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Rural Tourism and Sustainable Development Research: Bibliometric Insights

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Abstract: ***This study presents a bibliometric review of research on Rural Tourism and Sustainable Development published between 2015 and 2026, using a PRISMA-guided selection process and performance-based bibliometric indicators. Data were retrieved from the Scopus database using the keyword strategy "Rural Tourism" AND "Sustainable Development". Following screening and eligibility restrictions (English language; article type; and subject area limits to Social Sciences, Business/Management/Accounting, and Economics/Finance), 1,386 articles were included for analysis. Results show strong growth in research output up to 2025, high collaboration intensity, concentration of publications in a few outlets (notably Sustainability), and a geographically dominant contribution led by China. Thematic mapping indicates that "sustainable development" and "rural tourism" remain central motor themes, while some geographically anchored and method-driven themes appear emerging.***

Keywords: Rural Tourism, Sustainability, Sustainable Development, Tourism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism has emerged as one of the most significant and fast-expanding segments of the global tourism economy because it links travel experiences with local culture, nature-based resources, and community livelihoods. Unlike mass tourism that is often concentrated in cities and coastal hotspots, rural tourism is typically rooted in villages, small towns, agricultural landscapes, heritage sites, and ecologically sensitive areas. It offers visitors authentic experiences such as farm stays, local food, handicrafts, festivals, indigenous traditions, and nature trails. For rural regions, this form of tourism is frequently positioned as a practical strategy to diversify income sources, reduce poverty, strengthen local entrepreneurship, and limit out-migration by creating jobs close to home.

At the same time, the concept of sustainable development has become central to tourism policy and research, especially due to concerns about climate change, biodiversity loss, resource depletion, cultural commodification, and inequality. Tourism can generate income and infrastructure, but it can also bring pressures waste generation, water stress, land-use change, rising prices, uneven benefit distribution, and disruption to local culture. Rural destinations are often more vulnerable to these impacts because they may have limited governance capacity, fragile ecosystems, and weaker service infrastructure. Therefore, integrating sustainable development principles into rural tourism planning is not a choice but a necessity: rural tourism must be designed to protect environmental resources, respect socio-cultural integrity, and ensure long-term economic benefits for host communities. Because of this close connection between rural tourism and sustainability, research in the area has expanded rapidly over the last decade. Scholars have examined a wide range of topics such as community participation, destination governance, rural entrepreneurship, eco-tourism, agritourism, heritage conservation, carrying capacity, visitor behaviour, climate adaptation, and the role of technology and smart services in rural destinations. Newer work also explores resilience in rural tourism systems, especially after disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, extreme weather events, and economic shocks. This growth has produced a large and diverse body of literature across tourism studies, development studies, geography, environmental science, economics, and business management. However, the expansion of research also creates a challenge: as publications increase, it becomes difficult for researchers, students, and policymakers to quickly understand (i) how the field has evolved, (ii) which journals and authors are most influential, (iii) which countries and institutions are producing the most research, and (iv) what the main themes and emerging trends are. A structured bibliometric analysis is useful in such situations because it provides quantitative techniques to map scientific production, collaboration patterns, citation influence, and thematic development within a research domain.

Bibliometrics helps convert large numbers of publications into a clear "knowledge map," allowing readers to identify research hotspots, gaps, and future directions. In addition, transparency in study selection is increasingly expected in review-based research.

For this reason, the present study applies the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework to guide data identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion.

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Although PRISMA was initially designed for systematic reviews and meta-analyses, its structured approach is now widely applied to bibliometric studies to clearly justify how the final dataset was formed. In this study, Scopus records were retrieved using the search strategy "Rural Tourism" AND "Sustainable Development", and filters were applied for publication years (2015–2026), document type (articles), language (English), and relevant subject areas (Social Sciences, Business/Management/Accounting, and Economics/Finance). This ensures that the dataset represents peer-reviewed research most directly connected to rural tourism and sustainability scholarship. Accordingly, this paper conducts a PRISMA-guided bibliometric analysis of Scopus-indexed literature on rural tourism and sustainable development from 2015 to 2026. The study aims to: (1) assess annual publication growth and the overall development of the field; (2) identify leading journals, authors, and highly contributing countries; (3) examine collaboration patterns and citation influence; and (4) map conceptual structure through keyword and thematic analysis to detect core themes and emerging research fronts. By offering a clear and evidence-based overview, the study supports researchers in locating key literature and trends, and it assists policymakers and destination planners in understanding where scientific attention is concentrated and where further research is needed.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a PRISMA-guided bibliometric methodology to ensure that the dataset selection and analysis process was transparent, replicable, and free from ad-hoc inclusion. The bibliographic data were retrieved from the Scopus database because of its wide multidisciplinary coverage and structured export options for bibliometric processing. A topic search was executed using the query "Rural Tourism" AND "Sustainable Development", and the results were refined through eligibility filters aligned with the study objectives. First, the time window was limited to 2015–2026 to capture contemporary research development. Next, records were restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles to maintain consistency in quality and document type (excluding books, conference papers, and other non-article formats). To avoid language bias in analysis and to maintain comparability in keyword and abstract mapping, only English-language publications were retained. Finally, subject area filters were applied to keep the dataset focused on the management and socio-economic lens of the topic by prioritizing Social Sciences, Business/Management/Accounting, and Economics/Finance. After screening and refinement, the final dataset (n = 1,386 articles) was exported from Scopus with complete bibliographic fields (authors, affiliations, titles, abstracts, keywords, sources, references, citations, and publication year). Bibliometric analysis was then performed using Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny workflows, generating (i) descriptive performance indicators (annual scientific production, most relevant sources, authors, countries, citation structure, and collaboration patterns), and (ii) science mapping outputs such as keyword co-occurrence patterns and thematic mapping (based on keyword clusters and their density–centrality positioning). Together, these steps provided both a performance overview (who/where/what is most productive and influential) and a conceptual overview (how the themes are structured and how they evolve) of rural tourism and sustainable development research during the study period.

PRISMA Framework

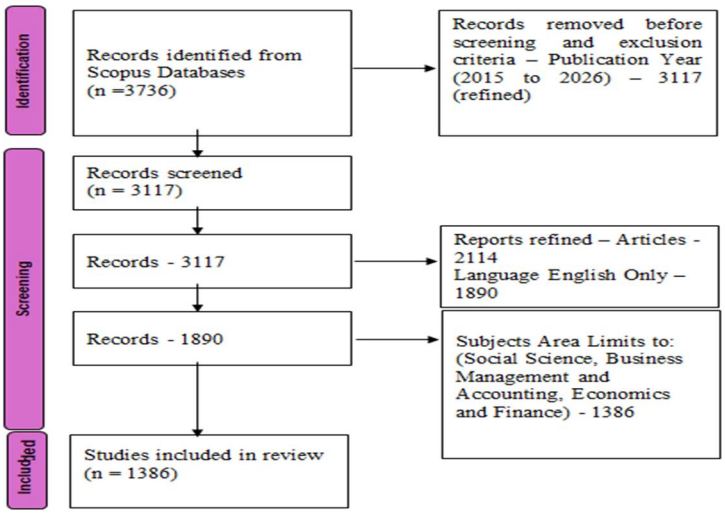

Fig. 1 PRISMA flowchart

(Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. BMJ 2021;372: n71.)

Keyword used: Rural Tourism AND Sustainable Development

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Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol has established itself as a critical mechanism for ensuring methodological precision and openness in research reviews, including those utilizing bibliometric techniques. While the framework was originally conceived to standardize reporting in healthcare interventions, its utility has expanded to support the rigorous mapping of intellectual structures and scientific landscapes in broader fields (Donthu et al., 2021). In the context of bibliometric analysis, PRISMA enhances the reliability of the research by enforcing a transparent account of the entire workflow from the initial identification of records to the final selection of studies. By clearly delineating the data sources, eligibility constraints, and the attrition of articles at every stage, the framework allows researchers to navigate complex, multidisciplinary datasets while ensuring that the study remains reproducible by future scholars (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Database Search Design and Results

Description	Results
MAIN INFORMATION ABOUT DATA	
Timespan	2015:2026
Sources (Journals, Books, etc)	394
Documents	1386
Annual Growth Rate %	-8.09
Document Average Age	4.22
Average citations per doc	18.57
References	0
DOCUMENT CONTENTS	
Keywords Plus (ID)	1924
Author's Keywords (DE)	4110
AUTHORS	
Authors	3765
Authors of single-authored docs	122
AUTHORS COLLABORATION	
Single-authored docs	138
Co-Authors per Doc	3.47
International co-authorships %	26.26
DOCUMENT TYPES	
article	1386

Source: Compiled by Author (Biblioshiny)

The analysed dataset comprises 1,386 articles published in 394 distinct sources over a relatively recent period ranging from 2015 to 2026. A critical finding is the declining trajectory of publication volume, evidenced by a negative annual growth rate of 8.09%, suggesting that research interest in this specific domain may be contracting or consolidating. Despite this reduction in output, the existing literature maintains significant scholarly impact, with a high average of 18.57 citations per document. Collaboration dynamics appear robust; the field is dominated by research teams rather than solo researchers. This is demonstrated by an average of 3.47 co-authors per document and a low prevalence of single-authored studies (only 138 documents). Furthermore, the research exhibits a moderate degree of global engagement, with 26.26% of articles involving international co-authorships. Finally, the intellectual diversity of the field is substantial, represented by 4,110 distinct author keywords and 1,924 Keywords Plus, indicating a wide array of thematic sub-topics despite the recent drop in publication frequency.

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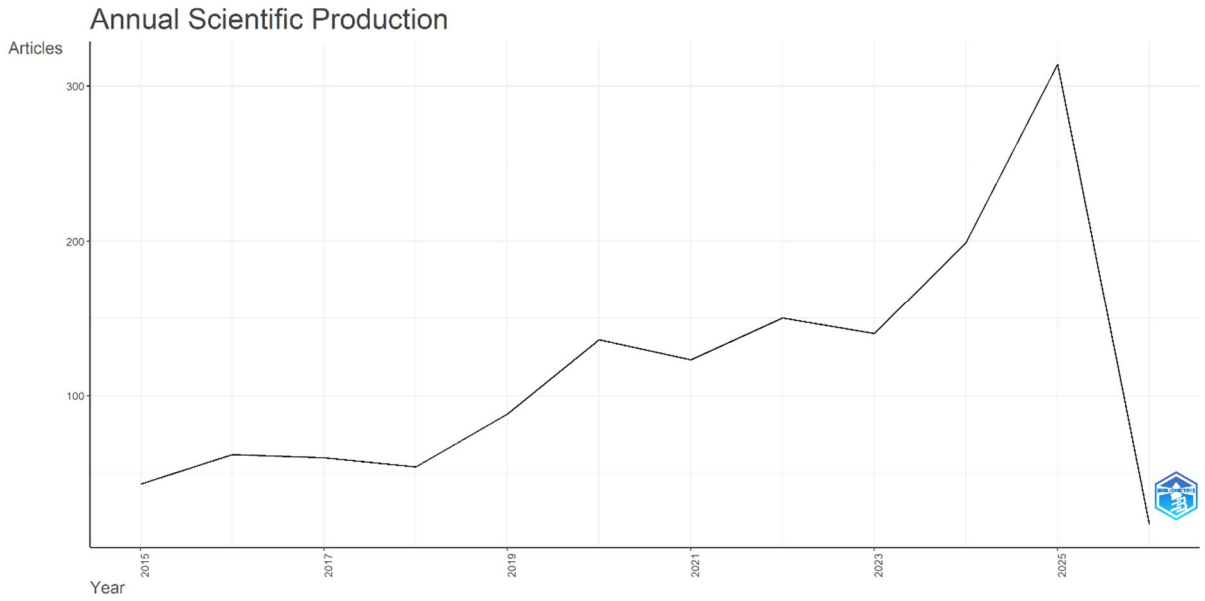

Fig.1 Annual Scientific Production

The longitudinal analysis of scientific production reveals a robust and accelerating upward trajectory in research output over the last decade. Between 2015 and 2018, the field appeared to be in a nascent or steady phase, with annual publications fluctuating between 43 and 62. However, a significant inflection point occurred in 2019, marking the beginning of a rapid growth phase. This momentum continued to build, culminating in a dramatic peak in 2025 with 314 articles a more than seven-fold increase compared to the baseline in 2015.

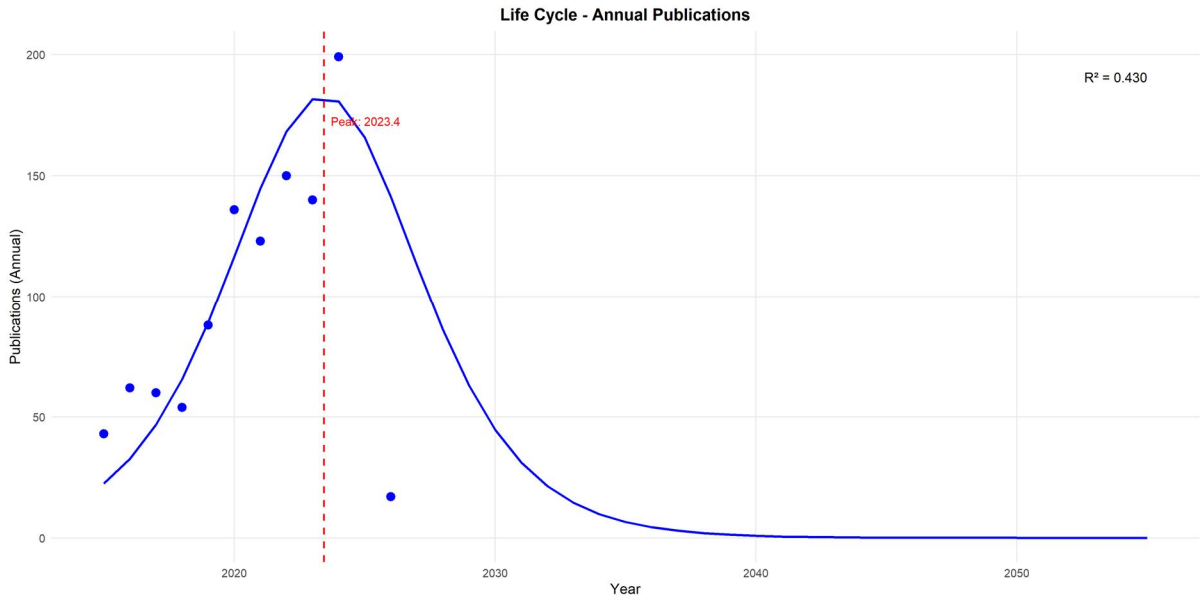

Fig.2 Life Cycle of Scientific Production

The analysis of annual scientific production between 2015 and 2026 reveals a robust and accelerating growth trajectory for the field. Research output remained relatively stable during the incubation phase (2015–2018), averaging approximately 55 articles per year. However, a significant inflection point occurred in 2019, triggering a period of exponential growth that culminated in a historic peak of 314 articles in 2025. While the Life Cycle curve model suggests a theoretical saturation point around, the empirical data contradicts this projection, as publication volume continued to surge well beyond that date, more than doubling from 2020 to 2025.

The sharp decline observed in 2026 (17 articles) should be interpreted as partial-year data rather than a genuine loss of interest, indicating that the field is likely still in a high-growth maturity phase rather than a decline.

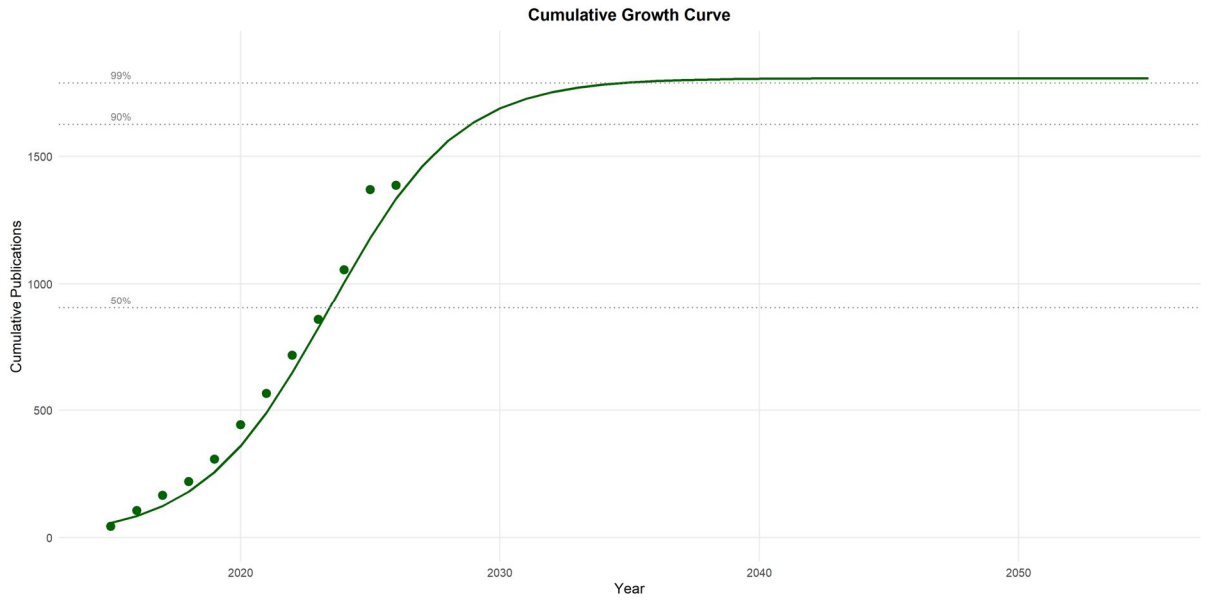

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Table 2. Most Relevant Sources

Sources	Articles
SUSTAINABILITY (SWITZERLAND)	323
JOURNAL OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM	56
GEOJOURNAL OF TOURISM AND GEOSITES	32
AFRICAN JOURNAL OF HOSPITALITY, TOURISM AND LEISURE	28
JOURNAL OF RURAL STUDIES	24
TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY	21
JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT AND TOURISM	18
TOURISM GEOGRAPHIES	18
WORLDWIDE HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM THEMES	18
ENVIRONMENT, DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY	17

The analysis of publication outlets reveals a highly concentrated distribution of research, with Sustainability (Switzerland) emerging as the overwhelmingly dominant source in this field. With 323 articles, it accounts for a disproportionately large share of the scientific production, publishing nearly six times as many papers as the second-ranked journal, the Journal of Sustainable Tourism (56 articles).

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The remaining top sources including Geo Journal of Tourism and Geo sites (32 articles) and the African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure (28 articles) show a steady decline in volume, with counts ranging from 32 down to 17. Thematically, the list indicates a strong disciplinary focus on the intersection of tourism, hospitality, and environmental management, as almost every top-tier journal explicitly references these concepts in its title.

Table 3. Most Relevant Authors

Author	Articles
WANG Y	22
LI Y	17
CASTANHO RA	14
COUTO GMMD	12
KASTENHOLZ E	11
VUJKO AD	11
WANG J	11
LI H	10
LI J	10
ZHANG J	10

The analysis of the most prolific contributors identifies Wang Y as the leading author in the field, with a total of 22 articles, establishing a clear margin of productivity over the rest of the cohort. Li Y follows as the second most active researcher with 17 publications, while Castanho RA secures the third position with 14. The remaining top authors exhibit a highly consistent output level; the counts for ranks four through ten including scholars such as Couto GMMD, Kastenholz E, and Vujko AD are tightly clustered between 10 and 12 articles. This distribution highlights a competitive research landscape driven by a core group of active scholars, with a notable prevalence of Asian surnames (Wang, Li, Zhang) suggesting significant research momentum originating from that region.

Table 4. Countries' Scientific Production

Country	Freq
CHINA	659
PORTUGAL	187
INDONESIA	183
SPAIN	180
ITALY	164
USA	123
MALAYSIA	109
SERBIA	94
ROMANIA	92
SOUTH AFRICA	83

The analysis of scientific production by country reveals a hegemonic contribution from China, which leads the field with 659 publications more than three times the output of the second-ranked nation. Following this dominant leader is a tightly clustered second tier of contributors comprising Portugal (187), Indonesia (183), Spain (180), and Italy (164), indicating a strong research interest in both Southern Europe and Southeast Asia. The United States follows with 123 articles, while the remainder of the top ten includes a diverse mix of emerging and established research hubs: Malaysia (109), Serbia (94), Romania (92), and South Africa (83). The data highlights a global research landscape heavily anchored in Asia and Europe, with China serving as the central engine of productivity.

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Fig.3 Country Scientific Production

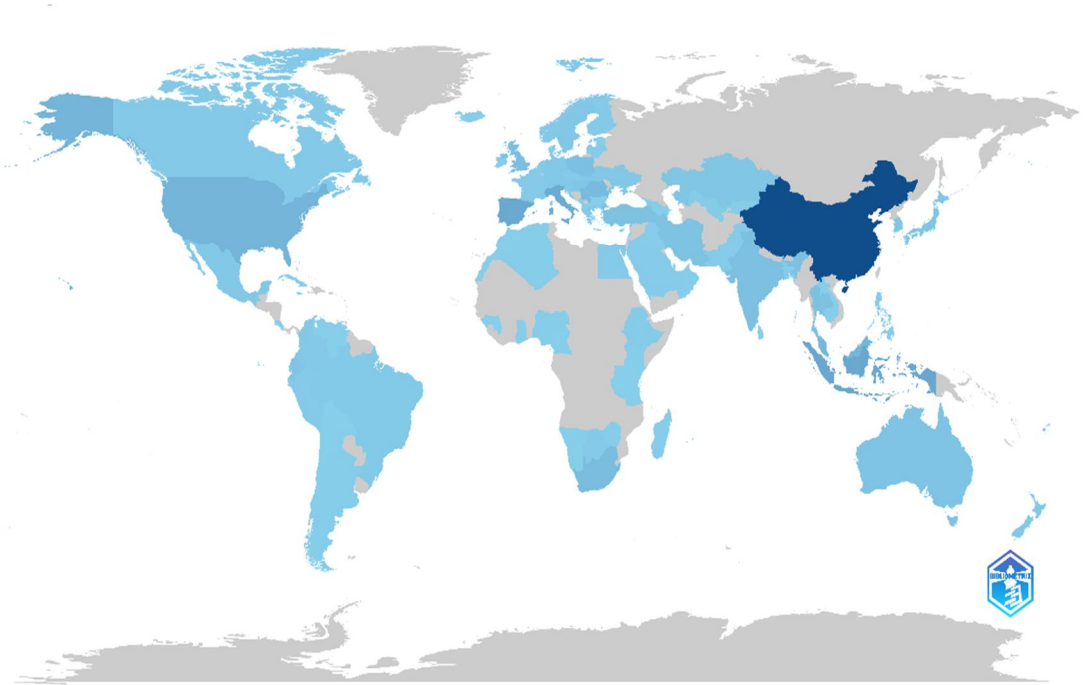

Fig.4 Word Cloud

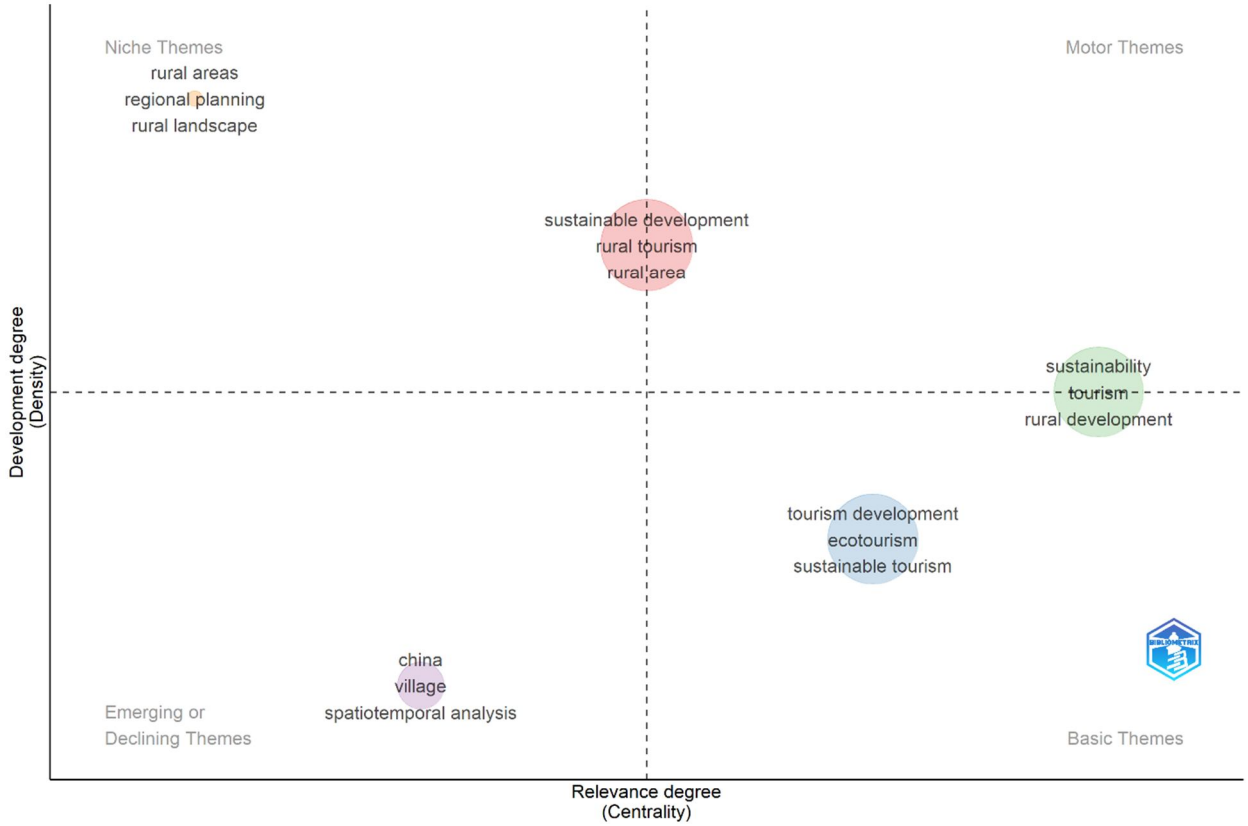

Fig.5 Thematic Map

The thematic map visualizes the research landscape by plotting themes based on their centrality (relevance) and density (development). Motor Themes (Upper-Right Quadrant): The cluster containing "sustainable development," "rural tourism," and "rural area" straddles the upper quadrants but leans towards being a Motor Theme. These topics are both highly developed (high density) and central to the field (high centrality), indicating they are the driving forces and core pillars of the current research. They represent the well-established, "mainstream" foundation of the discipline. Basic Themes (Lower-Right Quadrant): Clusters such as "sustainability/tourism/rural development" and "tourism development/ecotourism/sustainable tourism" appear in the lower-right. These themes possess high centrality but lower density. This suggests they are fundamental, foundational topics broadly important and frequently cited but perhaps less internally developed or specialized than the motor themes. They are the "general knowledge" or transversal themes of the field. Niche Themes (Upper-Left Quadrant): The cluster "rural areas/regional planning/rural landscape" is located in the upper-left. These themes have high density but low centrality. This characterizes them as highly specialized and well-developed sub-fields that are somewhat peripheral to the main global research network. They are important but operate in isolation compared to the core topics.

Emerging or Declining Themes (Lower-Left Quadrant): The cluster "China/village/spatiotemporal analysis" sits in the lower-left. With both low centrality and low density, these topics are either just emerging (gaining traction) or potentially declining. Given the specific terms (spatiotemporal analysis, China), this likely represents an emerging methodological trend or a specific geographic focus that is currently peripheral but could grow in importance.

IV. CONCLUSION

This bibliometric study mapped the scientific landscape of Rural Tourism and Sustainable Development research published in Scopus between 2015 and 2026, based on a final dataset of 1,386 peer-reviewed articles after systematic screening and subject-area refinement. The findings confirm that the field has moved from a relatively steady early phase (2015–2018) into a strong expansion stage after 2019, reaching its highest publication volume in 2025; the low count in 2026 should be treated as partial-year coverage rather than an actual decline.

Overall, the literature demonstrates meaningful scholarly influence, reflected in a strong citation average, and a clear pattern of teamwork-driven knowledge production, with most studies being multi-authored and a moderate level of international co-authorship. The study also highlights a high concentration of publications in a small number of journals, with *Sustainability (Switzerland)* emerging as the dominant outlet, indicating that sustainability-oriented journals serve as key platforms for disseminating rural tourism research. Author productivity is distributed among a core group of recurring contributors, while country-level output is strongly led by China, followed by a second tier of countries such as Portugal, Indonesia, Spain, and Italy, showing that both fast-developing rural regions and established tourism economies are shaping the research agenda. The thematic analysis further confirms that "sustainable development" and "rural tourism" remain the central driving (motor) themes, while broader sustainability and rural development themes function as foundational knowledge areas. Specialized topics such as regional planning and rural landscapes appear as niche clusters, and method- or geography-driven themes (e.g., spatiotemporal analysis and village-focused studies) indicate emerging directions that may gain stronger centrality in future research.

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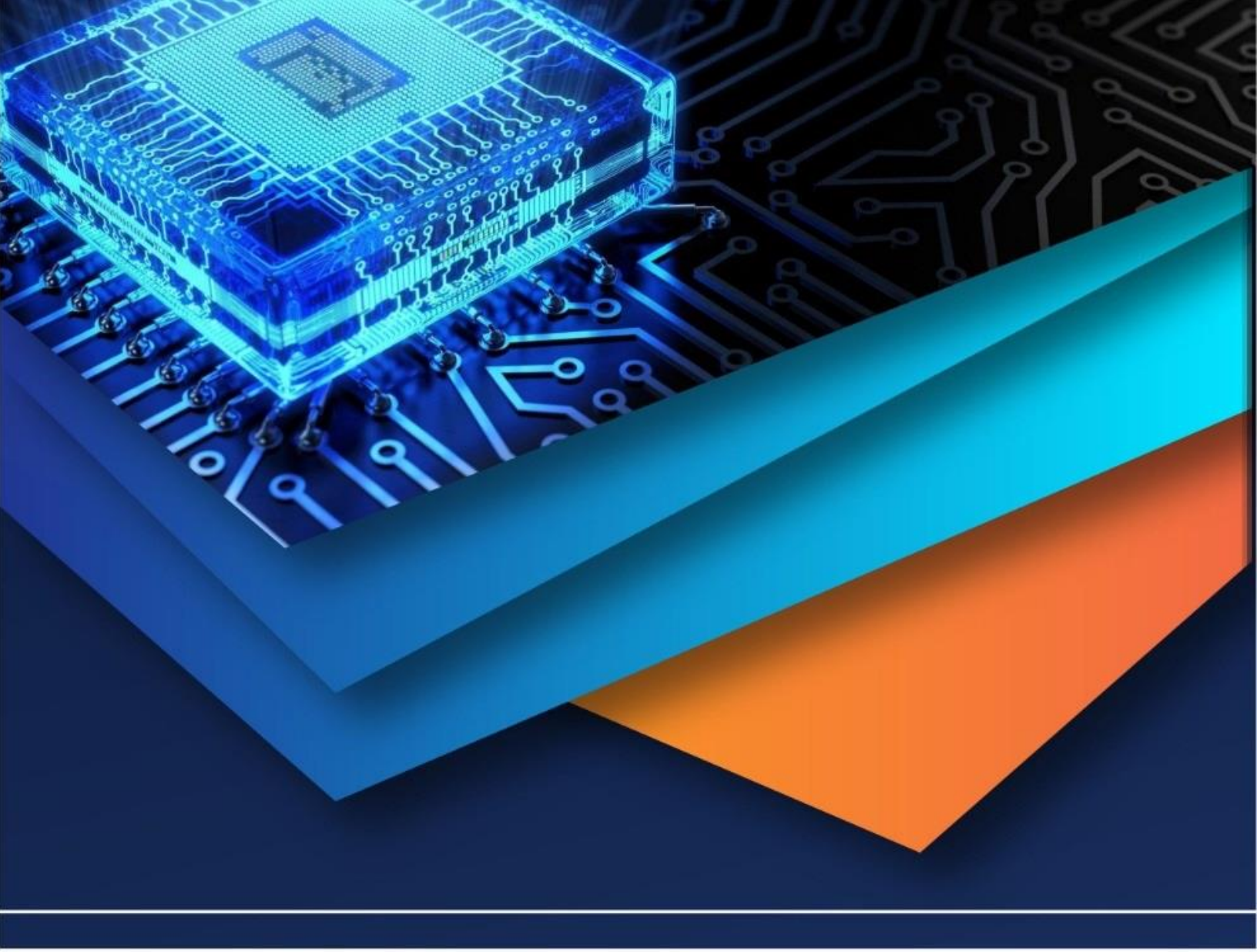

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