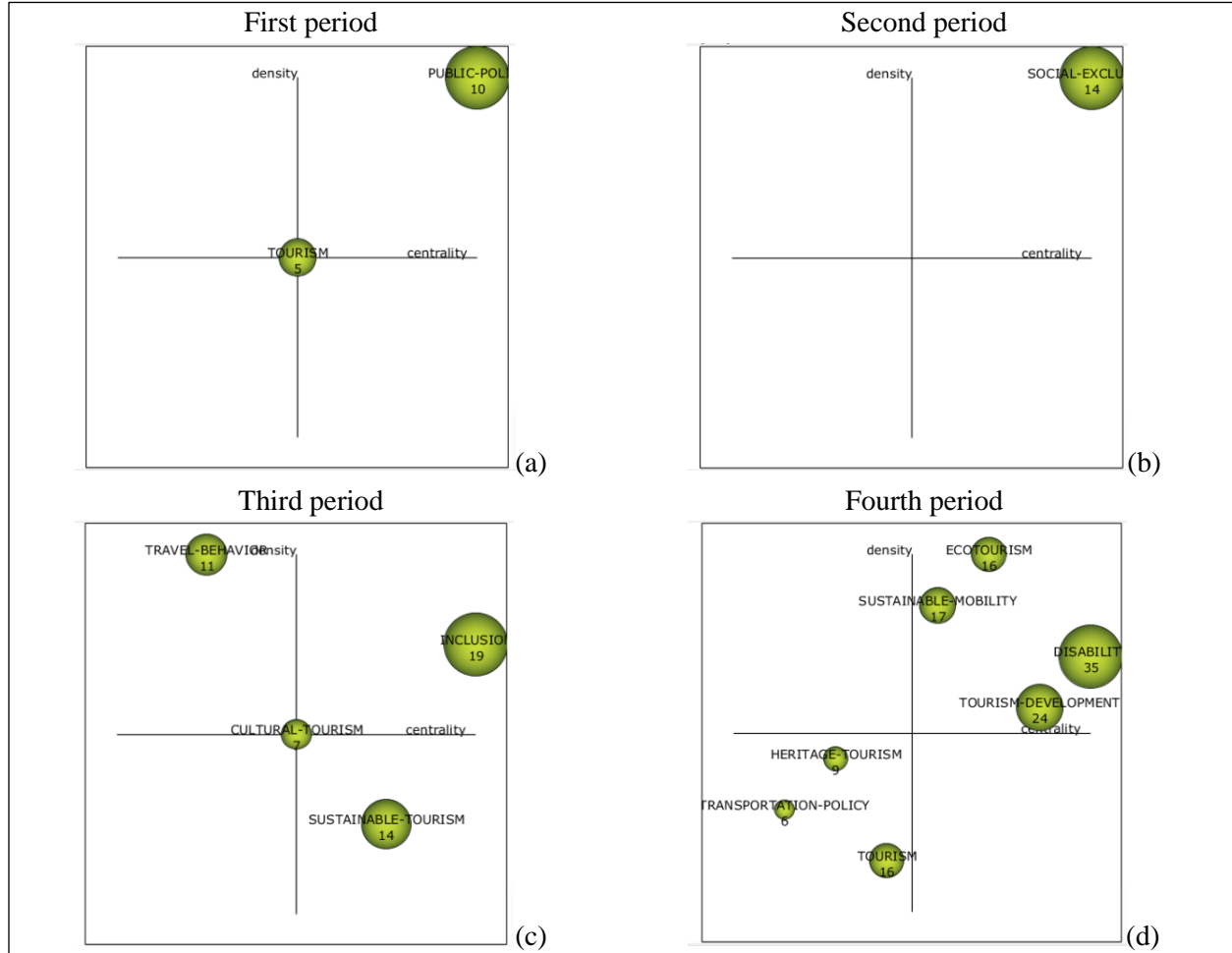


Table 4

Performance Analysis of the Four Periods

Name	No. of documents	Citations	H-index	Centrality	Density
First period (2001-2011)					
PUBLIC-POLICY	10	584	8	43.83	102.27
TOURISM	5	141	5	6.67	37.5
Second period (2012-2015)					
SOCIAL EXCLUSION	14	689	8	0	16.58
Third period (2016-2019)					
INCLUSION	19	554	12	70.78	91.95
TRAVEL-BEHAVIOR	11	546	10	20.06	116.2
CULTURAL-TOURISM	7	110	5	42.16	32.29

(continued)

Name	No. of documents	Citations	H-index	Centrality	Density
Fourth period (2020-2023)					
DISABILITY	35	400	9	132.78	67
ECOTOURISM	16	335	8	107.82	86.87
TOURISM- DEVELOPMENT	24	241	8	116.13	44.39
TOURISM	16	233	5	74.52	6.67
SUSTAINABLE- MOBILITY	17	80	5	103.16	78.13
HERITAGE-TOURISM	9	51	5	65.17	34.52
TRANSPORTATION- POLICY	6	40	4	21.72	11.11

Based on the results of the performance analysis in Table 4, the themes of DISABILITY, ECOTOURISM, and TOURISM-DEVELOPMENT had more citations and higher H-indexes than the other themes. Therefore, the thematic networks of these motor themes will be discussed, as they had also been considered in various other studies (citation?).

DISABILITY: Examined through its thematic network, this theme holds considerable importance. It is related to keywords such as working conditions, workplace, people with disabilities, leadership, travel behavior, and inclusive tourism. These are closely connected and have been the focus of many studies in recent years. The following will examine the relationship between this theme and the related keywords.

The tourism industry tends to cater more to non-disabled audiences. However, underrepresented populations, such as individuals with disabilities, are a growing market segment in hospitality and tourism, and they do make a significant economic contribution to the industry. These people are frequently overlooked in tourism research. Various researchers have discussed the recognition of people with disabilities in the tourism industry, focusing on their access to tourism places and services. However, this does not encompass a comprehensive perspective and the concept of inclusion, in which disabled travelers are acknowledged and actively involved in getting the benefits of participatory tourism. One way to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in tourism is to support inclusive tourism, which also enables their participation in tourism (Benjamin et al., 2021).

According to the UNWTO, the COVID-19 pandemic had a severe impact on people with disabilities, and therefore, recovery efforts should include enhancing accessibility for tourism destinations worldwide (De Pascale et al., 2023). Although research on the processes required to integrate disability considerations into tourism policy and development is expanding, the focus is more on the economic-environmental aspects of sustainability rather than the social aspects, especially for groups such as people with disabilities (Luu, 2021).

The issues raised are essential for achieving the SDGs in tourism. Still, there is very little tourism research on the work and life experiences of employees with disabilities and how inclusive initiatives affect them. Diversity in human resources and attention to people with disabilities are becoming strategies for the sustainability and competitiveness of organizations. In high-turnover industries like tourism and hospitality, implementing disability inclusion plans and employing workers with disabilities can lead to sustainable

competitive advantage. Sustainable employment in tourism, as one of the SDGs, offers opportunities for acceptable work and growth for everyone, including people with disabilities (De Pascale et al., 2023). Many social entrepreneurs in the hospitality industry have created long-term jobs for people with different disabilities, such as mental or intellectual disabilities, or vision and hearing impairments (Luu, 2021).

Travel behavior is another keyword related to disability. People with disabilities often face physical and economic barriers that make international travel a dream for most. These barriers also influence their choice of a tourist destination. However, people with or without disabilities have the same desire to travel and enjoy recreational tourism activities. Nevertheless, people with disabilities must pay more attention to details and overcome more challenges to participate in these activities (Kastenholz et al., 2015).

ECOTOURISM: This theme is related to keywords such as sustainable development, environmental economics, environmental protection, Sustainable Development Goals, economic growth, and tourism management within its thematic network.

Ecotourism projects should aim for social, environmental, and economic sustainability. A fundamental principle of ecotourism is the preservation of natural resources and the involvement of the local community in financial and developmental benefits. Sustainable ecotourism operations can benefit local communities by creating jobs, fostering participation, generating income, and protecting the environment (Mitrică et al., 2021).

TOURISM-DEVELOPMENT: This theme is related to keywords such as community and local participation, entrepreneurship, sustainability, and economic development within its thematic network.

Entrepreneurship is another theme closely related to tourism, particularly social entrepreneurship, which focuses on development. Numerous studies have examined various social and environmental issues that social entrepreneurship addresses in the tourism sector. Social enterprises have recently been involved in projects promoting ecotourism, sustainable, community-based, or inclusive tourism. Many of these innovative approaches support tourism development. Social tourism enterprises are committed to creating value for individuals and communities without compromising the environment and the principles which contribute to sustainable development (Dahles et al., 2020).

Local community participation is essential for tourism's long-term positive effects (Dahles et al., 2020). Enhancing the conditions of participation in society, especially for disadvantaged individuals, by increasing opportunities is fully aligned with the principles of social inclusion (Moualla & McPherson, 2019). Community participation and social inclusion are key to achieving social, cultural, and environmental sustainability goals (Tanrikul, 2023).

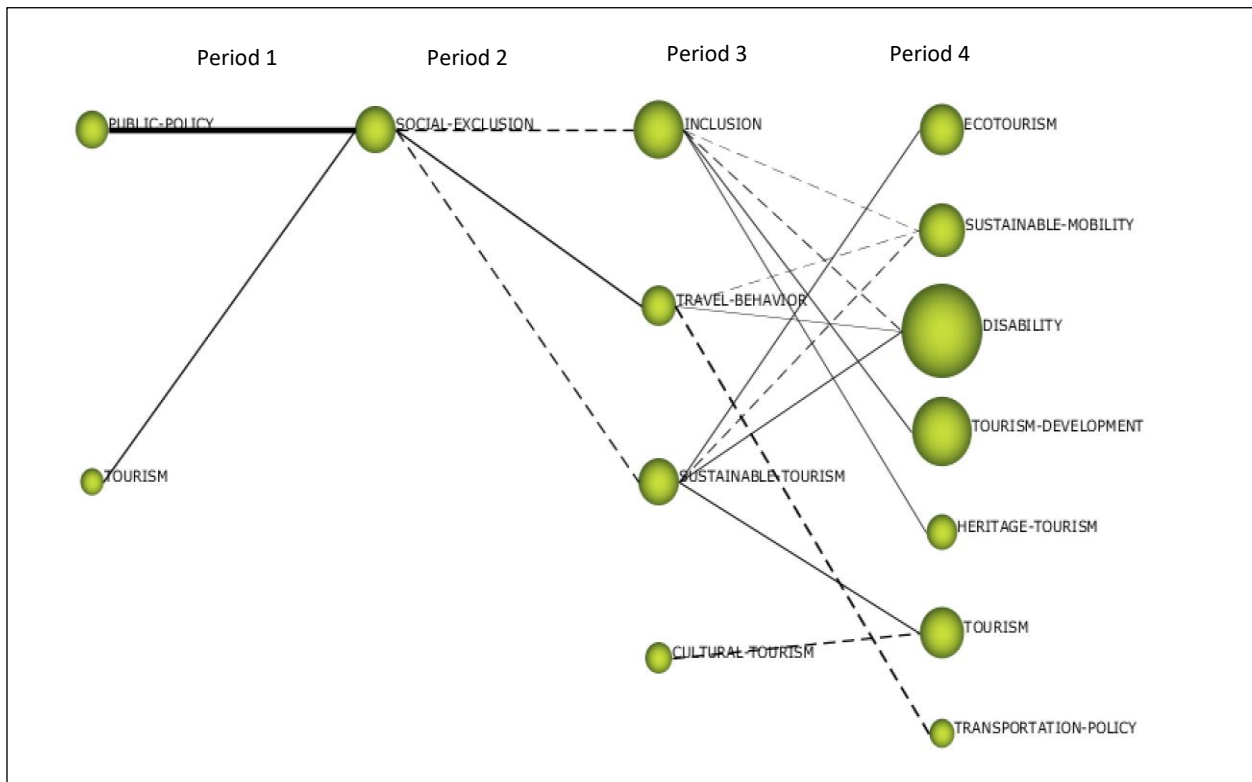
The themes identified in each period can be examined through their conceptual evolution, i.e., how similar keywords change over time (Cobo et al., 2012). Figure 4 shows the evolution of the themes of the research field through the analysis of the relationships between them. Based on the number of documents, PUBLIC-POLICY had the most documents from 2001 to 2011, and it was related to SOCIAL-EXCLUSION from 2012 to 2015. SOCIAL-EXCLUSION was connected to INCLUSION, TRAVEL-BEHAVIOR, and SUSTAINABLE-TOURISM themes in 2016-2019. During the period from 2020 to 2023, DISABILITY

was the theme with the largest number of documents, indicating that researchers in the field of social inclusion have paid significant attention to it.

The PUBLIC-POLICY theme from the first period strongly connects with the SOCIAL-EXCLUSION theme in the second period, which shows the continuity of related keywords. These two were among the driving themes in these two periods. The SOCIAL-EXCLUSION theme in the second period was also linked to TRAVEL-BEHAVIOR in the third period, a developing and isolated theme. Finally, TRAVEL-BEHAVIOR was associated with DISABILITY (motor theme) in the fourth period, which shared some common keywords.

Figure 4

Thematic Evolution Map



DISCUSSIONS

This study has employed a bibliometric analysis of the data by using SciMAT to examine the evolution of the research field of social inclusion in tourism from 2001 to 2023. Data was obtained from a search of documents available in the Scopus database. This is the first attempt to develop a systematic conceptual structure using a bibliometric analysis. The trends of the studies were analyzed using data from four different periods (2001-2011, 2012-2015, 2016-2019, and 2020-2023). The articles published in these periods were written by 159 researchers from 46 countries. The increase in publications in recent years indicates a growing interest in this significant issue within academic circles.

Beyond indicating growth in publication volume, the application of SciMAT allowed this study to identify the structural organization of the field, distinguishing between dominant, emerging, and underdeveloped research themes based on their centrality, density, and longitudinal evolution as summarized in Tables 4 and Figures 3 and 4. This represents a key methodological advantage over traditional narrative reviews.

The analysis has shown that DISABILITY, ECOTOURISM, and TOURISM-DEVELOPMENT had become motor themes in the last four years, and the number of studies on these topics published in international journals had increased steadily since 2016. These themes will likely continue to attract the scientific community's interest in the future.

The identification of these motor themes demonstrates one of the main benefits of using SciMAT, as it reveals not only frequently studied topics, but also those that structurally drive the field and connect multiple research streams. In this sense, SciMAT highlights disability as a central construct through which contemporary social inclusion research in tourism is increasingly framed.

From 2001 to 2015, the focus was on PUBLIC-POLICY and SOCIAL-EXCLUSION, and their relationship with social inclusion, including sustainable development, inadequate transportation, mobility, socio-economic impacts, and well-being, as well as travel behavior and tourism. Since 2016, there has been considerable interest in travel behavior, particularly in issues related to mobility and transportation, as well as attention to accessibility for people with disabilities, accessible tourism, and their working conditions. The importance of accessible tourism has been emphasized recently for three reasons. First, there is an increase in the number of tourists with disabilities. Second, it is necessary to identify this niche market for profit reasons. And third, it is essential to acknowledge the civil right to vacation for individuals with disabilities (Olya et al., 2018). Together, these factors underscore the fact that accessible tourism should be recognized not only as an economic opportunity, but also as a fundamental social responsibility, serving as a pathway to greater equity and inclusion within the tourism sector.

The science mapping results further show that this thematic shift was not abrupt, but rather cumulative, with earlier policy- and exclusion-oriented research providing the conceptual foundation for later studies focusing on mobility, accessibility, and disability. This evolutionary pattern, captured through the thematic evolution map (Figure 4), illustrates how knowledge in this field has progressively matured.

The results of the evolution map have revealed the key research themes that had contributed to this field: PUBLIC-POLICY, SOCIAL-EXCLUSION, TRAVEL-BEHAVIOR, and DISABILITY. After analyzing these themes and their evolution, the present study has examined their relationship based on the aforementioned keywords in each theme.

Importantly, the evolution map also reveals gaps in thematic continuity, indicating areas where research remains fragmented or weakly connected. These gaps point to limited integration between policy-oriented studies and empirical investigations of lived experiences, particularly for marginalized groups within tourism systems. These SciMAT-based findings provide an empirical foundation for interpreting the policy and practical dimensions of social inclusion discussed below, particularly in relation to mobility, accessibility, and disability.

Social inclusion is a vital component of sustainable development. However, sustainable development also requires careful policy-making to avoid social exclusion, and ensuring that policies are relevant to the community. Local authorities should collaborate with the private sector to develop and implement plans and policies that create long-term benefits for the community (Doyle, 2005). This highlights the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration in achieving inclusive and sustainable outcomes.

Social inclusion is needed when social exclusion happens. Policies should consider promoting a framework for social inclusion. This primarily means reducing or eliminating structural weaknesses, also known as “de-participation,” which is at the core of social exclusion (Vranken et al., 2003). To combat social exclusion and foster sustainable societies, individuals should be involved in activities and decision-making processes in an open, accessible, and transparent manner. Thus, meaningful participation becomes the key mechanism for reducing exclusion and fostering equality.

Politicians and policymakers need to listen to the experiences and opinions of people and encourage their participation, especially those striving for a more sustainable living environment. Building sustainable communities requires communication and collaboration with other individuals, groups, and stakeholders to strengthen the ‘Union for Sustainability.’ These elements are a major priority in developing social inclusion programs, especially for people with more severe impairments (McDowell & Mooney, 2001). Through the adoption of inclusive practices, policymakers can reduce inequalities and guarantee equitable benefits for even the most disadvantaged groups in their sustainability initiatives.

Government policies, such as improving transportation systems, can significantly impact the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability. Transportation systems can significantly impact people’s social well-being by providing access to education, healthcare, and social opportunities, while also influencing safety, equity, and social inclusion (Stanley et al., 2011). Thus, transport infrastructure must be understood as both a technical foundation and a social catalyst, directly influencing equity, inclusion, and long-term sustainability outcomes.

Transport is a key factor of social exclusion. Transport is not an independent dimension of social inclusion but is closely linked to other dimensions of social exclusion. Mobility deprivation is the process that prevents people from participating in society's economic, political, and social life due to their limited access to opportunities, services, and social networks. There is a relationship between increased mobility (travel/activities performed) and the reduced risk of social exclusion. This relationship is significant in urban and regional environments. Improved mobility indirectly contributes to potential improvements in well-being (Stanley et al., 2011; Hine, 2007; Bjerkan & Øvstedal, 2020; Stanley et al., 2019; Stanley & Stanley, 2013). In short, mobility should be understood not only as an enabler of social inclusion, but also as a fundamental determinant of individual well-being and the collective quality of life.

Mobility in tourism is also related to social inclusion in transportation. Therefore, it is important to understand social inclusion and exclusion within the context of a developing country and address the issue of transportation infrastructure development (Hussain et al., 2017). This perspective ensures that inclusion strategies are relevant to different socio-economic and geographic settings.

Transport is a vital part of the tourism experience for people with disabilities. However, research has not thoroughly explored the improvements in the transport sector, especially regarding accessibility and

transport costs (De Pascale et al., 2023). Nowadays, more attention is paid to the accessibility of transport systems, as they can enhance the access of people with disabilities to activities and increase social inclusion (Rosa et al., 2020). This demonstrates that transportation is not only a facilitator of tourism, but also a critical factor in achieving equity and justice.

People with disabilities have been on the policy agenda of governments for decades to ensure their equal participation in economic, social, and civil life. However, people with disabilities are still marginalized (Bjerkkan & Øvstedal, 2020). To achieve social inclusion in society, policymakers and tourism activists should consider the needs of people with disabilities, addressing the need to enhance tourism products specifically for them and increase their travel opportunities. Despite numerous policies addressing disability, the gender gap, and empowerment, further work is needed to establish an inclusive society (De Pascale et al., 2023). This gap between policy design and actual practice underscores the urgent need for stronger implementation mechanisms, ensuring that inclusion policies evolve from statements of intent to concrete actions and measurable outcomes.

As the social inclusion of people with disabilities and equal opportunities for all become increasingly important, accessible tourism has garnered more attention from researchers and governmental and non-governmental organizations in many countries over the last decade. Accessible tourism can help people with disabilities achieve social inclusion (Kastenholz et al., 2015; De Pascale et al., 2023). This underscores the role of accessible tourism as a bridge between disability rights and sustainable development, linking the recognition of equal rights with the creation of inclusive and sustainable opportunities.

Despite the growing emphasis on disability and accessibility, the SciMAT analysis indicates several neglected areas for future research. These include limited attention to developing and emerging destinations, a lack of intersectional approaches combining disability with gender, age, or socio-economic status, and insufficient research on employees with disabilities within tourism organizations. These blind spots are not immediately visible through narrative reviews but become evident through science mapping techniques.

Social inclusion as part of the social responsibility strategy benefits all stakeholders. However, researchers have largely overlooked the role of social responsibility in promoting social inclusion, and there is a notable lack of research on the concept and practice of social responsibility in this context (Miethlich & Oldenburg, 2019). The connection between education and social inclusion in the tourism labor market is a phenomenon that should be considered in the field of social responsibility (Dreher et al., 2013). Therefore, integrating social responsibility into tourism practices has the potential to advance both workforce equity and community well-being, thereby reinforcing tourism's role as a driver of inclusive and sustainable development.

Tourism activities can enhance the quality of life by providing a way to cope with society's challenges. They also generate hope for the future and foster social inclusion. As many researchers have suggested, social inclusion is an important concept that should be considered in tourism activities (Nkwanyana, 2020). Ultimately, embedding inclusion into tourism ensures that the sector contributes to both individual empowerment and collective sustainability.

Overall, the use of SciMAT has enabled this study to move beyond descriptive accounts of social inclusion and to systematically identify the conceptual structure, dominant trajectories, and research gaps within tourism scholarship. These insights provide a strong analytical foundation for the theoretical and practical implications discussed in the following sections.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study has advanced theoretical understanding by demonstrating how disability, accessible tourism, and mobility have evolved into central constructs in tourism research. It also clarifies the conceptual connections between public policy, transportation, sustainable development, and social equity. Furthermore, applying bibliometric analysis provides a systematic approach to mapping conceptual structures, enhancing theory-building in tourism and related fields of research in the social sciences. In particular, the study presents a coherent framework that integrates fragmented prior research and provides a longitudinal perspective on the evolution of social inclusion in tourism.

The findings have provided practical guidance for policymakers, destination managers, and industry stakeholders. Accessible tourism should be recognized as both a market opportunity and a social responsibility. Investments in transport infrastructure, inclusive tourism services, and cross-sector collaboration can improve accessibility, reduce inequalities, and enhance the well-being of marginalized groups. For practitioners, the growing demand for accessible tourism represents a potential source of increased revenue and a pathway to achieving broader social justice objectives. Beyond the industry, the results offer insights for NGOs and educational institutions, highlighting the importance of integrating inclusion strategies into workforce development and training programs to foster equitable participation in the tourism labor market.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The scope of this study has been limited to documents indexed in Scopus, which therefore, might have excluded relevant publications in other databases. Another limitation is the reliance on English-language publications, which may give rise to the issue of language bias. In addition, the SciMAT process involved data preprocessing, including the merger and removal of specific keywords, which may as a consequence subtly influence the results. Furthermore, bibliometric mapping captures structural relationships between keywords and citations, but does not fully capture contextual meanings and narratives embedded in the literature.

A deeper content analysis of the articles in each topic cluster, using text analysis software such as NVivo, would allow researchers to go beyond bibliometric indicators and examine the actual substance of the studies. Such an approach could reveal the underlying concepts, narratives, and theoretical perspectives embedded in each cluster, providing richer insights into how themes are constructed and connected. This is especially needed because bibliometric mapping alone shows the structural relationships between keywords and citations, but does not fully explain the context, meaning, and depth of a research. Therefore, combining bibliometric mapping with qualitative content analysis could help future research better interpret the

significance of each theme, identify overlooked issues, and propose more informed directions for advancing the field.

Overall, despite some limitations this study has provided much more valuable contributions. It may direct researchers towards areas that require further investigation within the context of social inclusion in the tourism industry. The findings reveal the evolution of research themes and trends related to the topic at hand over time. Policymakers can utilize the findings of this bibliometric analysis to develop effective policies that address social inclusion challenges within the tourism sector. Furthermore, through analyzing prevailing research trends, this study offers valuable insights into potential future avenues for the field. Overall, the study not only traces the intellectual trajectory of this domain, but also lays a solid foundation for advancing inclusive and sustainable tourism research in the future.

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