

Wellness Tourism Meets Sustainability: Global Trends and Knowledge Structure Through Bibliometric Insights

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ABSTRACT

Wellness tourism is one of the emerging sectors in the tourism industry, where travelers go for rejuvenation and refreshment by enhancing and balancing their body, mind, and spirit. It focuses on creating overall balance and preventing disease rather than treating the cause or symptoms. It can be termed the most sustainable way to enjoy journeys. Most wellness tourism activities are intertwined with nature and the environment. Even studies show that wellness tourists are looking for destinations that offer a calm atmosphere and warmly welcome them to nature's serene beauty. So it is important to understand the interconnectivity and role of wellness tourism and sustainability in the global tourism sector. This bibliometric study explores how sustainability shapes wellness tourism and how wellness tourism, in turn, supports sustainable practices. Over the period from 2006 to 2025, the number of publications increased to 24 in 2025. It was identified that wellness tourism and sustainability are emerging areas of research with immense opportunities for in-depth study to protect the environment. Most globally cited documents, average citations, themes concentrated in the study so far, and words associated with it were identified through this bibliometric study.

Keywords: wellness tourism, Sustainability, bibliometric analysis, Thematic evaluation

INTRODUCTION

Wellness and sustainability go hand in hand, as they both aim to preserve and maintain the natural aura of the environment and of humans. Wellness tourism refers to travelling with the primary purpose of maintaining or improving personal health and wellbeing. It includes yoga, meditation, holistic and spiritual wellness programs, healthy lifestyle tourism, and so on. As well, sustainable tourism aims to minimize negative environmental, social, and economic impacts while maximizing benefits to local communities (Cernat et al., 2007; Shokri Garjan et al., 2023). It focuses on environmental protection, responsible use of natural resources, cultural preservation, etc. Both focus on holistic well-being for people, nature, and communities. Natural resources are recognized as one of the primary factors influencing the enhancement of wellness and, thus, the growth and long-term viability of tourism locations (Pessot et al., 2021). Currently, the most successful and notable wellness tourism centers incorporate aspects of sustainable development into their tourism practices (Shokri Garjan et al., 2023).

However, despite the rising academic and industry focus on sustainability, few studies have specifically examined wellness tourism as a strategic tool for enhancing environmental sustainability (Nel-lo Andreu et al., 2021). This gap highlights the need to understand better how wellness tourism contributes to sustainable resource use, nature protection, and ecological awareness. To address this, the present study conducts a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of existing literature on wellness tourism and sustainability, mapping publication patterns, thematic trends, and knowledge structures. By identifying key research clusters and uncovering underexplored areas, this study provides valuable insights into the evolution, current state, and future directions of sustainable wellness tourism research.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a bibliometric approach to examine the research landscape on wellness tourism and sustainability. The data were collected from Scopus, a widely used academic database for bibliometric research, because it provides structured and comprehensive bibliographic records suitable for science mapping and citation

analysis. The search was conducted on November 16, 2025. To retrieve relevant publications, the search strategy used the keywords ‘sustainability’ OR ‘environment sustainability’ AND ‘wellness tourism’ OR ‘wellbeing tourism’ OR ‘holistic wellness’. These terms were selected to capture literature at the intersection of sustainability and wellness-oriented tourism. The initial search returned 86 documents.

To improve the consistency of the dataset, only English-language publications were retained. After applying this screening criterion, 84 documents remained for the final analysis. These records formed the study dataset for examining publication output, citation patterns, and thematic development in the field. The bibliometric analysis was performed in R using the Bibliometrix package, which supports descriptive bibliometric analysis as well as science mapping techniques such as citation analysis, collaboration analysis, and keyword-based thematic exploration. Using this tool, the study identified major publication trends, influential documents, highly cited countries, and research networks, thereby providing a structured overview of the knowledge base on wellness tourism and sustainability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The sustainability strategy, which is still in use today, was initially implemented in the middle of the 1990s. In addition to implementing tools for environmental management and control, it seeks to preserve and improve natural and cultural attractions (Nel-lo Andreu et al., 2021). Sustainable tourism refers to the responsible use of resources, including biodiversity, while minimizing negative impacts on the environment, culture, and society. It emphasises maximizing the benefits of tourism in ways that safeguard the natural and cultural heritage of local communities (Farsani et al., 2012; Mihardja et al., 2023). The term sustainable travel is broad and might mean different things to different people (Nikolić et al., 2021; Shokri Garjan et al., 2023). The attractiveness of a destination reflects its capacity to enable and prosper through tourism (Mihardja et al., 2023). When tourism relies heavily on natural resources, its development can generate negative consequences. The intricate relationship between tourism and the environment includes multiple activities and operations that, if not managed responsibly, can lead to significant environmental harm (Shokri Garjan et al., 2023; Tan, 2021). Developing nature-integrated wellness practices upholds destination branding and entails the development of communities in that region while conserving the environment (Mihardja et al., 2023; Pessot et al., 2021; Zeng et al., 2021).

Wellness tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments of global tourism, driven by travelers seeking experiences that enhance physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Closely linked to this growth is the increasing emphasis on sustainability, as wellness-based experiences often depend on pristine natural environments, culturally rooted healing traditions, and socially responsible practices (Lee et al., 2020; Nel-lo Andreu et al., 2021). To become appealing, wellness destinations require cultural attractions, outdoor activities, a temperate environment, authenticity, sustainability, healthful regional food, and traditional remedies (Nel-lo Andreu et al., 2021). Incorporating wellness tourism practices with the natural environment not only enhances the effectiveness of the healing experience but also contributes to the protection of nature. Compared to artificial settings, forest environments have a significantly more positive effect on human physiological activity. (Mihardja et al., 2023). Nature therapy, as a health promotion technique and a potential universal health model, has been shown to reduce modern stress states and technostress. In Japan and China, a new mode of wellness healing that immerses oneself with nature as ‘forest bathing’ initiated as a means to escape from the stresses and, in turn, to preserve their natural settings (Hansen et al., 2017). Wellness tourism also focuses on sun and beach destinations, which are directly linked to living or traveling close to the sea, or engaging in activities there termed as coastal wellness (Kelly, 2018; Nel-lo Andreu et al., 2021).

Geo tourism is another form of sustainable tourism practice (Mihardja et al., 2023).

Facing intense competition from tourism locales, tourist entities typically highlight a destination’s sustainable management practices as a way to stimulate tourists’ desire to explore and refer it to others (Zeng et al., 2021). Sustainable travel is more preferable but expensive for travelers (Shokri Garjan et al., 2023). When tourism is combined with sustainability principles, supply chain management becomes a strategic tool for minimizing environmental impact, supporting local economies, and promoting responsible resource use. Sustainable tourism supply chains prioritize ecofriendly procurement, renewable energy, waste reduction, ethical labour practices,

and partnerships with local producers and service providers (Morrison et al., 2004; Shokri Garjan et al., 2023). Incorporating the concept of tourism supply chain management within the wellness tourism industry can significantly enhance its overall performance by efficiently responding to diverse tourist demands. By integrating supply chain strategies, wellness destinations are better equipped to address the persistent challenge of limited resources while simultaneously supporting the economic development of the region (Chen 2009, n.d.; Nayeri et al., 2022; Shokri Garjan et al., 2023).

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

TABLE 1

Descriptive Summary of The Bibliometric Data Set (2006-2026)

MAIN INFORMATION ABOUT DATA	
Description	Results
Timespan	2006:2026
Sources (Journals, Books, etc)	45
Documents	84
Document Average Age	2.62
Average citations per doc	12.63
References	701
DOCUMENT CONTENTS	245
Keywords Plus (ID)	
Author's Keywords (DE)	298
AUTHORS	288
Authors	
AUTHORS COLLABORATION	0
Single-authored docs	
Co-Authors per Doc	5.26
International co-authorships %	23.81
DOCUMENT TYPES	50
article	
book	1
book chapter	17
conference paper	10

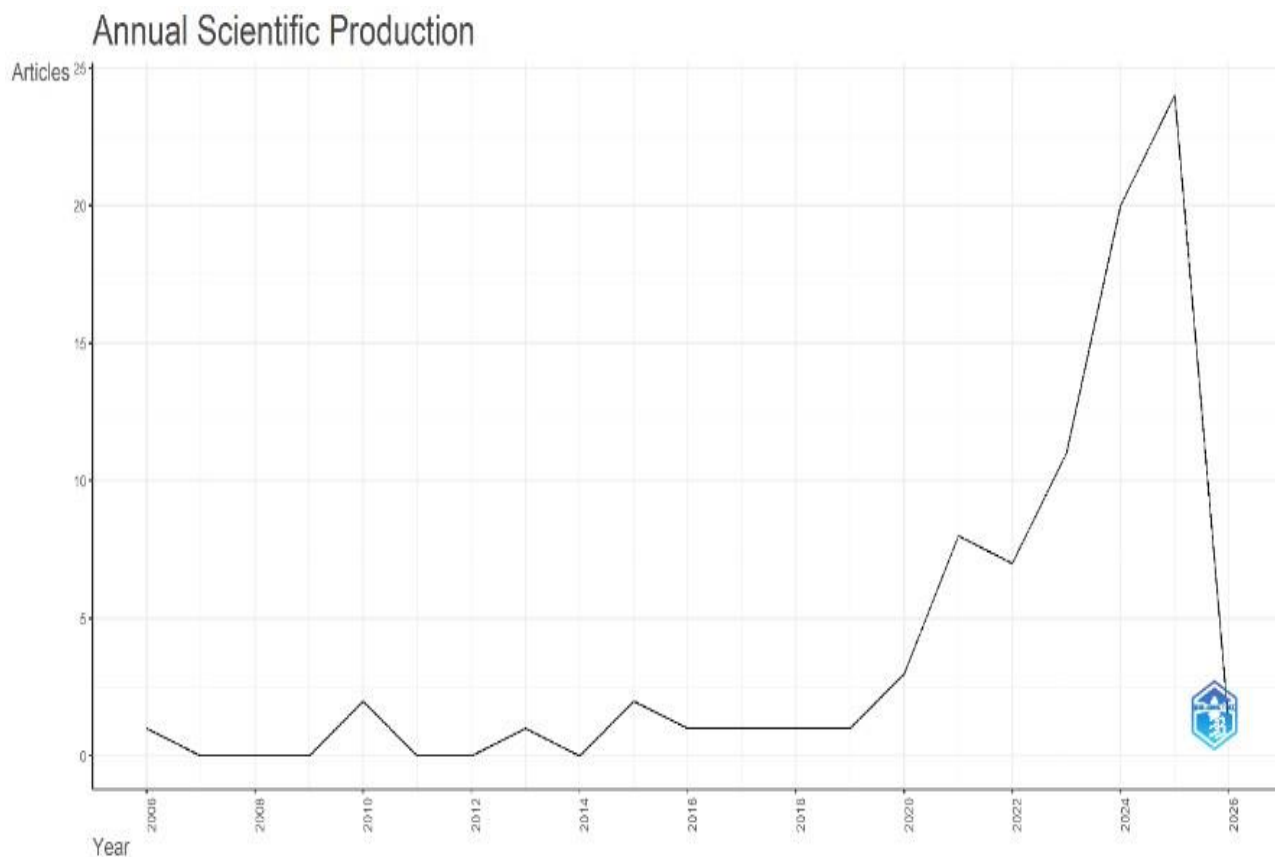
conference review	3
review	3

Note: Retrieved from Biblioshiny

Table 1 shows the descriptive summary of the bibliometric dataset. The Scopus database served as the source for the paper's bibliometric study. The study was conducted between 2006 and 2026. There are 45 sources, which include books and journals. The average documents are 2.62 years old, indicating the literature is fairly recent. Each document receives around 12 citations on average, showing that the research in this field has a moderate academic impact.

The 84 documents together cite 701 references, implying that authors are drawing on a wide academic base, indicating a rich foundational literature. The 245 keywords plus indicate that the intellectual structure of the field is broad, covering various themes and related concepts. The authors offered 298 distinct keywords, demonstrating a wide range of subjects and implying that the field's study is multifaceted with numerous new or specialised subtopics. The percentage of international co-authorships is 23.81%. This indicates that there is potential to improve cross-national cooperation while also demonstrating positive global participation. Journal articles, which are the main output of science and are usually subject to peer review, make up the bulk of publications.

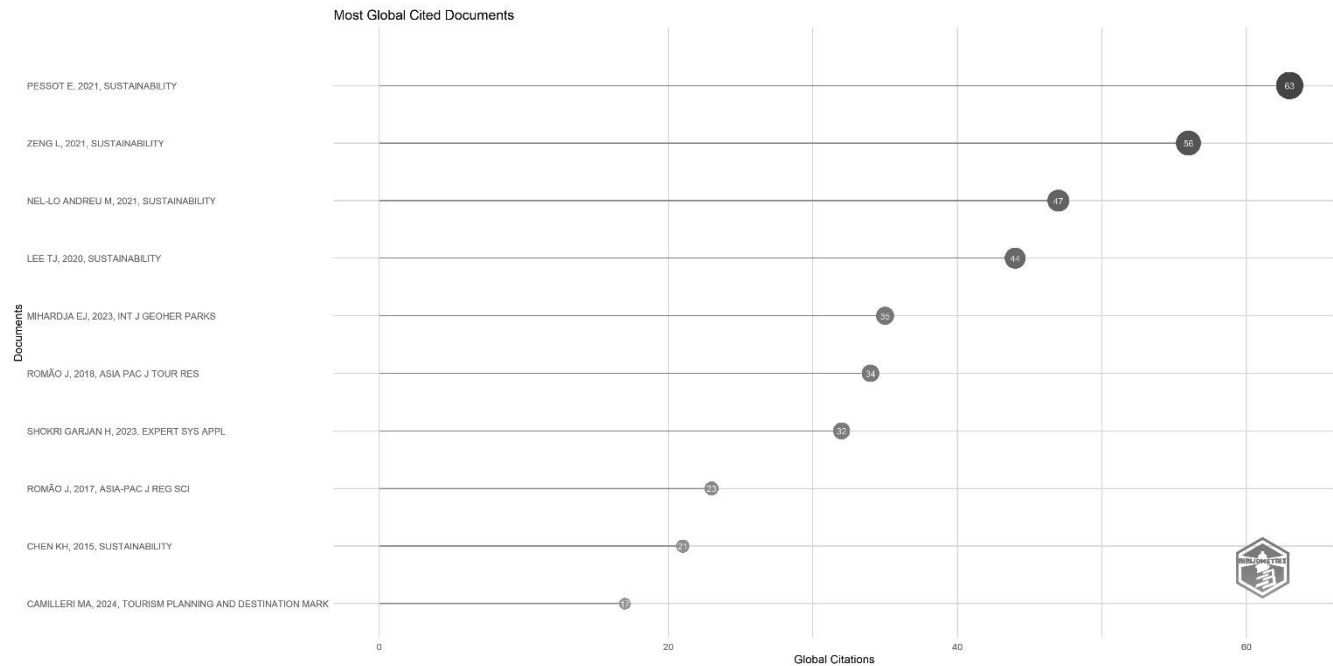
Figure 1 Annual Scientific Production



Note: Retrieved from Biblioshiny

Figure 1 shows the annual scientific production in the field. From 2006 to 2018, output remained low, with only 0–2 publications per year, indicating limited research activity. Publication volume began to increase between 2019 and 2021, reaching around 11 articles. This upward trend continued from 2022 onward, with 7 articles in 2022, 11 in 2023, nearly 20 in 2024, and a peak of about 24 in 2025. Overall, the figure indicates slow growth up to 2019, followed by a sharp rise in research interest and output through 2025.

Figure 2 Most Global Cited Documents

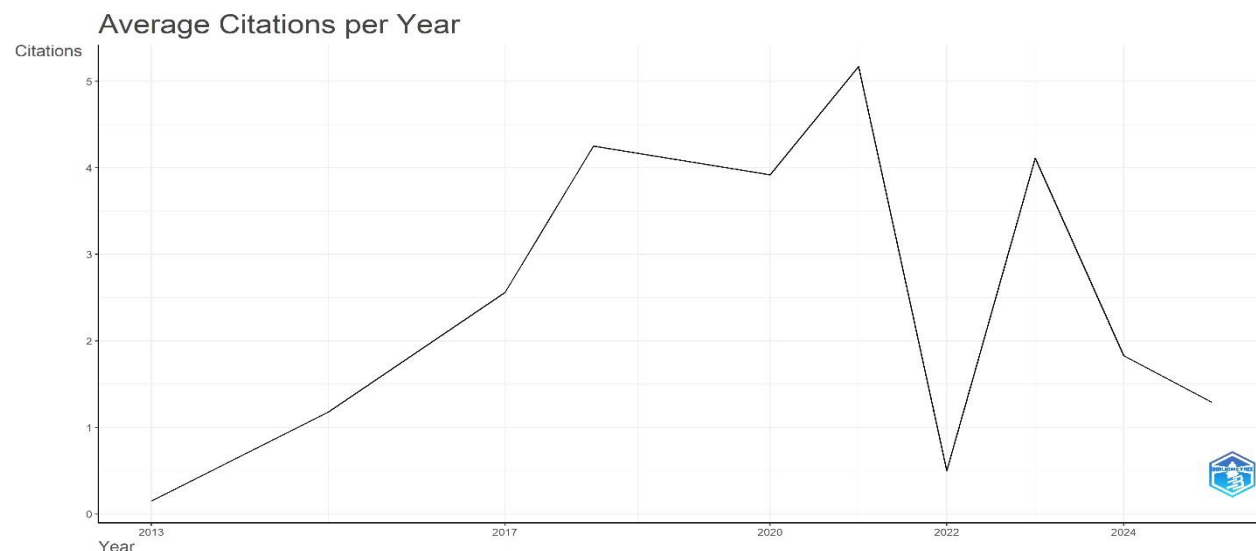


Note: Retrieved from Biblioshiny

Figure 2 presents the most influential documents in the field based on global citation counts. Pessot et al. (2021), published in Sustainability, is the most cited document with 68 citations, showing its strong impact on research related to sustainability and tourism. It is followed by Zeng (2021) with 56 citations and Nel-lo Andreu (2021) with 47 citations, both of which also make important contributions to the field. Among the mid-ranked studies, Lee (2020) and Mihardja (2023) received 44 and 35 citations respectively, reflecting continued scholarly interest in sustainability and geotourism.

Other notable works include Romão (2017, 2018) and Shokri Garjan (2023), each with citation counts in the low 30s, indicating their relevance to tourism development and related themes. Chen (2015) and Camilleri (2024) have comparatively fewer citations but still rank among the influential studies in the dataset. Overall, the distribution suggests that many of the most cited works were published within the last decade, highlighting the growing academic importance of sustainability, geotourism, and tourism planning in wellness tourism research.

Figure 3 Average Citations per year

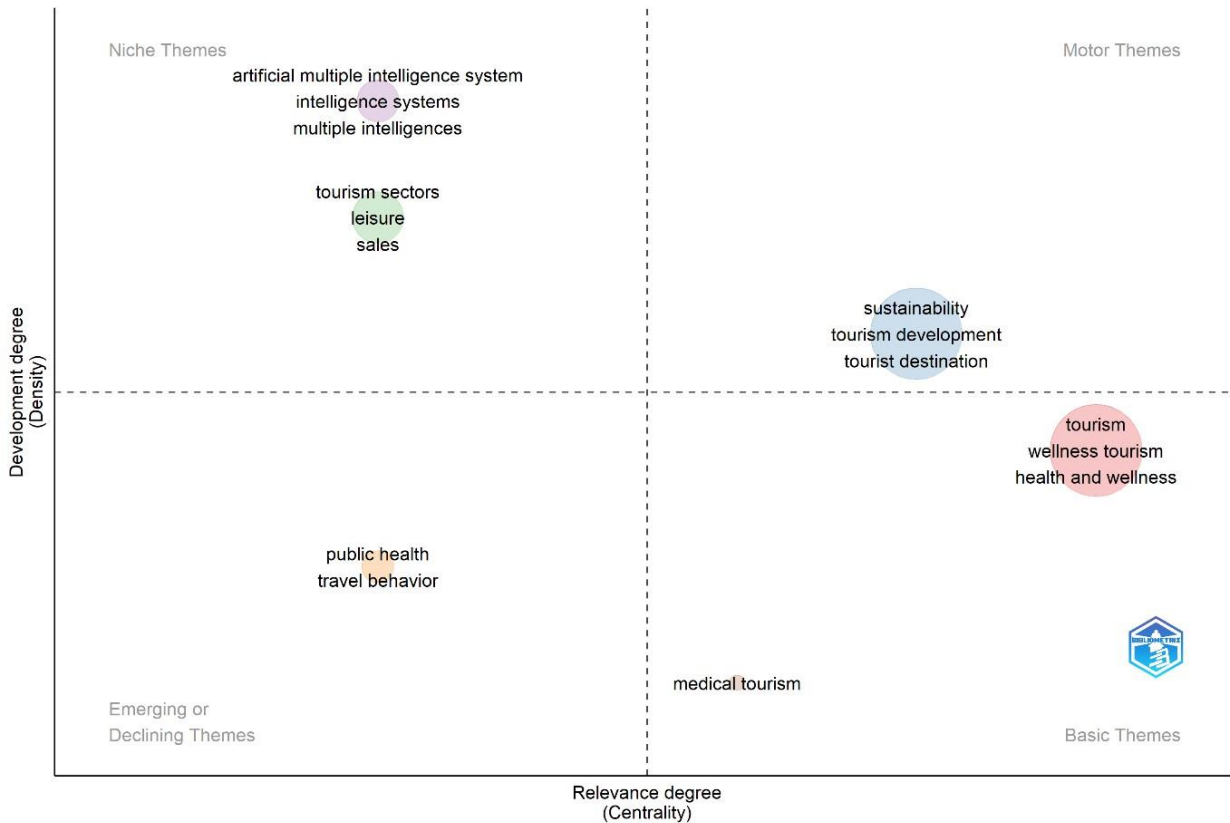


Note: Retrieved from Biblioshiny

Figure 3 shows the trend in average citations per year, which fluctuates but generally increases over time. Citation levels were very low in 2013 and then rose steadily through 2017, suggesting growing academic attention. A marked increase appears around 2019–2020, when the average citation rate peaks above 5, indicating a period of stronger research influence and visibility.

This upward movement is followed by a decline in 2022, which may reflect either fewer highly cited publications or the shorter time available for newer studies to accumulate citations. The average rises again in 2023 and falls in 2024, a pattern that is common for recent publications. Overall, the figure suggests that the field’s scholarly impact has grown over the past decade, despite normal year-to-year fluctuations in citation accumulation.

Figure 4 Thematical Map



Note: Retrieved from Biblioshiny

Figure 4 presents the thematic map of the study area. Based on centrality and density, the map is divided into four quadrants: motor themes, niche themes, emerging or declining themes, and basic themes.

Motor themes have high centrality and high density, meaning they are both well developed and highly relevant to the field. In this study, the main motor themes are sustainability, tourism development, and tourist destinations, showing the close connection between sustainability and wellness tourism. Niche themes have high density but low centrality. The key niche themes identified are artificial multiple intelligence systems, intelligence systems, multiple intelligences, tourism sectors, leisure, and sales. These themes are specialized and technically developed, but they are less central to the overall field.

Emerging or declining themes have low density and low centrality, indicating that they are either underdeveloped or losing relevance. In this category, public health and travel behaviour appear as weakly connected themes. Basic themes, by contrast, have high centrality but low density, meaning they are important to the field but not yet fully developed. Medical tourism appears as a key basic theme and remains highly relevant to wellness tourism, suggesting strong potential for further research. Overall, sustainability and wellness tourism emerge as the dominant themes in the study area. Although medical tourism appears as a fundamental theme, it still requires deeper investigation in future studies.

design authentic wellness experiences rooted in local culture and nature. Destination marketers can strengthen brand positioning by highlighting sustainability attributes that appeal to health-conscious and environmentally aware travelers. Policymakers can further support the sector by encouraging sustainable infrastructure, certification standards, community participation, and partnerships that enhance the long-term resilience of wellness destinations. Overall, the study indicates that sustainability-oriented management can improve visitor satisfaction, strengthen destination image, and support the long-term growth of wellness tourism.

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