Researching Slow Tourism: An Institutional and Spatial Map

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Abstract

This study delves into the evolving landscape of slow tourism, a niche yet rapidly expanding field within sustainable tourism, characterized by a focus on cultural immersion, environmental stewardship, and local community engagement. Employing a comprehensive bibliometric analysis, the research scrutinizes the proliferation of scholarly interest in slow tourism, particularly highlighting its emergence as a counter-narrative to the fast-paced consumption patterns of conventional tourism. The study meticulously compiles data from the Web of Science database, incorporating publications spanning from the early 1990s to 2024, to map out the trajectory of academic discourse surrounding slow tourism. Key analytical dimensions include publication trends over time, geographical distribution of research, thematic concentrations, and institutional contributions to the field. The findings underscore a significant surge in research interest post-2008, with a notable concentration in Europe, reflecting the region's pioneering role in integrating slow tourism principles with broader sustainability and heritage conservation efforts. Through this investigation, the study aims to provide a foundational understanding of slow tourism's theoretical underpinnings, its alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and its implications for future tourism practices.

Keywords

Bibliometric analysis, slow movement, slow tourism, slow travel, Cittaslow, sustainability, ChatGPT

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Introduction

The 21st century is marked by the rise of tourism at an increasingly rapid pace. In the pre-pandemic period, tourism reached almost 1.5 billion international tourists according to Pop and Popescu (2021), a value reached as a result of increasing mobility, increasingly accessible means of transport, a growing population, the desire for knowledge and leisure in places established as tourist destinations. This has led to an overpopulation of some destinations, which is most often associated with a deterioration of the environment, but also with a deterioration of the quality of life of the residents of these places. The COVID-19 pandemic has had very serious effects on the tourism sector, but at the same time it has also led to some changes in terms of the orientation of demand towards new destinations, towards less known or less developed places. Isolation and the fear of contagion contributed to the discovery of new destinations, which, although they had an important tourist potential, were not among the well-known destinations that attracted tourists due to the intense promotion that had been carried out over time.

Discovering new destinations, spending quality time for a longer period, in the middle of nature, using local resources, contributes to sustaining the environment in the cleanest conditions. Forms of tourism less practiced before the COVID-19 pandemic, but which are more environmentally friendly, such as slow tourism (Klarin et al., 2024), have also taken off. Slow tourism supports sustainable tourism and reduces the high pace of tourism practices (Le Busque et al., 2022). Slow tourism becomes an alternative to mass tourism, the fast pace of everyday life and travel, but also contributes to reducing negative impacts that contribute to climate change (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020), (Serdane et al., 2020). Slow tourism is based on

the slow food movement, which emerged towards the end of the 20th century in Italy to counteract fast food, especially in historical areas with a rich cultural heritage.

The increase in global tourism demand also leads to an increase in competition between destinations, and the types of tourism based on the exploitation of natural resources with local specificity are of increasing interest. Thus, local gastronomy is emerging as a trend, as an intangible heritage that attracts tourists (Molina-Collado et al., 2024). Slow food, according to the World FoodTravel Association (2023), is the journey made with the aim of consuming food in a place, in order to get to know that place better through taste. Slow food is not only about food, but also about the gastronomic experience and activities related to local gastronomy that tourists undertake during the trip (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and Basque Culinary Center, 2019). Slow tourism, and the slow movement in general, is gaining an increasingly important role in the concerns of researchers with the recognition of its implications for sustainability in several areas (Del Soldato and Massari, 2024). Thus, in the post-pandemic period the role of slow tourism has increased due to the recovery possibilities it offers and the opportunities for developing sustainable tourism. Klarin et al. (2024) highlight the importance of sustainable community development and underline the potential of the Mediterranean diet as a sustainable model. The complex link between food and tourism development is of particular importance in the preservation of cultural heritage. The aim of the slow movement is to find the natural rhythm in which to carry out the activity, seeking a balance between fast and slow in order to achieve performance in relation to speed (Kostilnikova et al., 2022). The slow food experience has a positive impact on tourists' quality of life (Huang et al., 2022).

Restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on tourism have led to the shaping of tourist attitudes and motivation to travel to less exploited destinations as a result of diversifying supplier offerings towards sustainable travel. Thus, there is an opportunity for the development of slow tourism, with numerous local benefits. Also, forms of alternative tourism that have a positive impact on the environment but also contribute to personal well-being include: responsible tourism, ecotourism, cultural tourism, health tourism or green tourism (Oh et al., 2016). Slow tourism is considered as a niche tourism and several authors discuss how it can be integrated with sustainable tourism (Dickinson et al., 2011).

The aim of this research is to identify the key concepts related to slow tourism, the interest shown by researchers in this topic, expressed by the volume of research carried out in this field, the location at European level of the countries with higher production in publications related to this topic, the identification of the institutions that have been more involved in slow tourism research and the publishers that have significant publications in this field. The paper is organized as follows: an introduction presenting an overview of slow tourism in the context of recent events that have negatively impacted tourism activity, as well as the opportunities that have emerged along the way; a section presenting the most recent approaches to slow tourism through the lens of a bibliometric analysis, in order to highlight the interest shown by researchers in this topic and the configuration of current and future trends; a section dedicated to the methodology presenting the method used in carrying out this research; and a section of results, comments and conclusions drawn from the research.

1. Review of the scientific literature

Slow tourism, slow travel is a new tourism trend that is increasingly attracting the attention of practitioners and researchers alike. Recent studies address the slow movement in different aspects, from slow food to slow tourism, slow travel, slow city (Cittaslow), using as means of analysis different platforms such as social media or international databases for different types of publications.

Klarin et al. (2024) conduct a scientometric analysis combined with a critical qualitative analysis to identify future research directions to shed light on the current state of knowledge about slow tourism. In this regard, through a bibliometric analysis, Krešić and Gjurašić (2022) tracked the evolution of slow tourism for the period 2011-2021, as well as research themes targeting slow tourism. The study focused on the trends that have manifested themselves in slow tourism by author and country over the last ten years. Mavric et al. (2021) perform a bibliometric analysis on the contribution of countries, organizations, which have addressed slow tourism, using VOSviewer to highlight the trend of literature in this direction. The results of the research showed a remarkable increase in the number of publications on slow tourism.

Kostilnikova et al. (2022) approach slow tourism by outlining a conceptual framework from which some attributes that define slow tourism emerge, such as time, distance, and motivation, emphasizing sustainable transport, Lumsdon and McGrath (2011) discuss the socio-cultural phenomenon of slow travel, while Serdane (2020) attempts to identify opportunities within slow tourism from a supply-side perspective. The idea

of slow travel was also used to promote countries as tourist destinations, Serdane et al. (2020), where service providers are involved in understanding the slow movement in tourism development.

Although relatively new as a method, social media content analysis is also being explored in the sustainability sphere, including in slow tourism according to Le Busque et al. (2022), and "fitspiration" is becoming a trend in order to determine the influence that content can have on audience image. Thus, Le Busque et al. (2022) analyze 600 posts by Instagram users who posted images with the hashtag "slow tourism" for locations and activities associated with slow tourism. The aim of the research is to highlight the role of social media in investigating trends and research opportunities in this field. A study exploring vlogger content on slow tourism to find gaps between theory and practice was conducted by Manthiou et al. (2022). It finds a variety of methods used in studying the phenomenon of slow tourism, from bibliometric analysis to interviews or social media network analysis, demonstrating the growing interest in this type of tourism, especially at European level.

2. Research methodology

The present research seeks to explore the literature on slow movement through the application of bibliometric analysis. This analysis serves as a roadmap for new researchers embarking on their future academic endeavors. It also motivates scholars and researchers to focus on emerging and yet-to-be-explored topics for deeper exploration. Essentially, its purpose is to distill the trends in research and the scholarly networks among leading publications, reputable journals, key subjects, prominent authors, research organizations, prolific nations, and the prevalence of specific keywords (Kalantari et al., 2017). Bibliometric analysis can help researchers identify gaps in research trends, measure scientific progress, and recognize research trends in various disciplines (Liu et al., 2023). It can also provide insights into the relationships between authors, institutions, and countries, and help researchers identify the top influential authors, institutions, and journals in a particular field (Baako and Abroampa, 2023). By analyzing publication outputs, citation patterns, and collaboration networks, researchers can gain a quantitative overview of the global research output, identify influential authors, institutions, and journals, and map the collaboration networks among researchers (Atsız et al., 2022). For this specific study, the researchers gathered data from the WoS database (Clarivate Analytics) in April 2024.

The Web of Science (WoS) database is a widely used and reputable source for bibliometric analysis due to its extensive coverage, accuracy, and ability to provide comprehensive insights into research trends and patterns (Azañedo et al., 2022). WoS is a citation index, which means that it contains records of publications along with information on citations made in those publications and links them to identify which publications have cited that one, and how many times a publication has been cited (Gray, 2024). This feature allows researchers to trace citations to a paper in order to find other papers related to it, and to analyze research based on citation counts and patterns, which is a crucial aspect of bibliometrics.

WoS provides a wide range of citation metrics and trends relating to authors, publications, institutions, and collaborations, which can be analyzed using the Analyze Results feature in WoS or other resources available through the InCites platform for more in-depth analysis. WoS is also used to construct author, organization, and country co-authorship maps, journal co-citation maps, and keyword co-occurrence maps, which can provide insights into the relationships between authors, institutions, and countries, and help researchers identify the top influential authors, institutions, and journals in a particular field (Sezgin et al., 2022).

For this study, data was gathered from the Web of Science (WoS) database, specifically from the Science Citation Index Expanded (SCIE), Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI), Conference Proceedings Citation Index-Social Sciences and Humanities, and the Book Citation Index-Social Sciences and Humanities, using "Slow Tourism, Cittaslow, Cittaslow Network, Slow Adventure, Slow Cities, Slow City, Slow Food, Slow Travel " as a search keywords in the title field. To narrow the search results and minimize the inclusion of irrelevant studies, the keywords were enclosed in quotation marks (""). This approach yielded 2568 relevant documents, including articles (1637), conference papers (587), and books (84) within the WoS database. Language and document type distributions present a predominantly English-centric research landscape (2435) with articles leading the publication types.

Drawing on the diverse methodologies for literature exploration and analysis highlighted in bibliometric research like Öztürk et al. (2024), our study investigates the following aspects: "the annual number of publications", "which are the top contributing EU countries", "which are the top contributing organizations", "which are the top contributing publishers", "which are the top 20 keywords in papers", "which are the top 15 topics debated". In analyzing the database that resulted we used a variety of tools like: Chat GPT, Excel,

VOSviewer, Datawrapper, MonkeyLearn. These tools were used in order to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the research process. Each of these tools is valuable, as follows:

- Chat GPT: Chat GPT can assist in generating text, summaries, or responses, which can be helpful for analyzing and summarizing large volumes of text data from academic papers, abstracts, or other sources (Ortiz, 2023).
- Excel: Excel is a versatile tool for organizing, analyzing, and visualizing bibliometric data. It can help in managing citation data, creating tables, charts, and graphs to represent trends, collaborations, and other bibliometric indicators.
- VOSviewer: VOSviewer is a powerful tool for visualizing bibliometric networks, co-authorship networks, and keyword co-occurrence maps. It enables researchers to identify key trends, clusters, and relationships within a bibliometric dataset (van Eck and Waltman, 2010).
- Datawrapper: Datawrapper is useful for creating interactive and visually appealing charts and graphs based on bibliometric data. It can help in presenting research findings in a clear and engaging manner, enhancing the communication of research insights (Datawrapper, 2024).
- MonkeyLearn: Monkeylearn is a text analysis tool that can be used to extract insights, classify documents, and perform sentiment analysis on bibliometric data. It can automate the process of categorizing and analyzing large volumes of text data, saving time, and improving accuracy (MonkeyLearn, 2024).
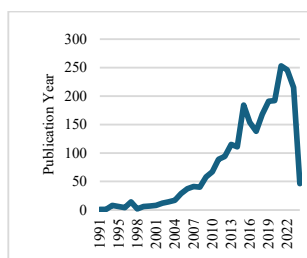
3. Results and discussion

Publications per year

Figure 1 illustrates the growth in the number of research studies published over time on the topics of interest. A scan of papers listed in the Web of Science (WoS) database, using key words "Slow Tourism, Cittaslow, Cittaslow Network, Slow Adventure, Slow Cities, Slow City, Slow Food, Slow Travel", was conducted for the period between 1986 and 2024. The earliest paper identified in this scan was published in 1991. There were few publications found for the period between 1991 and 2001 (less than 10 for each year). Interest in the slow phenomenon began to significantly increase among researchers starting from 2008, reaching a peak of 253 publications in 2021.

EU Contributing countries to the slow phenomenon

The research results outline the geographical distribution of publications related to Slow Tourism, highlighting a significant concentration in European countries, with Italy, Germany, and Spain leading in the number of publications. This geographical analysis underpins the regional interest in "Slow current", particularly in areas rich in cultural heritage and gastronomic diversity Figure 2.

Given the nature of slow movement as a promoter for sustainability, it is logical to conclude that Europe's leading position in research output is tied to its commitment to sustainable development. This interest among European scholars is likely influenced by the European Union's policies on sustainable development, which aim to transform Europe into a premier sustainable tourism destination by enhancing its economic and employment contributions.
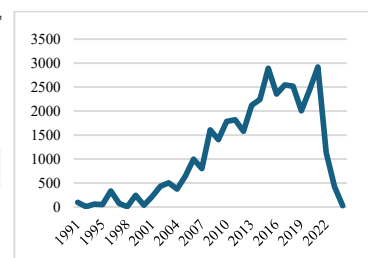

Figure no. 1. Publications per year
Source: made by authors based on data from WoS

Figure no. 2. Slow phenomenon preset in WoS on EU level.
Source: Made by authors using https://app.datawrapper.de

Figure no. 3. Citation per year
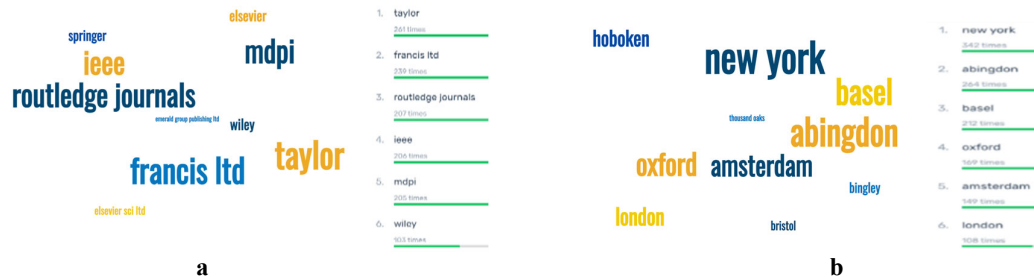*Source: made by authors based on data from WoS*

Number of citations over years

The line graph in Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the number of citations over a span of years, from 1991 to 2024. The data, as noted, is sourced from Web of Science (WoS). As observed over time there is a clear increasing trend in the number of citations over the years, starting from 1991. This suggests a growing body of work that is being referenced in academic or scientific research. The graph shows a peak around the years 2015 and 2021, where the number of citations reaches its highest point. This could indicate a particularly influential body of work published in previous years that has garnered a lot of attention. After the peak, there is a noticeable decline in citations. This drop becomes particularly steep in the year 2024. It's important to note that for the year 2024, the data is not complete, as the year is in progress. Despite the recent decline, the overall trend from 1991 to 2024 is upward, reflecting a long-term increase in the production and citation of academic works.

The top contributing Publishers and the top prolific Cities of origin for publishers

When considering publishing entities, Figure 4 (a) showcases the foremost publishers within the slow movement sector. The graphic emphasizes that Taylor and Francis Ltd leads the field with 261 articles respectively 239 articles. Following are Routledge Journals with 207 articles, and IEEE with 206 articles, alongside MDPI with 205 articles. Wiley rounds out the list, cited 103 articles.

When considering the top prolific cities of origin for publishers (Figure 4 - b) we identified New York as the top prolific city for publishers in the slow movement field with the largest font size and the highest frequency count of 342 times. This prominence indicates that New York is a significant hub for research and literature on the topic. Aside from New York, the other cities listed—Oxford, Amsterdam, London, Basel, Abingdon, and Bristol—are European, signifying a strong European influence in the publishing activities related to the slow movement sector.

a   b

Figure no. 4. Top publishers (a) and top prolific Cities of origin for publishers (b) in the field of slow movement

Source: made by authors using https://monkeylearn.com

Top 20 keywords encountered in indexed papers

To find out which are the most frequent keywords occurring in WoS index articles on the topic of slow movement, we used ChatGPT version 4. We asked the AI to list the top 20 frequent keywords contained in the database generated by WoS. The results are shown in Table No. 1.

Table 1. List of the top frequent key words encountered in WoS on the topic of slow movement

List of Key Words	List of Key Words	List of Key Words
Community Engagement	Travel Behavior	Eco-Friendly Practices
Heritage Preservation	Environmental Impact	Local Economy
Tourist Satisfaction	Local Culture	Travel Motivations
Sustainable Practices	Tourism Marketing	Cultural Preservation
Rural Destinations	Destination Branding	Slow Food Movement
Economic Growth	Tourist Experiences	Tourism Strategies
Quality of Life	Social Sustainability	

Source: List generated by ChatGPT based on the analysis of database downloaded from WoS

The keywords provide a multifaceted view of the field, where environmentalism, community development, cultural retention, and tourism are interwoven themes. This reflects a holistic approach to the slow movement, acknowledging its wide-ranging impacts and potential benefits. The research aggregated by these keywords can guide policymakers, practitioners, and researchers in developing strategies that honor local contexts while promoting sustainable and enriching slow movement experiences.

Top 10 topics debated in the articles that have connection with slow movement.

To complete this endeavor, we used ChatGPT version 4. Prior we saved the abstracts for all 2568 papers in one document and after we used Chat GPT to extract the 10 most discussed topics from this document. The results are shown in Table 2.

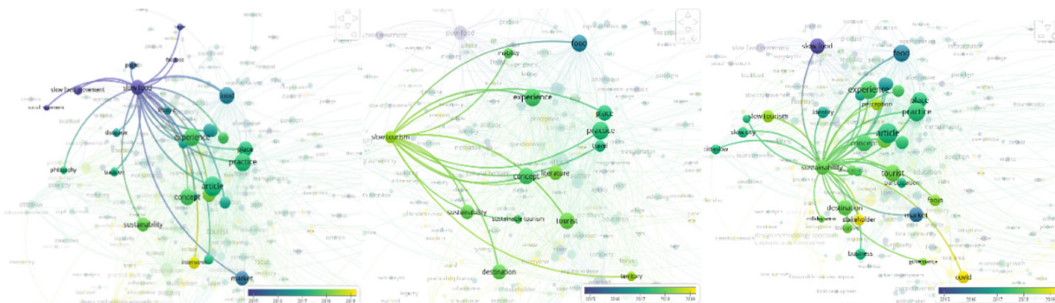**Table 2. The 10 most discussed topics extracted from abstracts with ChatGPT**

Principles of Slow Tourism: Examination of the core principles that define slow tourism, emphasizing sustainability, authenticity, and meaningful connections with destinations.
Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Analysis of how slow tourism aligns with SDGs, particularly in terms of environmental conservation, economic sustainability, and social equity.
Cittaslow Movement's Impact: Exploration of the Cittaslow movement's role in promoting slow tourism principles and enhancing life quality in small communities through sustainable practices.
Cultural Heritage and Preservation: Discussion on the importance of preserving cultural heritage within tourism and how slow tourism supports cultural and historical conservation.
Environmental Sustainability Practices: Detailed analysis of environmental sustainability within slow tourism, including eco-friendly travel practices and reduction of tourism's carbon footprint.
Importance of Local Gastronomy: Focus on local gastronomy's role in attracting tourists seeking authentic experiences and its impact on local economies and cultural preservation.
Community Engagement in Tourism Development: Examination of how slow tourism fosters community engagement, ensuring that tourism development benefits both locals and visitors.
Economic Benefits for Local Communities: Debate on the economic impacts of slow tourism on local communities, highlighting the balance between growth and sustainability.
Tourist Satisfaction and Behavior: Insights into how slow tourism influences tourist satisfaction, driving demand for immersive, authentic travel experiences.
Marketing Strategies for Slow Tourism: Strategies for marketing slow tourism destinations effectively, targeting tourists interested in sustainability and depth of experience.

Source: List generated by ChatGPT based on the analysis of database downloaded from WoS

The results highlight the top 10 debated topics, including the principles of Slow Tourism, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the impact of the Cittaslow movement, and the importance of preserving cultural heritage and environmental sustainability. A notable focus is on the economic benefits for local communities, tourist satisfaction, and the role of marketing strategies in promoting Slow Tourism. The analysis further delves into the repercussions of globalization, travel motivations, and the interconnectedness with the Slow Food Movement, underscoring a comprehensive analysis of Slow Tourism's multifaceted impacts.

Top key connectors for Slow Food, Slow Tourism, Sustainability

In order to do this analysis, we used VOSviewer as a tool to identify the top connected topics for three of the two most important components of the Slow movement - "Slow Food" and "Slow Tourism" - and one element that is at their core "Sustainability". The results are presented in Figure 5.

Figure no. 4. Key connectors for Slow Food, Slow Tourism and Sustainability when analyzing the articles indexed in WoS
Source: Made by authors using VOSviewer

From the output of VOSviewer, we can deduce that sustainability is a common thread that links the concepts of Slow Food and Slow Tourism, with various research topics deriving from this central concept. This reflects an integrated approach to studying these movements, emphasizing the importance of sustainability in their development and implementation.

The color coding in the visualization serves as a temporal map of the field's evolution, with darker hues marking the established, foundational concepts of the slow movement. Conversely, the lighter shades signal burgeoning areas of inquiry, reflecting the dynamic and evolving nature of research interests within the domain. This chromatic distinction offers a visual chronology, showcasing the progression from traditional to contemporary focal points in the discourse on slow movement.

Conclusions

The study offers a comprehensive exploration of slow tourism through a bibliometric analysis, highlighting the increasing academic interest in this area, especially against the backdrop of changing tourism dynamics influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Key findings from the analysis reveal that there is a notable increase in publications and research on slow tourism, suggesting heightened scholarly and practical interest. This trend underscores the shift towards more sustainable, environment-friendly, and culturally immersive travel experiences. European countries, particularly Italy, Germany, and Spain, emerge as leaders in slow movement research. This regional focus likely reflects Europe's rich cultural heritage, commitment to sustainability, and policy frameworks promoting sustainable tourism. A significant portion of the research underscores the importance of preserving cultural heritage within the tourism sector, supported by slow tourism principles. The intersection of slow food and tourism highlights the role of local gastronomy in attracting tourists and supporting local economies.

Despite the positive trends, challenges such as economic pressures, infrastructure needs, and adapting to consumer preferences persist. Future research should further explore the integration of slow tourism with digital technology, the impact on local economies beyond Europe, and strategies to overcome barriers.

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