

Mapping The Global Research Landscape Of Destination Branding And Ecotourism (2014–2024): A Bibliometric Analysis

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Abstract

This study aims to map the scholarly development of research on the integration of destination branding and ecotourism within global literature from 2014 to 2024. Using a bibliometric analysis based on Scopus data, the study traces publication trends, author and journal productivity, country-level collaboration, and the thematic structures that emerge in international research. A total of 205 articles meeting the selection criteria were analyzed using Biblioshiny in the Bibliometrix package in R Studio, following stages of data cleaning, metadata standardization, and keyword as well as citation-network mapping. The findings indicate a significant rise in publications connecting destination branding with ecotourism, with the highest growth recorded in 2024. Keywords such as ecotourism, destination image, and sustainable tourism dominate the thematic network, while the thematic map reveals three major clusters: the integration of branding and sustainability, tourist experiences and emotional attachment, and the role of ecotourism in shaping destination image. These findings suggest that global research is shifting toward a multidisciplinary approach that positions

conservation, local identity, and ecological experience as essential components of destination branding. Nevertheless, methodological limitations such as reliance on metadata, language constraints, and the use of a single database restrict the generalizability of the results. Thus, this study offers an initial overview of the knowledge structure in this field and opens avenues for further research that combines bibliometrics with content analysis to gain a more comprehensive understanding of its conceptual dynamics.

Keywords: *Destination Branding; Ecotourism; Sustainable Tourism; Tourism Communication; Bibliometric Analysis.*

1. Introduction

The concept of destination branding that originated from a simple marketing concept has now developed into an approach that emphasizes multidimensional strategies, including reputation, identity, and perception in tourism competition in the global market (Ruiz Real et al., 2020). Destination branding is understood not merely as a promotional activity but as a communication strategy that shapes a destination's values and identity. In ecotourism, principles such as conservation, environmental education, and community empowerment require explicit communication to influence public and visitor perceptions. Accordingly, the integration of destination branding and ecotourism becomes essential when ecological messages are conveyed consistently through narratives, symbols, and destination identities, allowing conservation values to be embedded both in practice and in the destination's overall image.

Goffman (1974) framing theory, later refined by Entman (1993) offers a basis for understanding how destination meaning is shaped through the selective framing of messages. Within ecotourism, such framing is crucial for communicating conservation, ecological education, and environmental protection in ways that guide visitors' interpretations. This view corresponds with Cox (2013) Environmental communication theory emphasizes communication's pragmatic role in motivating public action and shaping collective environmental meanings. The place branding framework proposed by Anholt (2007) and further refined by Kavaratzis et al. (2005) Argues that destination identity is formed through narratives and symbols communicated consistently to the public. Within this view, ecological values, natural authenticity, and community involvement can be embedded into a destination's identity, enabling conservation to become a core element of the image presented to visitors.

Amadia (2020) has outlined a branding concept for local destinations that emphasizes the communication of conservation narratives and local

identity. However, the study is primarily focused on the design of destination branding as a single, standalone construct, so an in-depth analysis of how destination branding evolves within ecotourism in the global literature has yet to be incorporated. Therefore, further mapping within the scope of international research on this theme remains necessary.

In the tourism industry, ecotourism is a concept that is currently getting more and more popular on a global scale. The International Ecotourism Society (2015) defines ecotourism as a natural tourism activity responsible for preserving the environment and the welfare of the local population, involving interpretation and education. United Nations World Tourism Organization UNWTO (2002) also explained that ecotourism is an activity carried out with the motivation of observing nature and local culture, which emphasizes education, conservation, and community welfare.

Although destination branding and ecotourism are significant areas within tourism studies, they have largely developed as separate scholarly streams, with destination branding emphasizing global marketing and ecotourism focusing on conservation and sustainability. Only a small body of research has examined how these domains intersect, particularly in communicating conservation and sustainability values through destination branding. This separation highlights a conceptual gap in integrating both fields within tourism research.

Based on the mapping of 205 Scopus-indexed articles published between 2014 and 2024, this study is grounded in a central problem: research on destination branding and ecotourism has largely been treated as two separate fields, with their theoretical linkages and research patterns not yet articulated within a unified and coherent knowledge framework, particularly in the global literature. Although publication trends indicate a significant increase across several themes, the systematic relationship between destination branding strategies and conservation values remains insufficiently mapped.

Much of the existing literature tends to position destination branding primarily within marketing and image-related studies, while ecotourism is predominantly discussed from conservation and sustainability perspectives. Consequently, a comprehensive integration of these two domains is required to clarify how destination branding functions as a medium for sustainability communication within ecotourism governance, which forms the basis of the problem statement of this study.

The urgency of this study lies in the need to offer an integrated overview of research trajectories, thematic orientations, and the intellectual structure of destination branding and ecotourism. Although bibliometric evidence

shows a substantial growth in publications, this expansion has not been matched by a systematic understanding of how the two fields intersect and develop conceptually. The lack of coherent mapping and limited cross-study integration has resulted in a fragmented literature, constraining scholars' ability to identify dominant themes, research gaps, and future directions. Accordingly, this study provides an empirical foundation to clarify disciplinary dynamics, collaboration patterns, and global topic evolution, thereby strengthening the academic positioning of destination branding and ecotourism and offering a strategic reference for more focused future research.

Several studies indicate that developing destination branding strategies within ecotourism is essential, particularly strategies that highlight environmental conservation values and sustainability principles. This aligns with the findings of Izzah & Islam (2024) who note that "branding that emphasizes ecological, educational, and conservation values provides another attraction while creating awareness of mangrove sustainability." Thus, emphasizing ecological dimensions through branding serves as a key factor in strengthening the image of conservation-based destinations.

Integrating destination branding and ecotourism enables a deeper understanding of how sustainability messages can be communicated within tourism. A bibliometric approach is needed to map conceptual patterns, research networks, and thematic developments that remain insufficiently explored. This integration not only strengthens theoretical discussions on tourism communication and destination branding but also offers an empirical basis for developing sustainability-oriented branding strategies.

This study links destination branding and ecotourism by mapping their scientific development in global literature from 2014 to 2024 through a Scopus-based bibliometric analysis. It examines publication trends, collaboration patterns, and the emergence of key themes and conceptual relationships within the research network. The study posits that both fields have grown steadily, with conservation emerging as a central theme, and that intersections between the two areas are increasingly visible through keyword patterns and the evolving knowledge structure.

Scientific mapping that elucidates the relationship between destination branding and ecotourism remains scarce, leaving the thematic linkages across these domains insufficiently examined and the positionality of integrative studies not clearly defined. This limitation forms the basis of the present research problem and indicates a methodological gap, namely, the absence of a single comprehensive intellectual map.

Ritonga et al. (2024) Highlight the role of branding and ecotourism communication policies in shaping public awareness of environmental issues, yet they also point to a discrepancy between the intensity of governmental communication efforts and the level of public understanding. As the study places greater emphasis on local dynamics, further analytical development is required to examine how ecotourism communication issues and sustainable branding strategies are addressed within the global literature.

Bibliometric analysis plays a crucial role in examining the relationship between destination branding and ecotourism. Through this method, the development of relevant literature can be comprehensively mapped, enabling a clearer understanding of how destination branding functions as a communicative medium within ecotourism to strengthen destination image, particularly one grounded in conservation and sustainability values.

The bibliometric literature on ecotourism remains largely concentrated on themes of conservation and environmental responsibility, as demonstrated by the thematic clusters identified by Khanra et al. (2021) and Dinç et al. (2023) Including ecological preservation, carbon footprint, and community empowerment. Despite steady growth in related publications, cross-disciplinary integration between ecotourism and destination branding remains limited. This highlights the need for further examination of their intersection, particularly in understanding how conservation-oriented branding contributes to the broader development of ecotourism and supports sustainable tourism communication.

Literature on destination branding, as examined by Çolakoğlu (2023) and Phung et al. (2023) This indicates that research remains largely centered on image, marketing, and tourist experience. Collectively, these findings suggest that considerations of conservation and sustainability have yet to become central elements within destination branding studies, despite their potential to communicate conservation values in ecotourism.

Bibliometric analysis is one of the proper methods in understanding and knowing the whole research field picture (Donthu et al., 2021). Bibliometric analysis is indispensable in tracing research trends, academic actors who have a role, productive institutions, and scientific collaboration between countries, including understanding the topics that develop in both dimensions. This study analyzes various studies that discuss the dimension of destination branding in ecotourism based on data from Scopus with the help of Biblioshiny software in Bibliometrix; hence, it can be visualized how the network graph of emerging topics and keywords illustrates how the two dimensions, namely destination branding and ecotourism, intersect.

This study contributes by presenting a comprehensive bibliometric mapping of destination branding and ecotourism research from 2014 to 2024 within the global research landscape, based on an analysis of 205 Scopus-indexed articles. Its primary contribution lies in integrating two domains that have often been examined separately, destination marketing perspectives and sustainability-oriented studies, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of the position of destination branding within the context of ecotourism. The bibliometric findings provide an empirical foundation for identifying dominant themes, underexplored research areas, and emerging directions, thus substantially enhancing conceptual understanding and offering a scholarly reference for researchers seeking to further develop studies at the intersection of destination branding and ecotourism.

2. Method

The research methodology employed in this study follows bibliometric analytical procedures commonly applied in literature mapping research. Bibliometric analysis makes it possible to find out the most widely used keywords, the literature that is widely cited and published, the countries that publish a lot, international collaborations, the relationship between keywords, the most cited authors, the correlation between authors, as well as various main topics in research (Lahnech & Chami, 2025).

The research articles included in this study were sourced from the Scopus database, as it offers broad disciplinary coverage and facilitates seamless processing using various tools commonly employed in bibliometric studies (Klarin, 2024). The document search was conducted on 4 June 2025, with the retrieval limited to publications up to 2024 to avoid bias from current-year articles that may not yet be fully indexed. A ten-year span, from 2014 to 2024, was selected because a decade provides a sufficiently representative period for observing the development of the field without including older literature that is no longer relevant to the present context.

The document search was conducted using predetermined keywords to capture the range of terminology commonly employed in the literature. Terms such as destination branding, place branding, destination image, destination positioning, and tourism branding were included to reflect the broader conceptualizations of identity formation and destination perception. Meanwhile, keywords including ecotourism, sustainable tourism, nature-based tourism, green tourism, and conservation tourism were used to represent the spectrum of environmentally oriented tourism practices that form the core of ecotourism scholarship. The use of this

diverse set of keywords was intended to ensure comprehensive search coverage, allowing the retrieval of studies that employ varying terminological conventions. Conversely, bibliometric-related keywords were deliberately excluded to filter out bibliometric or literature review papers, as the present study specifically aims to map empirical research that provides original data or primary findings.

The search was further restricted to the social sciences domain, English language publications, and journal articles. These limitations were applied to ensure a consistent level of academic quality across all selected works and to maintain topical alignment within socio-cultural and managerial perspectives, thereby avoiding discrepancies that may arise across different publication types. Based on these selection criteria, a total of 205 articles were identified as relevant to the two central dimensions of this study, namely destination branding and ecotourism.

Article selection was limited to publications written in English, based on the consideration that English serves as the principal medium of scientific communication in the international scholarly arena. This restriction also ensured that all analysed articles adhered to comparable academic standards. Although this criterion may introduce a degree of language bias, several mitigation strategies were applied. The search procedure was repeatedly validated by reviewing keyword variations and confirming that the core patterns of the findings did not shift substantially. Moreover, most influential studies on destination branding and ecotourism are indeed published in English-language international journals, suggesting that any potential impact of this limitation on the results is likely minimal.

All selected articles exported from the Scopus database in CSV format were subsequently processed through a multi-stage data cleaning procedure. This included the removal of duplicate records, the standardization of author names and affiliations, as well as the harmonization of journal titles and other relevant metadata. The keyword fields were also carefully reviewed to consolidate variations in spelling or terminology that referred to the same conceptual constructs, thereby preventing unnecessary fragmentation in the network analysis. To ensure reliability, an inter-reviewer consistency check was conducted by two independent evaluators. This step was undertaken to minimize potential selection bias and to guarantee that all inclusion decisions aligned with the predefined criteria in a consistent and transparent manner.

The bibliometric analysis in this study was conducted using Biblioshiny within the Bibliometrix package in R Studio, selected for its comprehensive functions that integrate data processing, visualization, and network mapping within a single analytical environment. The analytical capability

of R Studio enables a deeper identification of patterns and relationships that cannot be fully captured through network analysis alone, as certain details may otherwise remain indistinct (Laila et al., 2024). The procedures included calculating annual publication trends, assessing source and author productivity, and examining citation distributions such as total citations, citations per year, and local citation scores (LCS). The study also analysed the productivity of institutions and countries, as well as collaboration networks through co-authorship structures and affiliated institutions. All metrics were subsequently visualised in the form of tables and graphs to illustrate the dominant actors and publication channels within the field.

In mapping thematic structures and knowledge frameworks, the analysis draws on keyword examination and citation network mapping. Keyword frequency is used to identify the most dominant topics, while co-occurrence and co-citation analyses are applied to reveal the conceptual dimensions that emerge within the thematic landscape. The list of articles containing Global Citation Scores and Local Citation Scores is also presented to assess the scholarly influence of each study.

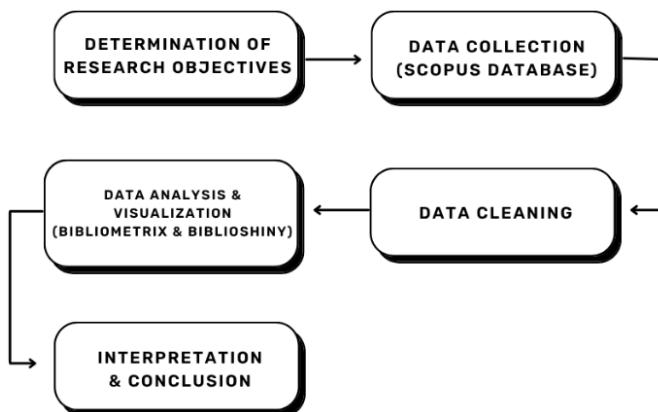


Figure 1. Research flowchart

3. Results

3.1 Analysis of the number of papers and journals published

In the last 10 years, from 2014 to 2024 (see figure 1), the number of article publications that integrate the ecotourism dimension and destination branding has grown significantly, with an average annual growth of 23.11%. Hence, the figure illustrating the research potential of these two dimensions can be pretty large.

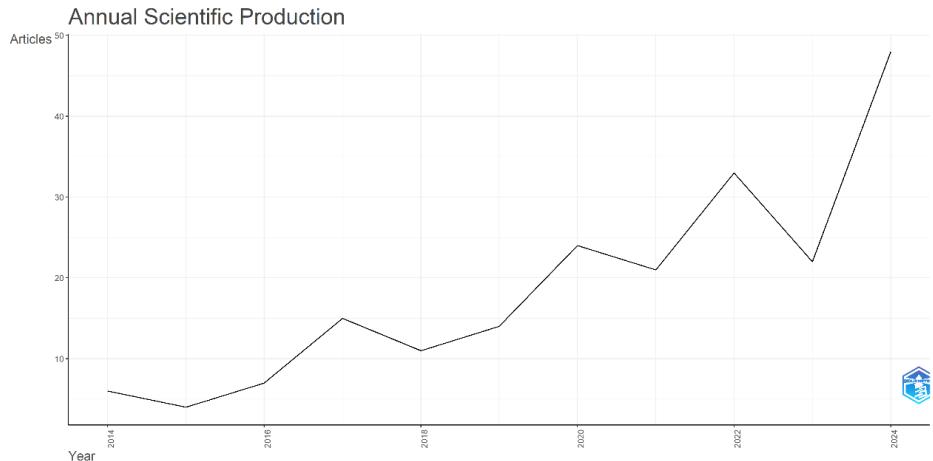


Figure 2. Annual Scientific Production on branding destination and ecotourism 2014-2024

In the development of research trends and the number of publications that integrate the dimensions of destination branding and ecotourism, it can be seen how the scientific production development in the last 10 years period, from 2014 to 2024 (see figure 2), The graph illustrates a non linear pattern of development, in the early phase, from 2014 to 2016, publication activity remained very limited, however, by 2017 a notable increase began to appear. The peak occurred in 2024, with a total of 48 published articles. The compound annual growth rate (CAGR) from the beginning to the end of the period reached 23 percent per year. Annual fluctuations in publication levels were likely influenced by several external factors, including journal editorial cycles or shifts in policy developments and global phenomena.

Several influential keywords, such as destination image, sustainable tourism, ecotourism, and destination branding, indicate that research over the past decade has evolved from focusing primarily on image and marketing-oriented studies toward a stronger integration of destination branding with sustainability issues in ecotourism. Changes in publication volume occurred both quantitatively and qualitatively, with a clear shift toward framing approaches that link destination marketing with conservation values and sustainable development.

Table 1. Ten journals and the number of published papers on the h-index

Sources	Articles	H_indeks
Sustainability (Switzerland)	50	19
Journal Of Sustainable Tourism	17	15
Geojournal Of Tourism And Geosites	12	5
Current Issues In Tourism	11	7
Asia Pacific Journal Of Tourism Research	8	7
Journal Of Ecotourism	7	6
Annals Of Tourism Research	4	4

From 2014 to 2024, in the last ten years, journal publications with the theme of destination branding and ecotourism mostly come from the research sectors on environmental studies, sustainable tourism studies, and the field of tourism and hospitality, "Sustainability" (Switzerland) became the most productive journal with the 50 articles produced, followed by the "Journal Of Sustainable Tourism" with 17 articles and the "Geojournal Of Tourism And Geosites" with 12 articles. In terms of scientific influence, Sustainability (Switzerland) has the highest H index of 19, which the Journal of Sustainable Tourism also follows with an H index of 15, and in the next position is occupied by "Current Issues in Tourism and Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research" with the same H index number of 7.

Sustainability (Switzerland) appears as the journal with the highest number of articles within this topic. In addition, *Sustainability* is generally characterized by a substantial volume of publications and a broad, multidisciplinary scope, which means that the articles it publishes are not always centred on a strongly defined thematic focus. Several journals, such as the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* or *Current Issues in Tourism*, operate within a more focused and thematic domain, allowing the proportion of articles related to destination branding and ecotourism within these outlets to demonstrate clearer thematic alignment. Nevertheless, the data in the table refer specifically to documents directly related to destination branding and ecotourism, regardless of the overall publication volume of each journal. It should be emphasized that a high number of articles does not automatically indicate strong thematic influence, thereby requiring careful and critical interpretation.

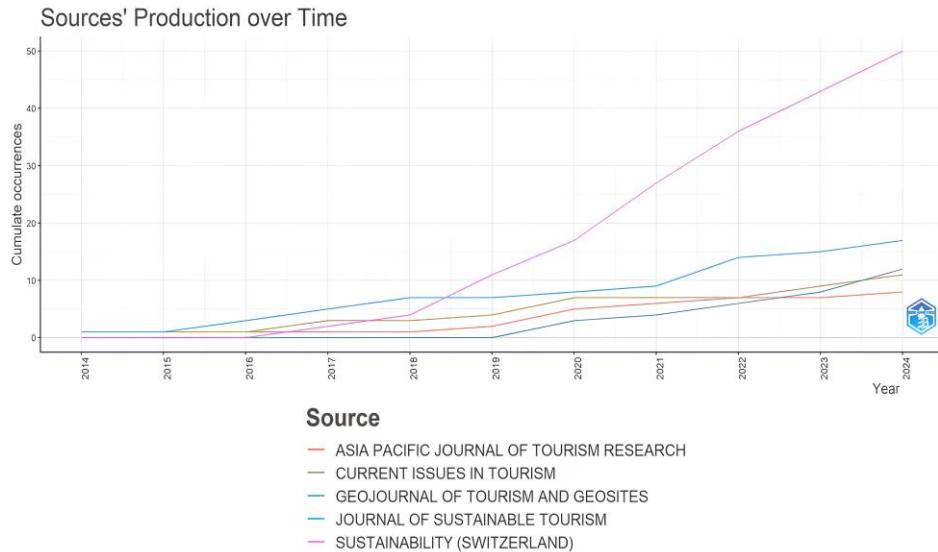


Figure 3. Affiliation relationship between published papers and journals

In terms of the publication total in the top five journals, “Sustainability” (Switzerland) has shown a consistent increase in the last ten years in terms of publications, but “Sustainability” (Switzerland) began to engage in 2017, which produced only two articles and reached a peak of 50 articles in 2024. Then, the “Journal of Sustainable Tourism” has a stable publication pattern that started in 2014 with 17 publications in 2024. Meanwhile, the “Geojournal Of Tourism And Geosites” carried out publication activities in 2020, which started with three articles, with an increase of 12 articles until 2024.

The divergent growth trajectories across journals indicate that studies on destination branding have increasingly evolved toward a more interdisciplinary approach, moving beyond discussions limited solely to promotion and marketing. A growing number of scholarly works on destination branding now incorporate examinations of destination image in relation to environmental issues, sustainability, and spatial contexts. This shift reflects an expanding conceptual scope, transitioning from conventional destination marketing studies toward a more complex understanding of how destinations are formed, perceived, and managed in response to ecological changes and the rising demand for sustainable tourism.

3.2 Analysis of key researchers, institutions, and countries

There were 652 authors in the overall document analysis regarding the publication of the destination branding integration and ecotourism

topics from 2014 to 2024. Thirty-five authors have contributed significantly by publishing articles twice or more, and 590 authors, or 94.4% of the total, have only published one article.

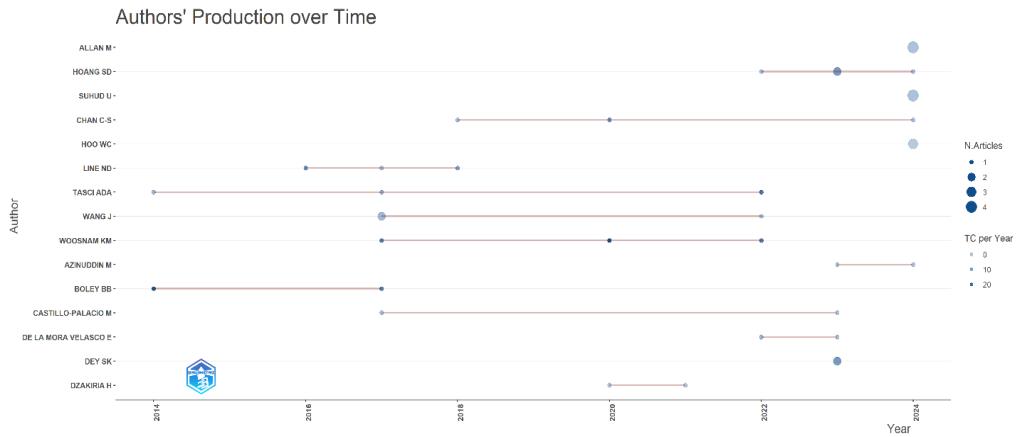


Figure 4. Authors' Production over Time

Most researchers including Suhud U, Chan C-S, and Hoo WC (see figure 4) in the last two years have created intense article publication activities, authors such as Hoang SD, Woosnam KM and Tasci Ada have shown a relatively high trend of article growth and annual citations, the authors with the highest number of publications are Allan M, Hoang SD, and Suhud U with four articles each. The authors' contribution chart illustrates that most researchers were active only within specific periods, indicating that studies on destination branding within the context of ecotourism have yet to be supported by a robust and continuous research network. Many authors who examine both topics tend to be connected through stronger associations with adjacent fields such as marketing, tourism, or geography, suggesting that their engagement in this area remains episodic. The limited number of researchers exhibiting a sustained production curve further reflects that this field still requires consistent scholarly contributions in order to establish a solid theoretical foundation.

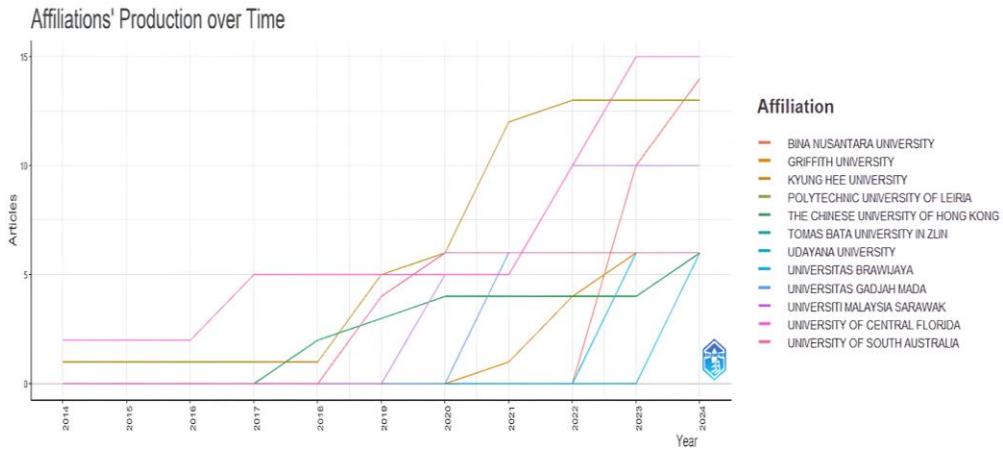


Figure 5. Cumulative number of articles published by top institutions

There are several main research institutions in the publication of destination branding and ecotourism topics in the period 2014 to 2024, top five of them are the University Of Central Florida with a total of 15 article publications, then there is Bina Nusantara University with 14 article publications, Kyung Hee University with 13 publications, Malaysia Sarawak University with 10 publications, and University Of South Australia with six publications.

The institutional contribution patterns illustrated in the graph not only reflect differences in publication volume but also indicate the academic orientations of each institution. Several universities, such as the University of Central Florida and Kyung Hee University, have directed their publication trajectories toward positioning sustainability issues, destination image, and visitor experience as dominant research themes. Meanwhile, the rising number of publications from Bina Nusantara University reflects a surge of emerging scholarship on sustainable tourism interest, particularly within the Asian context. The publication activity of Malaysia Sarawak University centers on the interconnection between place identity, conservation, and branding strategies, which represents one of its regional strengths. Observing the movement of publication trends in the graph reveals not only which institutions are most productive, but also how research directions have evolved, developments that are inherently shaped by each institution's social environment, industry needs, and geographical context.

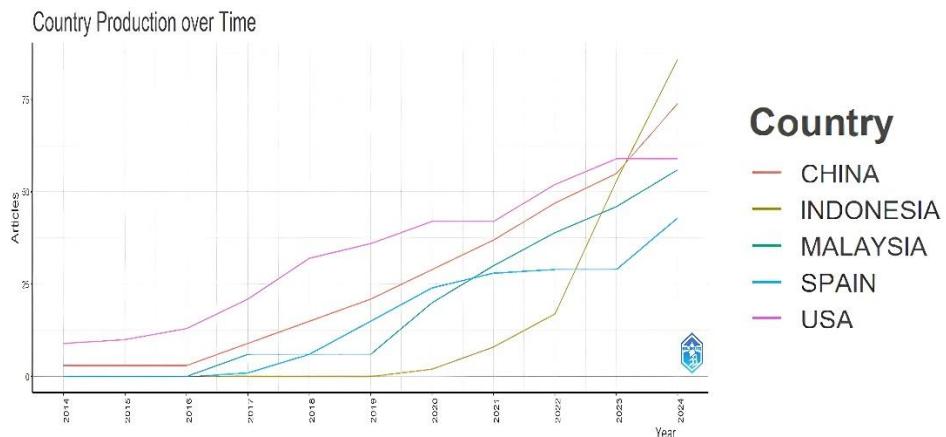


Figure 6. The top five countries publishing papers

From 2014 to 2024, Indonesia recorded the highest publication at 86 articles, followed by China with 74 articles, the USA with 59 articles, Malaysia with 56 articles, and Spain with 43 articles. USA has become the most consistent country in publication growth every year by touching an average publication rate of 3.4 articles per year, while China has an average publication of 26.9 articles per year, Malaysia and Spain have reached an average of 19 publications and 15.9 articles per year, while in 2020 Indonesia has finally made publication activities magnificently by experiencing a drastic surge in publication over the last five years by touching the number 15.1 for the average article publication per year.

In the development of research, the increasing trend of publications is also closely linked to the regional dynamics of each country. In the United States, the growth of sustainability-related research aligns with the country's strong tradition in tourism marketing and tourist behavior studies (Acharya et al., 2023). The significant expansion of research in China corresponds with the rising interest in sustainable tourism across Asia, where issues related to conservation and nature-based destination management have become central concerns (Kong et al., 2025). The surge observed in Indonesia can be understood within the context of growing attention to ecotourism, village branding, and the strengthening of local identity across various regions (Ardiansyah et al., 2025). Thus, the upward trend in publication growth also reflects how policy contexts, industry needs, and destination development priorities shape the research focus in each country.

3.3 Analysis of cited papers

Table 2. Top 5 Global Citation Scores (GCS)

Paper	DOI	Total Citations	TC per Year	Normalized TC
		ns		
Boley Bb, 2014, Ann Tour Res	10.1016/j.annals.2014.08.005	315	26.25	2.54
Jamal T, 2014, J Sustainable Tour	10.1080/09669582.2013.786084	268	22.33	2.16
Woosnam, K.M., 2020, J Sustainable Tour	10.1080/09669582.2019.1708920	166	27.67	5.19
Andrades L, 2017, Tour Manage	10.1016/j.tourman.2017.05.008	149	16.56	3.40
Jacobsen Jks, 2019, Ann Tour Res	10.1016/j.annals.2019.02.011	147	21.00	3.01

The search activity on destination branding and ecotourism topics with the Scopus database from 2014 to 2024 can be seen in some of the most cited scientific articles globally (see Table 2). The list of articles was generated through an automatic ranking process in Biblioshiny, which uses the Global Citation Score (GCS) indicator. The five articles with the highest scores were selected from a total of 205 documents as markers of the strongest contributions within the global citation network. This selection was entirely objective and not based on personal preference, as it relied on citation metrics extracted directly from Scopus metadata, including Total Citations, Total Citations per Year, and Normalized Total Citations. Presenting only the top five articles was an academic consideration, as displaying too many highly cited works could dilute the analytical focus. Selecting the five highest-ranked publications represents a proportional approach to highlighting the studies that have genuinely served as principal references in the development of this research field.

The five articles reveal three overarching themes emerging from the thematic analysis. Boley et al. (2014) and Jamal & Camargo (2014) Underscore that issues of empowerment, community participation, and social justice constitute essential foundations in destination management, particularly within tourism frameworks that emphasize sustainability values. (Woosnam et al., 2020) Demonstrates that destination image is shaped not only by physical attributes but also by community engagement and the social integration that occurs between visitors and local residents.

Andrades & Dimanche (2017) and Jacobsen et al. (2019) Highlight the interrelationships among travel quality, competitive advantage, visitor management, and destination governance within the context of global competitiveness. Collectively, insights drawn from these five influential studies suggest that impactful research within the domains of destination branding and ecotourism is grounded in social interconnectedness, authentic visitor experiences, and an integrated sustainability-oriented approach.

Table 3. Top 5 Local Citation Scores (LCS)

Document	DOI	Year	Loc al Cita tion s	Glob al Cita tions	LC/ GC Rati o (%)	Norma lized Local Cita tio ns	Norma lized Global Cita tio ns
Lee Sw, 2020, Asia Pac J Tour Res	10.1080/ 10941665 .2020.171 3185	2020	9	133	6.77	13.50	4.16
Woosnam, K.M., 2020, J Sustainable Tour	10.1080/ 09669582 .2019.170 8920	2020	5	166	3.01	7.50	5.19
Mohaidin Z, 2017, Int J Tour Cities	10.1108/I JTC-11- 2016- 0049	2017	3	60	5.00	5.63	1.37
Jacobsen Jks, 2019, Ann Tour Res	10.1016/ J.Annals. 2019.02.0 11	2019	3	147	2.04	14.00	3.01
Strzelecka M, 2017, Ann Tour Res	10.1016/ J.Annals. 2017.06.0 02	2017	3	144	2.08	5.63	3.28

The table above (see Table 3) shows several articles that have been widely cited locally in the study on destination branding and ecotourism. To maintain analytical focus, only the five articles with the highest Local Citation Scores are presented, based on the automatic ranking generated by Biblioshiny rather than any subjective selection. The metric reflects how frequently each article is cited by other documents within this research dataset. Limiting the list to five documents ensures that the discussion remains concise and concentrated, allowing the presented works to genuinely represent the most influential contributions in the entire dataset.

The high Local Citation Scores of an article not only indicate the frequency with which it is cited, but also reflect its position as a dominant scholarly reference within the same field of study. In the context of destination branding and ecotourism, such a position signifies that the article functions as a conceptual guide that shapes the analytical framework for understanding the development of issues such as sustainability, social relations, destination loyalty, and community empowerment.

The analytical focus lies in positioning the five articles within the thematic framework derived from the keyword analysis and thematic mapping. Woosnam et al. (2020) Demonstrates that tourist behavioural tendencies are strongly shaped by emotional attachment and solidarity between visitors and local communities. Mohaidin et al. (2017) Highlights that motivational factors such as personal desires, environmental concern, and social interaction significantly influence tourists' decisions to choose sustainable destinations. Findings from Jacobsen et al. (2019) Show that destination appeal is affected by tourists' perceptions of crowding and the emotional responses it elicits.

Lee & Xue (2020) Argue that sustainability dimensions, environmental, cultural, and socio-economic, serve as key determinants in shaping destination loyalty. Strzelecka et al. (2017) Indicate that deep emotional attachment to a destination and interactions with nature enhance the capacity for local community empowerment. The thematic insights from these five articles reinforce the pattern that destination branding within the ecotourism domain is evolving toward a holistic approach, one that prioritizes sustainability values in constructing destination image and attractiveness.

3.4. Keyword analysis

Table 4. Analysis of high-frequency words

Word	Occurrences
Ecotourism	114
Tourist Destination	99
Destination Image	50
Sustainable Tourism	45
Tourism Development	44
Sustainability	37
Marketing	36
Perception	36
Tourist Behavior	32
Tourism Management	26

Some keywords with a high frequency level generally describe how the core topic of a study, based on the analysis there are the top ten keywords with the highest frequency of occurrence in studies that integrate the field of destination branding and ecotourism, some of the keywords in question are as follows: Ecotourism, Tourist Destination, Destination Image, Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Development, Sustainability, Marketing, Perception, Tourist Behavior, and Tourism Management. Some words also show several aspects, such as sustainability, destination image, and destination management and development strategies, that have received the main attention in the academic literature in the last ten years.

The list of high frequency keywords presented in this study was not generated through manual counting, but rather produced systematically through Biblioshiny's analytical procedures, which examine inter-keyword relationships using a co-occurrence matrix and the log-likelihood ratio (LLR) to assess the reliability of a term's appearance within a given thematic environment. Accordingly, the prominence of terms such as *ecotourism* or *destination image* reflects the statistical strength of their position within the data network, rather than merely indicating simple frequency counts, even though the table ultimately displays only the final frequency results.

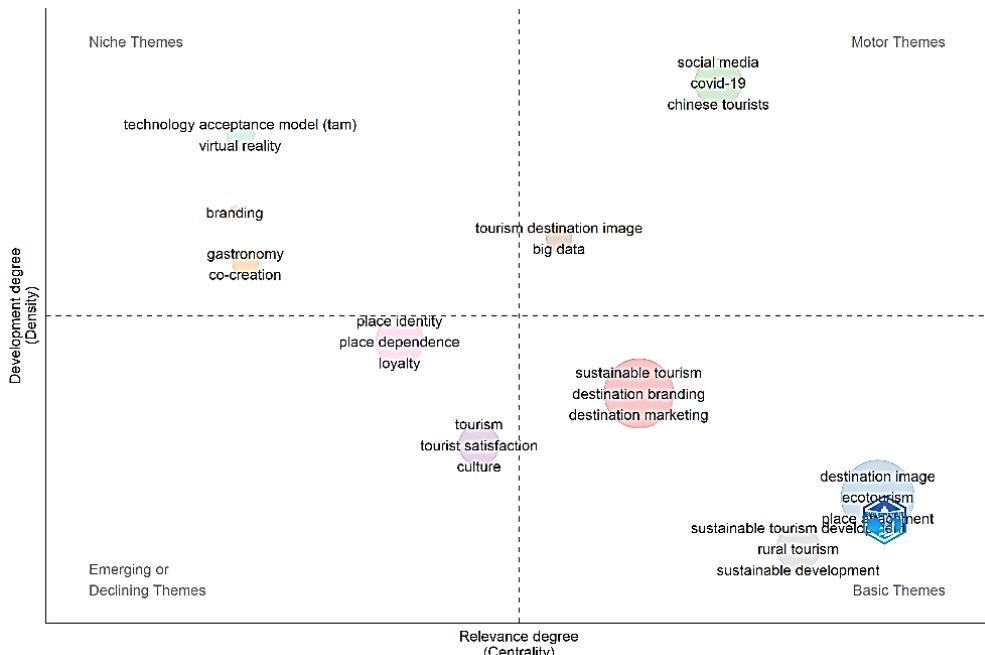


Figure 7. Keyword Map

The thematic map in Figure 7 is not constructed based on raw frequency counts, but rather on the structural strength of the relationships among keywords, calculated through the normalization of association strength. The Louvain clustering algorithm, employed in Biblioshiny, is used to group themes according to the modularity patterns within the network. This approach produces the positioning of themes within the four quadrants motor, niche, basic, and emerging which are derived from the statistical structure of inter keyword relationships. Accordingly, examples such as the grouping of ecotourism and destination image within the Basic Themes, or COVID-19 and social media within the Motor Themes, emerge from statistical computations rather than from the researcher's thematic preferences.

Analysis related to high-frequency keyword mapping was combined, various research themes associated with integrating destination branding and ecotourism topics were categorized into four quadrants. The first quadrant is Motor Themes, the central point of the research network. The second quadrant is Niche Themes, themes that develop optimally, but are still separate from other themes. The third quadrant, namely Emerging or Declining Themes, is a theme that has just emerged but has begun to be abandoned. The fourth quadrant, namely Basic Themes, is a theme that is developing or can be said to be a basic theme, and has the potential to become a theme that will be considered in the future.

The keyword mapping results indicate that research developments in destination branding and ecotourism are converging toward three principal clusters, which appear distinctly in the Keyword Map presented in Figure 7. The first cluster brings together several key terms, including “sustainable tourism,” “destination branding,” and “destination marketing.” This cluster reflects a clear shift in recent studies toward integrating destination branding with sustainability principles, particularly in examining how destination messages and images are crafted to support responsible tourism practices and long term sustainability orientations.

The second cluster highlights a group of keywords such as place identity, place dependence, loyalty, tourism, tourist satisfaction, and culture. This cluster indicates a shift of focus toward relational and experiential aspects of tourism. These themes illustrate that elements such as satisfaction, cultural and emotional perceptions play a determining role in shaping long term bonds between tourists and destinations.

The third cluster, which can be clearly observed in the keyword map in Figure 7, centers on terms such as “destination image,” “ecotourism,” “place attachment,” “sustainable tourism development”, “rural tourism,” and “sustainable development.” This pattern highlights that ecotourism is

not merely a tourism product approach, but also serves as a foundational dimension in shaping destination images that foreground natural values, close engagement with local communities, and a sustained focus on long-term sustainable development.

The three clusters are derived directly from the co-occurrence patterns and cluster divisions on the keyword map. Accordingly, the identified research directions genuinely reflect the underlying structure of the thematic network rather than subjective interpretation. Based on this foundation, the evolution of studies in destination branding and ecotourism can be interpreted with greater consistency and academic accountability. Several keywords appearing on the map but not included in the main clusters are, in essence, topics with highly specific occurrences. These terms lack sufficiently strong connections to the core discussions in destination branding and ecotourism, preventing them from forming stable, overarching clusters or serving as thematic pillars that shape the broader research trajectory.

4. Discussion

The bibliometric analysis demonstrates a marked growth in publications integrating destination branding and ecotourism, with a strong emphasis on sustainability, conservation, and ecologically grounded tourism experiences. This trend is consistent with Jin & Gao (2025), who identified a global increase in ecotourism research accompanied by a shift toward conservation, community empowerment, and sustainable governance. However, while their study approached ecotourism as a broad research domain, the present study distinctly frames destination branding as a strategic communication mechanism directly connected to sustainability values and destination image formation.

Furthermore, the prominence of keywords such as destination image, tourist behavior, satisfaction, and place attachment highlights the centrality of tourist perceptions and experiences in ecotourism-based branding. This finding aligns with Tripathy & Mishra (2024), who underscored the role of satisfaction and brand management in fostering loyalty and sustainable experiences, although this study extends the perspective by positioning satisfaction, loyalty, and emotional attachment as integral elements within an evolving conceptual structure.

In addition, the clustering of ecotourism, rural tourism, sustainable development, and conservation echoes Soták-Benedeková et al. (2025), reinforcing the view that ecotourism increasingly serves as a foundation for destination identity. Importantly, this study advances prior research by demonstrating that branding functions not merely as a marketing tool, but

as an integrative medium that aligns regional identity, ecological values, and tourist experiences within the global academic discourse.

Differences in research findings can be attributed to variations in methodological approaches, analytical scope, and conceptual emphasis. Jin & Gao (2025), for example, examined ecotourism literature broadly using Web of Science data from 2012–2022, whereas the present study deliberately focuses on the intersection of destination branding and ecotourism between 2014 and 2024, with keywords emphasizing destination image and sustainability communication. As a result, destination branding emerges as the central conceptual framework in this study, rather than a supporting theme as in Jin and Gao's work. Similarly, while Tripathy & Mishra (2024) conceptualize tourist satisfaction as the primary outcome of destination branding, this study positions satisfaction, loyalty, and emotional attachment as interconnected elements within an evolving thematic structure. In contrast, Soták-Benedeková et al. (2025) adopt a long-term rural tourism perspective, in which branding does not function as an integrative framework to the same extent as observed in this study.

The upward publication pattern indicates that the intersection between destination branding and ecotourism has increasingly become a relevant and necessary area of inquiry. The sharp rise in 2020 and its peak in 2024 reflect growing academic attention toward integrating destination branding with sustainability discourse. The significant output in 2024 suggests that scholars are now more focused on understanding how branding concepts can be aligned with conservation values and sustainability imperatives. Based on these research trends, it is evident that destination branding is no longer confined to promotional instruments but is evolving into a communication mechanism that incorporates place identity, ecological values, and sustainable tourist experiences. This development is consistent with the findings of Seidulin et al. (2025) who argue that branding not only attracts tourists but also contributes to environmental and cultural preservation.

The dominance of Sustainability (Switzerland) in its publication growth pattern demonstrates that studies on destination branding and ecotourism have, to some extent, progressed toward a more multidisciplinary publication landscape. Several journals such as the Journal of Sustainable Tourism, Current Issues in Tourism, and the Journal of Ecotourism which maintain a more specialized scope, continue to show substantial contributions. These variations in publication trajectories indicate how research on destination branding and ecotourism has evolved through both cross disciplinary approaches and more field

specific tourism perspectives. Examining the publication trends across journals further shows that studies integrating destination branding and ecotourism do not grow uniformly. Some journals exhibit the most consistent or stable increase, reflecting a broader shift in destination branding research toward a more integrated approach that incorporates ecotourism and sustainable tourism within various publication platforms.

Based on the publication output of several countries, including Indonesia, China, the United States, Malaysia, and Spain, it is evident that these five countries have played a particularly active role in producing research literature on destination branding and ecotourism over the past decade. Consequently, the knowledge framework and academic discourse in this field fundamentally reflect research dynamics that are predominantly shaped by the contexts of these five regions. It is important to note, however, that these findings solely describe the volume of publications indexed in the bibliometric database and do not directly reflect the thematic characteristics or research orientations of each country.

This study does not include keyword mapping by country or a detailed network analysis; therefore, specific differences in research focus across countries cannot yet be identified. Accordingly, the quantitative contributions of these five countries clearly illustrate which actors have been the most productive in publishing literature in this domain, yet the data cannot be used to draw conclusions about how each country formulates or interprets issues related to destination branding and ecotourism within their respective research landscapes.

By examining the findings from the Analysis of High-Frequency Words and the Keyword Map, it becomes evident that research in destination branding and ecotourism is in the process of constructing a cohesive conceptual framework. The cluster linking *sustainable tourism*, *destination branding*, and *destination marketing* underscores that branding has increasingly been integrated as an inherent strategy within the sustainability framework. The prominence of the terms *ecotourism* and *sustainable tourism* in the Analysis of High-Frequency Words further suggests that current research directions are progressively positioning sustainability values as the foundational conceptual basis for shaping the construction of destination messages and value propositions.

On the other hand, the emergence of a cluster comprising place identity, place dependence, loyalty, satisfaction, and culture indicates that the formation of a destination's image cannot be explained solely from a communication perspective. It also requires an understanding of emotional engagement and the experiential dimensions of tourists. In line with this, the authentic character of an ecotourism destination one that demonstrates

concern for environmental integrity and the well-being of local communities tends to attract tourists on a deeper emotional level (Sitorus et al., 2025). Meanwhile, the cluster that brings together ecotourism, destination image, place attachment, and sustainable development illustrates that ecotourism functions as a fundamental basis for shaping a destination image grounded in long-term and sustainable orientations. Taken together, these patterns demonstrate that the development of research is converging on three core elements—sustainability, tourist experience, and image construction thus collectively defining the theoretical advancements within the field of destination branding and ecotourism.

The bibliometric findings indicate that research on destination branding and ecotourism is moving toward a stronger integration between destination identity, conservation values, and sustainability. This aligns with the perspective of Topsakal et al. (2025), who argue that branding in the context of ecotourism is directed not only at strengthening conservation efforts but also at supporting environmental preservation and biodiversity protection. The pattern of keywords and thematic mapping further demonstrates that branding is no longer confined to a marketing strategy; rather, it is increasingly associated with issues such as destination image, place attachment, and sustainable tourism.

These findings are consistent with the framing theories of Goffman and Entman, which emphasize the role of messages in shaping public understanding of an object, including tourist destinations. This view is reinforced by the environmental communication perspective, which positions communication as an essential medium for fostering ecological awareness and encouraging more responsible behaviour. The research patterns identified within the broader framework of place branding reveal a growing trend in which destination narratives and symbols foreground conservation-based identity and community participation.

Although this bibliometric analysis provides an overview of how the knowledge structure surrounding destination branding and ecotourism has developed, the study also carries several methodological limitations. The analysis relies solely on metadata, which does not allow for a deeper examination of the substantive conceptual discussions within the full texts of the articles. Another limitation concerns the absence of scientific collaboration mapping or country-level network analysis, which makes it difficult to distinguish thematic orientations or research priorities across regions. In addition, the descriptive nature of this study employing bibliometric methods means that its outcomes are constrained by the coverage of the Scopus database, therefore, the interpretations should be

understood as a broad visualization rather than definitive conclusions about disciplinary development. These methodological constraints leave room for future research that integrates bibliometric approaches with content analysis or qualitative methodologies, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the interrelations among destination branding, ecotourism, and sustainability issues.

5. Conclusion

Overall this study maps the development of research on the integration of destination branding and ecotourism from 2014 to 2024 using a bibliometric approach based on the Scopus database. The mapping reveals that the research orientation related to both concepts has shifted toward issues of sustainability and conservation, a shift that includes efforts to construct destination images grounded in ecological values. Several clusters identified in the mapping illustrate how theories within this field have begun to converge and form a more structured conceptual pattern. Accordingly, the resulting knowledge map not only summarizes the existing trends but also represents how the global literature frames the integration of destination branding and ecotourism from a theoretical perspective.

The findings of this study are presented with several important notes regarding its methodological limitations. The selection of keywords, the dependence on a single database, and the metadata-based approach restrict the study's ability to assess the substantive quality of the articles or to analyze the empirical contexts underlying the publications. Consequently, the results should be interpreted as a general mapping rather than a direct evaluation of the effectiveness of branding strategies or their implementation within ecotourism, and these limitations inherently reduce the degree of generalizability of the mapping outcomes.

Building on the existing findings and limitations, future research holds considerable potential to explore the interrelationships among clusters in greater depth for instance, by examining how sustainability principles are operationalized within branding practices or how sustainability concepts are translated into destination communication strategies. Integrating bibliometric methods with content analysis or qualitative approaches is crucial to capture conceptual dynamics that may fall outside the scope of metadata-driven analysis. Accordingly, this study provides an initial theoretical foundation for understanding the evolving integration of destination branding and ecotourism while also opening space for more comprehensive investigations in the future.

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