

Marketing, People, and Place in Rural Tourism: A Systematic Literature Review of Development Strategies

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Abstract: *This systematic literature review of 195 empirical studies (2014–2024) reveals how rural tourism strategies have evolved from traditional models toward integrated frameworks emphasizing sustainability and community empowerment. The analysis demonstrates a fundamental reimagining of rural destinations as dynamic cultural landscapes where local identity, environmental stewardship, and inclusive growth converge, with micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) serving dual roles as economic catalysts and cultural ambassadors through ecotourism initiatives, product development, and community-based entrepreneurship. Parallel transformations in marketing show a shift toward digital engagement through immersive technologies, emotional storytelling, and social media strategies that enhance global visibility while preserving authentic place narratives. Crucially, the findings highlight human capital development—particularly through targeted education, skills training, and inclusive capacity-building programs—as the foundation for professionalized services, local leadership, and long-term destination resilience. The study reveals three critical contributions to rural tourism scholarship: first, it identifies the convergence of digital marketing innovations with traditional place-based authenticity as a key success factor; second, it demonstrates that MSME empowerment functions as both an economic and cultural preservation mechanism; and third, it establishes human capital development as the foundational enabler of all other strategic dimensions. The study advocates for holistic strategies that synchronize sustainable planning, innovative marketing, MSME support, and workforce development, stressing that multi-stakeholder collaboration and evidence-based policies are essential to address systemic challenges. By framing rural tourism as a balanced ecosystem of cultural preservation, technological innovation, and community agency, this research positions it as a transformative vehicle for equitable regional development.*

Keywords: *Rural tourism; Sustainable development; Community-based tourism; Digital marketing; MSME empowerment; Human capital development.*

INTRODUCTION

The growth of global tourism has fundamentally reshaped the landscapes of local economies and environments, making the development of sustainable tourism strategies a pressing concern for many regions (Hall, 2019; Mowforth & Munt, 2015; Pan et al., 2018; Telfer & Sharpley, 2015). This study delves into the strategic development of rural tourism, particularly focusing on how it can promote sustainability while enhancing local identity and economic resilience. As the tourism sector continues to expand, establishing a balanced approach that nurtures the local environment and society is crucial, ensuring that communities benefit from tourism in ways that preserve their cultural and natural heritage (Janjua et al., 2022; Roslan et al., 2021).

Recent studies highlight an emerging consensus on the critical importance of sustainable tourism development practices that support local communities, thereby recognizing the need for actionable frameworks that empower residents in decision-making processes related to

tourism initiatives (Chan et al., 2021; Mtapuri et al., 2021). The prevalent literature underscores that effective tourism strategies encompass an integrative approach in which local knowledge, resources, and cultural assets are leveraged to create unique and authentic tourism experiences that resonate with both visitors and residents (Dangi & Jamal, 2016; Yi et al., 2021). Sustainable tourism is multifaceted, addressing economic, social, and environmental dimensions simultaneously to develop resilient tourism frameworks (Khan et al., 2021).

Despite the wealth of existing knowledge, gaps remain in applying these theories to practical settings. Specifically, the challenges of aligning tourism development with local community needs and environmental sustainability have not been comprehensively addressed (Heslinga et al., 2017; Yanes et al., 2019). While many studies advocate a community-based tourism approach that integrates local cultures with entrepreneurial initiatives, few systematic reviews aggregate findings across different locales, hindering the identification of best practices and generalized strategies for rural tourism development (Dodds et al., 2016; I. Ferreira et al., 2019). This research bridges this gap through a systematic literature review (SLR) that evaluates contemporary strategies and produces actionable insights for rural tourism development initiatives (Aldao et al., 2021; Casado-Aranda et al., 2021).

The novelty of this systematic literature review lies in its comprehensive integration of four strategic pillars—destination development, marketing innovation, MSME empowerment, and human capital development—within a unified analytical framework. Unlike previous reviews that examine these elements separately, this study synthesizes their interdependencies and reveals how their convergence creates sustainable competitive advantages for rural destinations. Furthermore, by analyzing 195 empirical studies spanning the transformative period from 2014 to 2024—including the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath—this review captures how rural tourism strategies have adapted to unprecedented disruptions and technological accelerations. This temporal scope provides unique insights into resilience mechanisms and innovation pathways that earlier reviews could not address.

The primary focus of this study is to explore tourism development strategies that prioritize local stakeholder engagement while advancing sustainability goals. It concentrates on how integrating local knowledge and community input can lead to more effective tourism practices that empower local residents and enhance the visitor experience. The objectives of this research are: 1) to identify successful practices in sustainable tourism development from case studies across diverse geographic and cultural contexts; 2) to understand the perceptions and attitudes of local communities toward tourism and their roles in value co-creation; and 3) to develop an integrated framework to guide local governments and policymakers in formulating inclusive tourism strategies that balance economic development with cultural preservation and environmental sustainability (X. Li et al., 2022; Mekonnen et al., 2022).

The significance of this study extends beyond academic contributions to offer practical implications for multiple stakeholder groups. For policymakers, it provides evidence-based guidelines for designing integrated rural tourism policies that avoid fragmented approaches. For destination managers and community leaders, it offers strategic frameworks that balance modernization with authenticity and commercial viability with cultural preservation. For tourism entrepreneurs and MSMEs, it identifies capability requirements and support mechanisms essential for sustainable business development. Finally, for local communities, this study articulates pathways for meaningful participation in tourism development that

enhance—rather than compromise—their quality of life and cultural identity.

The theoretical significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to the broader field of sustainable tourism by clarifying the relationship between local community empowerment and tourism development. By pinpointing the conditions and strategies under which sustainable, community-centered tourism can flourish, this research fills a void in the literature regarding practical applications of these strategies across diverse contexts (Aman et al., 2019; Hussain et al., 2022). Theoretically, it advances destination management theory by proposing a synergistic model in which marketing, human capital, enterprise development, and place-making function as mutually reinforcing rather than independent variables. This integrated perspective challenges traditional linear models of tourism development and offers a more holistic understanding of how rural destinations achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

In terms of methodology, this study adopts a systematic literature review framework, which enables a comprehensive synthesis of existing research on rural tourism strategies. This approach not only consolidates knowledge from various studies but also critically assesses the methodologies, findings, and recommendations of previous works to derive meaningful, real-world-applicable conclusions (Bertocchi et al., 2020; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). Through this rigorous analysis, the study offers a well-rounded perspective on the current state of tourism development and its alignment with sustainability goals, thereby providing valuable insights for stakeholders involved in tourism policy and management (Bethune et al., 2022).

METHODS

This study utilized a systematic literature review (SLR) to investigate rural tourism development strategies, focusing on key concepts such as community-based tourism, rural tourism, and cultural tourism. The SLR method was selected due to its robust framework for synthesizing research findings and deriving conclusions based on a comprehensive examination of existing literature (Kerschbaumer et al., 2020; Majid et al., 2022). This systematic approach mitigated bias while ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives within the field of tourism (Nave & Ferreira, 2019). The selection of the SLR methodology was particularly appropriate for this research, as it enabled the identification of patterns, trends, and gaps across a large body of empirical work, facilitating the development of integrated frameworks that transcended individual case studies.

The research conformed to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, which provided a detailed checklist to enhance the transparency and reporting quality of systematic reviews (Nave & Ferreira, 2019; Roberts et al., 2020). The PRISMA framework governed each stage of the review process, from the identification of relevant literature through the extraction and synthesis of data.

The data sources for this review consisted solely of journal articles indexed in Scopus, covering an eleven-year period from 2014 to 2024. This period was chosen to capture recent advancements and insights in the domain of rural tourism. The keywords employed in the search included "rural tourism development," "community-based tourism," "local tourism," and "cultural tourism." The search was conducted using Publish or Perish (PoP), a widely recognized software tool that facilitates academic research by retrieving and analyzing published literature based on citation metrics. PoP was particularly beneficial because it

allowed researchers to measure the impact and significance of various articles, thus streamlining the selection process for high-quality studies (Majid et al., 2022).

The screening and selection process for this systematic literature review (SLR) on rural tourism development strategies followed a structured, multi-phase approach to ensure the inclusion of only high-quality and relevant studies. The first phase applied broad exclusion criteria, removing non-empirical publications such as books, book chapters, conference papers, editorials, letters, notes, retracted works, and review articles, as they typically lacked original data or analytical depth (Lombardi & Secundo, 2020; Nave & Ferreira, 2019; Sahu et al., 2020). The second phase involved title and abstract screening to retain only studies that explicitly addressed rural tourism, community-based tourism, or cultural tourism (Majid et al., 2022; Sepriano et al., 2020). In the third phase, the impact factor of the journals was considered to ensure academic rigor, prioritizing studies published in moderate- to high-impact outlets (Ain et al., 2019; Majid et al., 2022). The final phase involved a close reading of full texts to identify articles with substantial empirical findings and actionable strategies relevant to rural tourism development (Frederico et al., 2019; Sepriano et al., 2020). This rigorous four-stage process enhanced the overall quality and coherence of the review, supporting both scholarly contributions and practical relevance.

Data extraction involved a meticulous process in which relevant information was collected from each selected article. Key data points included the study's methodology, results, theoretical frameworks, and recommendations. This structured approach facilitated the identification of common themes across the literature, laying the groundwork for subsequent synthesis (Roberts et al., 2020). The analysis employed qualitative techniques to categorize extracted data into thematic areas, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of existing trends, gaps, and opportunities within rural tourism development research (Sahu et al., 2020). Through a thorough evaluation of the literature, this research contributed to an informed discourse within the tourism academic community.

The thematic synthesis method served as the primary approach to data synthesis in this study. By analyzing the themes identified during data extraction, this methodology allowed for the drawing of new insights and theoretical constructs regarding rural tourism development strategies (Divjak et al., 2022). Each theme was interpreted in light of the broader research landscape, contributing to both academic knowledge and practical applications for rural tourism stakeholders. The synthesis process compiled a cohesive narrative that encapsulated the current state of research in rural tourism while highlighting potential areas for future investigation and development (Nash et al., 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This systematic review draws exclusively on articles indexed in Scopus, covering the period from 2014 to 2024 to capture recent developments in rural tourism. The search was conducted using the Publish or Perish (PoP) software with keywords such as “rural tourism development,” “local tourism,” and “cultural tourism.” A total of 1,118 records were initially retrieved. After removing 84 duplicates and excluding 148 records that did not meet the inclusion criteria (e.g., books, book chapters, conference papers, editorials, letters, notes, retracted papers, and review articles), 886 records proceeded to the screening phase. During this phase, 63 records were excluded due to insufficient relevance based on titles, and 54 could

not be retrieved. The remaining 769 abstracts were assessed for eligibility, resulting in the exclusion of 574 records due to limited contribution to the research topic (Based on abstracts). Ultimately, 195 empirical research articles were included in the final review. All authors were actively involved in each stage of the selection process, with responsibilities distributed proportionally to ensure consistency and rigor.

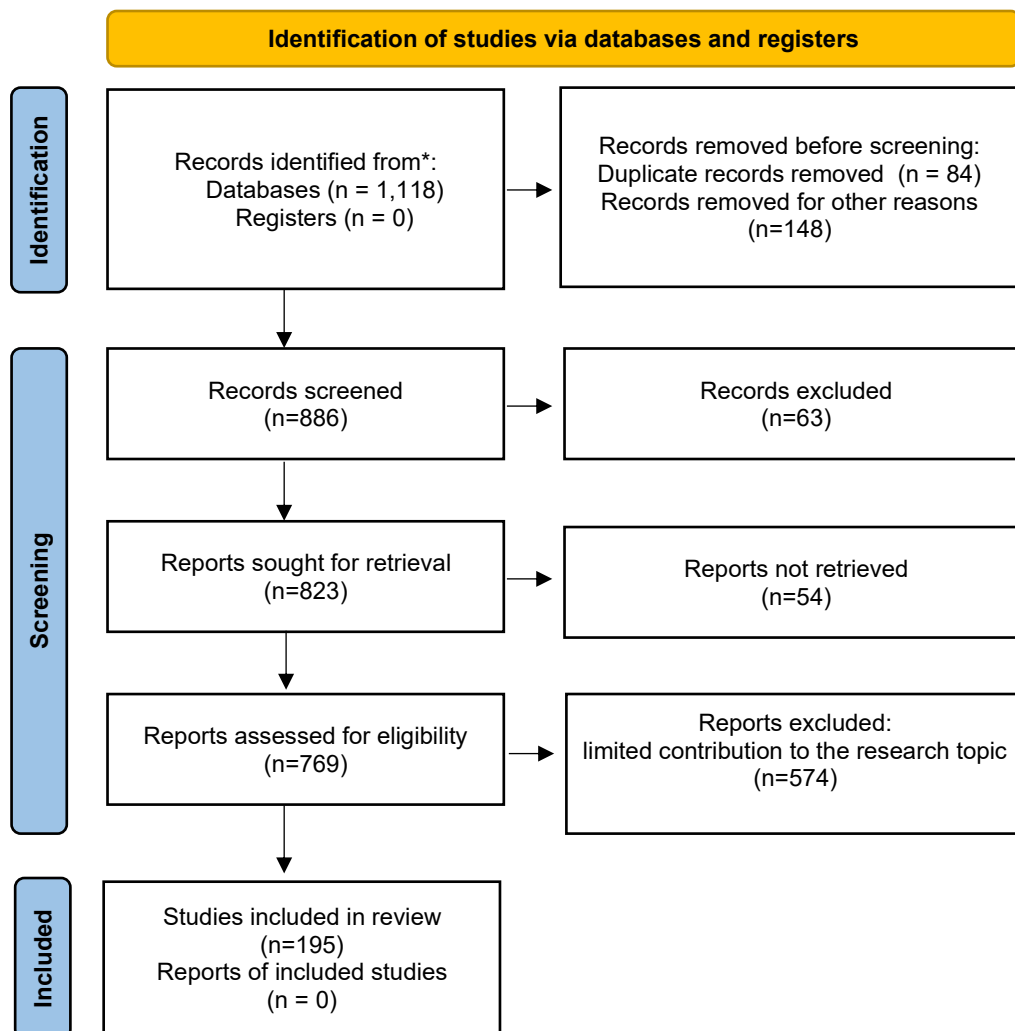


Figure 1. PRISMA-Based Screening and Selection Flow

The analysis of 195 empirical studies on rural tourism strategies between 2014 and 2024 reveals a comprehensive transformation in the sector, characterized by a strong convergence between sustainability goals and participatory planning. A central pillar of this evolution is the redefinition of rural tourism destinations—not merely as geographic locations but as integrated cultural landscapes where authenticity, environmental stewardship, and socio-economic inclusivity shape the visitor experience. Destination development increasingly entails strategic efforts to enhance infrastructure, digital connectivity, and heritage conservation, while simultaneously building a compelling sense of place rooted in local identity. These findings suggest that successful rural destinations are those that balance preservation and innovation, allowing for both experiential richness and long-term resilience.

Table 1. Articles Included in The Analysis

No	Strategic Theme	Strategic Narrative (Integrated)	Number of Articles
1	Empowerment of MSMEs and Local Communities	Strengthening MSMEs and local community participation through training, cultural promotion, ecotourism, ecosystem collaboration, improving service quality, and branding to improve community welfare.	41 Items
2	Development of Technology-Based and Digitalized Destinations	The use of technology to improve the visitor experience through digital promotion, augmented reality, AI, social media, operational efficiency, and destination competitiveness.	21 items
3	Sustainable Tourism and Ecotourism	Environmental conservation, mitigation of the negative impacts of mass tourism, raising awareness, local participation, and the use of sustainability indicators that integrate ecological, social, and cultural dimensions.	54 Items
4	Product Innovation and Diversification of Tourism Experiences	Development of unique, personal, cultural/nature-based tourism experiences including culinary innovation, wellness, festivals, slow tourism, storytelling, and experience differentiation.	42 items
5	Infrastructure and Accessibility Enhancement	Improving transportation infrastructure, digital accessibility, and tourism support facilities to increase tourist flows and inter-regional connectivity.	13 items
6	Human Resource Capacity and Tourism Education	Continuous training, strengthening destination management, tourism literacy, technological competence, and competency-based policy formulation.	32 Items
7	Multi-Stakeholder and Institutional Collaboration	Synergy between government, communities, the private sector, and academia to formulate participatory and inclusive governance policies that support sustainable rural tourism.	21 items
8	Destination Promotion and Image Building	Narrative-based promotions, immersive experiences, social media, destination branding, and emotional-cultural approaches to increase travelers' interest and loyalty.	22 items
9	Cultural Heritage Protection and Local Identity	Cultural preservation, protection of heritage assets, strengthening local identity through festivals, cultural promotion, and community involvement in tourism governance.	22 items
10	Crisis and Destination Resilience Management	Increasing the resilience of tourist destinations to global and local crises through risk management, community empowerment, and data-driven policy approaches.	15 items
11	Social Inclusion and Gender Equality in Tourism	Gender mainstreaming, social justice, gender equality, and inclusive participation in tourism development to achieve justice and sustainability.	7 items
12	Data-Driven Strategies and Impact Evaluation	Spatial planning, sustainability performance measurement, and evidence-based policies through tools such as SWOT, DPSIR, AHP, and integrated destination assessments.	9 items

In parallel, tourism marketing has undergone significant shifts in method and message. Rather than relying solely on traditional promotion channels, rural tourism marketing now leverages digital tools—such as social media campaigns, immersive technologies, and emotion-driven storytelling—to engage targeted audiences and differentiate rural destinations in competitive markets. Branding strategies are increasingly narrative-based, integrating local voices and cultural values to build destination loyalty and emotional connection. This marketing transformation is not only technological but also conceptual, as it reframes the tourist not as a passive consumer but as a co-creator of value and experience. These findings collectively underscore twelve core strategic themes that have emerged from the literature, systematically summarized in Table 1 alongside their foundational references.

The role of tourism enterprises, particularly Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), emerges as a strategic driver of local economic development. Empowering these enterprises through training, capacity-building, and ecosystem integration contributes directly to community well-being and entrepreneurial vibrancy. The reviewed literature highlights various support mechanisms—ranging from local product promotion and ecotourism integration to value-based governance models—that enable rural MSMEs to thrive while aligning with sustainable tourism principles. These enterprises serve not only as service providers but as cultural ambassadors and innovation agents within their communities.

Equally vital is the development of human resources in tourism, which underpins the professionalism and adaptability of rural destinations. Studies emphasize the need for continuous investment in tourism education, digital literacy, and management competencies to build institutional capacity and ensure high-quality service delivery. Human capital is increasingly recognized not just as a workforce but as a strategic asset capable of driving transformation across all levels of rural tourism development. Inclusive training programs that incorporate local knowledge, gender equity, and youth engagement are essential to ensuring that rural tourism is equitable, resilient, and future-ready.

Rural tourism has emerged as a crucial area of focus due to its significant potential for economic development, cultural revitalization, and community empowerment. Various studies indicate that rural tourism can generate substantial economic benefits by creating jobs and increasing external revenue streams, especially in underserved regions (S. Kumar et al., 2021; Y.-L. Liu et al., 2023; Rasoolimanesh & Jaafar, 2016). For example, Rasoolimanesh & Jaafar, (2016) illustrate how tourism development often leads to local economic advancement in rural areas through enhanced job opportunities and income sources. Y.-L. Liu et al. (2023) discuss how rural communities benefit economically from introducing new tourism initiatives. Additionally, the engagement between tourists and local cultural traditions facilitates authentic experiences, which further underlines the importance of rural tourism (Y.-L. Liu et al., 2023). Educating tourists about local customs promotes a positive visitor experience and fosters a deeper connection between the community and its cultural heritage, enhancing local identity (Demirović Bajrami et al., 2020; Janjua et al., 2022).

Regarding marketing strategies, promoting rural tourism destinations requires innovative and culturally sensitive approaches. Digital marketing methods have become essential in this changing landscape, as evidenced by Deb et al., (2022), who advocate for leveraging online platforms to expand reach and impact in the tourism sector. Effective marketing strategies must integrate community perspectives and narratives to create compelling experiences that resonate

with potential visitors. Recognizing the uniqueness of rural destinations allows for the crafting of narratives highlighting the value of local culture, traditions, and natural beauty (Ćurčić et al., 2021). Moreover, marketing efforts can utilize social media platforms to increase visibility and attract a global audience (Joo et al., 2020). Such engagement not only promotes a destination but also fosters community pride and investment in the tourism sector.

The development of tourism enterprises in rural areas is pivotal to realize the economic benefits outlined above. Entrepreneurship plays a crucial role, as small-scale, family-run businesses often dominate rural tourism settings (Kallmuenzer & Peters, 2017). These enterprises are typically more agile and can better respond to local needs and changes in market demand compared to larger corporations. A study by Guo et al., (2022) showed that effective tourism entrepreneurship is significantly linked to income generation and employment creation within rural contexts. This is particularly important as it helps prevent urban migration by providing viable income alternatives in rural areas. However, the success of these enterprises relies heavily on sound infrastructure and support from local and regional governments. Thus, local authorities must adopt supportive policies to facilitate and regulate tourism entrepreneurship effectively.

Human resources in rural tourism are integral to ensuring that the sector delivers on its promise of community empowerment and sustainability. A well-trained and motivated workforce is vital for enhancing the quality of services offered within the tourism sector (Adamov et al., 2020; Wijijayanti et al., 2020). Initiatives aimed at increasing the skill levels of local workers can foster higher levels of service excellence and visitor satisfaction, thus aiding in repeat business and customer loyalty (De Luca et al., 2020). Research indicated that there are significant gaps in training and skill development in many rural areas, often hindering the full potential of local tourism enterprises (Jeelani et al., 2022). The integration of training programs that focus on hospitality, customer service, and sustainable practices will be essential in transitioning rural communities toward a more professional representation in the tourism market (Deb et al., 2022).

Despite the many opportunities that rural tourism presents, various challenges remain. One critical challenge is the fragmentation of tourism initiatives and the inadequate integration of sustainable practices. Janjua et al., (2022) emphasize the need for a comprehensive evaluation framework to address these gaps effectively. Additionally, many rural tourism initiatives fail to adequately engage with broader societal issues, such as gender inclusivity and socio-cultural integration, posing another layer of complexity (Demirović Bajrami et al., 2020; Hassan et al., 2022). Duxbury et al. (2020) argue for more inclusive initiatives that consider the diverse experiences and needs of local communities. More robust collaboration among stakeholders—community members, government entities, and tourism operators—will be essential for ensuring that rural tourism grows sustainably and equitably.

As sustainability becomes an overarching theme in current discussions around rural tourism, the integration of sustainable development principles into tourism strategies is essential. Sustainable tourism practices not only help to preserve the natural environment but also enhance the quality of life for local communities (Ćurčić et al., 2021; Demirović Bajrami et al., 2020). Community-based tourism models that empower locals while promoting environmental conservation through collective action have been proposed (Janjua et al., 2022; Jeelani et al., 2022). These models advocate for local inputs in decision-making processes

related to tourism, ensuring that benefits accrue to the community rather than external entities. Such initiatives not only help preserve cultural heritage but also foster a sense of ownership among local populations, thus enhancing the overall sustainability of rural tourism (Adamov et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

This systematic review of 195 empirical studies from 2014–2024 reveals rural tourism's strategic evolution toward sustainability, community empowerment, and innovation, transforming destinations into cultural landscapes emphasizing local identity, environmental stewardship, and socio-economic inclusivity. Marketing has shifted to participatory, digital, and narrative-driven strategies fostering visitor resonance, while MSMEs drive economic and cultural vitality, and human resource development via education and training bolsters service quality and capacity. Persistent challenges—fragmented governance, weak evaluation frameworks, and neglect of gender/social equity—underscore the need for multi-stakeholder collaboration, context-sensitive policies, and investments in infrastructure and human capital to enable adaptive, inclusive systems aligned with sustainable development goals. For future research, longitudinal studies tracking post-2024 interventions in underrepresented regions (e.g., Southeast Asia) could assess long-term equity outcomes and AI-driven personalization's role in scaling resilient rural tourism models.

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