

Research trends in the study of smart destinations

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29073/e3.v12i4.1150>

Received: 09/04/2026 | **Accepted:** 22/05/2026 | **Published:** 10/06/2026

ABSTRACT

Smart destinations represent a novel approach to contemporary tourism, integrating digital technologies, sustainability, and governance to enhance the visitor experience and the quality of life for residents. This involves the incorporation of tools such as the Internet of Things (IoT), big data, and artificial intelligence, and is consolidating itself as a cornerstone of the sector's digital transformation. However, the field exhibits conceptual, methodological and thematic fragmentation, which limits its structured understanding and demands a systematic analysis of its trends. Within this framework, the present study aims to identify these trends through a structured analysis of scientific production, its contributions, global distribution, and thematic evolution. A systematic review under PRISMA 2020 guidelines will be used to ensure rigor and reproducibility. The results reveal a complex dynamic with sustained expansion and conceptual reconfigurations, highlighting the need for greater theoretical and methodological articulation to guide more integrative and critical future developments.

Keywords: Smart tourism destination; smart tourism; sustainability; artificial intelligence; destination management

INTRODUCTION

Smart Destinations can be defined as a contemporary tourism approach that integrates digital technologies, sustainability, and governance to enhance the visitor experience and the quality of life for residents (Kuchumov, Karpova, & Testina, 2024). This approach is predicated on the utilisation of technological tools such as the Internet of Things (IoT), Big Data, artificial intelligence, and digital platforms, which facilitate efficient, dynamic, and adaptive management of tourist destinations (El Archi & Rachid, 2026). In the context of global digital transformation, smart destinations constitute a strategy aimed at strengthening territorial competitiveness, optimising data-driven decision-making, and promoting sustainable practices in the tourism sector (Moliner-Tena et al., 2026).

This approach also incorporates the social, environmental, and economic dimensions of contemporary tourism (Vaz et al., 2025). The intricacy of contemporary tourism systems has resulted in an augmentation of scientific publications concerning smart destinations, as demonstrated by the continuous growth of recent publications and bibliometric studies (Pileliene & Alsharif, 2025). Nevertheless, this production evinces conceptual and methodological dispersion, which curtails the identification of a coherent structure within the field. This situation underscores the necessity for systematic analyses of prevailing research trends.

The study of smart destinations demonstrates sustained growth in scientific production; however, the extant body of knowledge reveals fragmentation at the conceptual, methodological and thematic levels (Alsharif, Isa, & Alqudah, 2024; Palomo Santiago & Parra López, 2024). This disarticulation prevents the delimitation of a coherent structure for the field of study, hindering the precise identification of development patterns, consolidated lines of research, and knowledge gaps (Krishnamma, Babu, & Zacharia, 2025). Moreover, the diversity of theoretical approaches and the paucity of updated systematic syntheses impede understanding of the evolution of the topic and its main academic contributions (Naveen Kumar et al., 2025).

In this context, there is an absence of a consolidated overview that facilitates the structured analysis of research trends, the dynamics of scientific output growth, the geographical distribution of knowledge, or the evolution of key themes. This situation has the effect of limiting the advancement of the field, restricting the systematic accumulation of knowledge, and hindering the construction of consistent analytical frameworks for the study of smart destinations. The objective of this research is to identify research trends in the study of smart destinations through a structured analysis of scientific output, its contributions, global distribution, and thematic evolution. To achieve this objective, a series of questions have been developed to guide the analysis of research trends in the study of smart destinations.

1. What has been the evolution of scientific production in terms of the number of publications per year?
2. What are the main theoretical and empirical contributions that have shaped this field of study?
3. How is scientific production geographically distributed globally?
4. What are the emerging, growing, and declining keywords that reflect the thematic trends in the field?

The originality of this study lies in the systematic structuring of the scientific body of knowledge on smart destinations, which allows for a comprehensive, organised, and rigorous understanding of the field. The analysis of research trends enables the identification of patterns of production and thematic evolution, as well as knowledge gaps and emerging areas that require further development. This approach is conducive to the updating of the state of the art, and it offers a solid and coherent foundation for future research. It also facilitates the construction of a strategically oriented research agenda, aligned with the contemporary dynamics of the field and the demands of the tourism sector, thereby strengthening the connection between academia, technological innovation, and sustainable development.

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted through a systematic literature review following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) (Page et al., 2021). This approach is intended to ensure transparency, rigour, and reproducibility in the identification, selection, and analysis of scientific studies. Furthermore, it is anticipated that this will also allow for the structured organisation of available knowledge and the identification of research trends in the field of smart destinations.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

The eligibility criteria were defined with the objective of ensuring the quality, relevance, and coherence of the documents included in the analysis. The inclusion criteria encompassed scientific articles and reviews published in indexed journals that are directly related to smart destinations and their relationship with tourism, travel, destination management, and tourism dynamics. The selection was restricted to documents in English and Spanish with

full-text access and published in recognised databases. The exclusion criteria were applied in three phases. The initial phase entailed the removal of records that contained indexing errors, including duplicates, incomplete documents, and bibliographic inconsistencies. This was followed by the exclusion of documents without full-text access, a phase that did not involve any removal in this study since it only included documents with full access. Finally, irrelevant documents were excluded through a review of titles, abstracts, and keywords, with those that did not directly address smart destinations and their analytical dimensions within the tourism context being discarded. This process enabled the consolidation of a set of documents that were consistent with the research approach.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The information sources correspond to the Scopus and Web of Science databases, which are recognised for their quality, multidisciplinary coverage, and rigorous indexing criteria (Culbert et al., 2025). Scopus offers extensive coverage of scientific literature on a global scale, while Web of Science facilitates access to high-impact publications in addition to providing citation analysis (Culbert et al., 2025). Together, these tools enable the creation of a robust, reliable, and representative compilation of scientific knowledge within the study area.

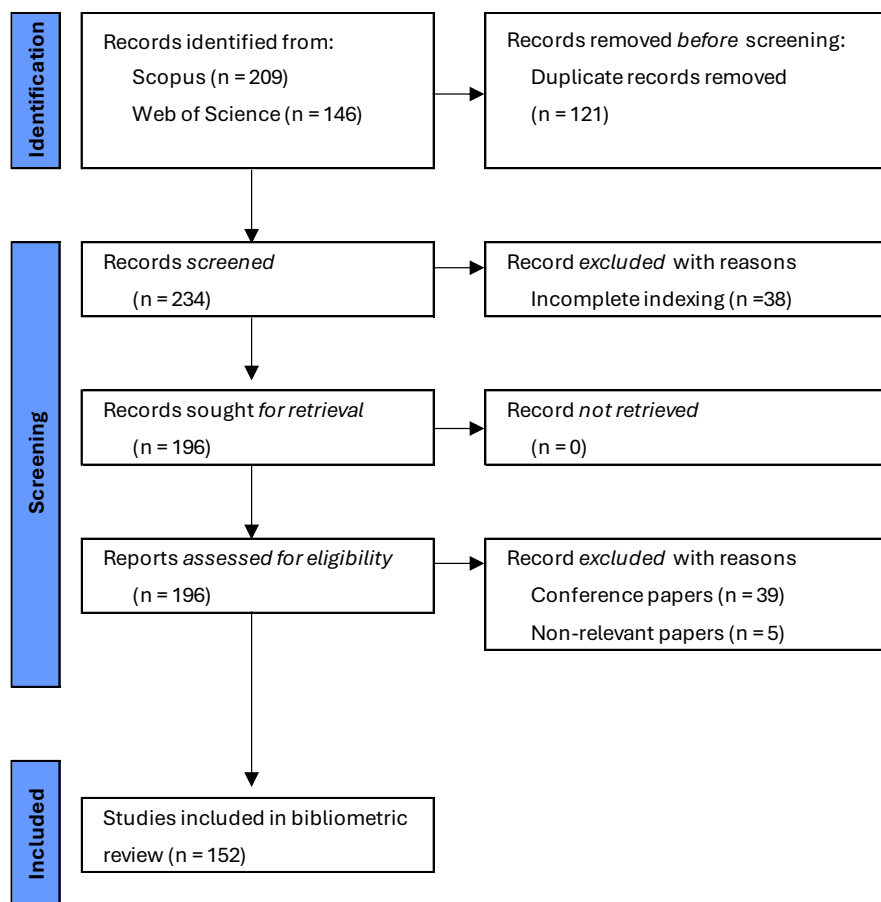
SEARCH STRATEGY

The search strategy was defined using specific equations for each database, derived from the inclusion criteria and adapted to their formats and Boolean operators. In Scopus, the equation used was TITLE (("smart tourism destination*" OR "smart destination*") AND ("tourism" OR "travel" OR "destination management" OR "tourist destination*")) and in Web of Science, the equivalent equation was TS=(("smart tourism destination*" OR "smart destination*") AND ("tourism" OR "travel" OR "destination management" OR "tourist destination*")), integrating keywords and synonyms to systematically retrieve relevant scientific output for analyzing research trends.

SELECTION PROCESS

The selection process for the studies was conducted systematically according to the PRISMA 2020 stages, as presented in Figure 1 through a flowchart that describes the phases of document identification, filtering, eligibility, and inclusion. This enables the clear visualisation of the number of records at each stage and the reasons for exclusion, thereby ensuring the traceability of the methodological process.

Figure 1 – PRISMA flow diagram



Source: Prepared by the author based on Page et al. (2021)

DATA PROCESSING

The data processing was conducted utilising the Microsoft Excel software, a tool employed for the organisation, cleansing and systematisation of the information derived from the selected documents. This entailed the construction of analysis matrices that enabled the classification of variables such as authors, year of publication, country, keywords, and main contributions. This facilitated the clear structuring of information and the analysis of research trends in the field of smart destinations.

RISK OF BIAS

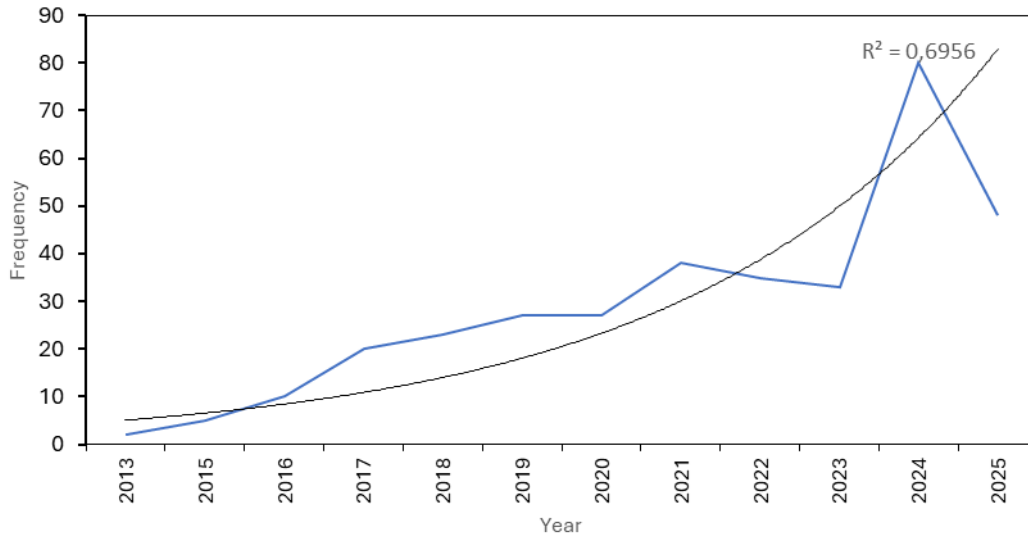
The risk of bias was mitigated by the implementation of rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria, complemented by reliance on high-quality scientific information sources. However, potential biases persisted due to the selection of search terms, the restriction to specific languages, and the scope of the databases utilised. Notification biases and the exclusion of grey literature, which may impede the incorporation of pertinent contributions, were also noted. The methodological approach adopted was designed to address these limitations, thereby ensuring the validity of the results.

RESULTS

The scientific literature on smart destinations commenced in 2013 and extends to 2026, a period in which exponential growth of 69.56% is observed, as demonstrated in Figure 2. This demonstrates a sustained expansion of the field, supported by a high coefficient of determination (R^2), indicating a robust model fit and consistency in the evolution of scientific output. The number of publications increased from 20 in 2017 to 23 in 2018, 27 in 2019 and

2020, 38 in 2021, 35 in 2022, 33 in 2023, 80 in 2024, and 48 in 2025, confirming the consolidation of research interest in this field.

Figure 2 – Evolution of the number of publications



Source: Own elaboration

The analysis examines the ten most cited articles in the scientific body of research on smart destinations, as presented in Table 1. These articles represent the most influential contributions to the development of the field, with works such as "Smart tourism destinations: ecosystems for tourism destination competitiveness" by Boes et al. (2016) being cited 542 and 390 times respectively in the *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, and "Tourists' Experiences with Smart Tourism Technology at Smart Destinations and Their Behaviour Intentions" by Jeong et al. (2020) being cited 396 and 282 times respectively in the *Journal of Travel Research*. These contributions are complemented by those of Vecchio et al. (2018), Del et al. (2015), Jovicic (2019), Ivars-Baidal et al. (2019), Wang et al. (2013), and Shafiee et al. (2019), which have been published in high-impact journals. These contributions demonstrate the theoretical and empirical consolidation of the field.

Table 1 – Main contributions in the literature

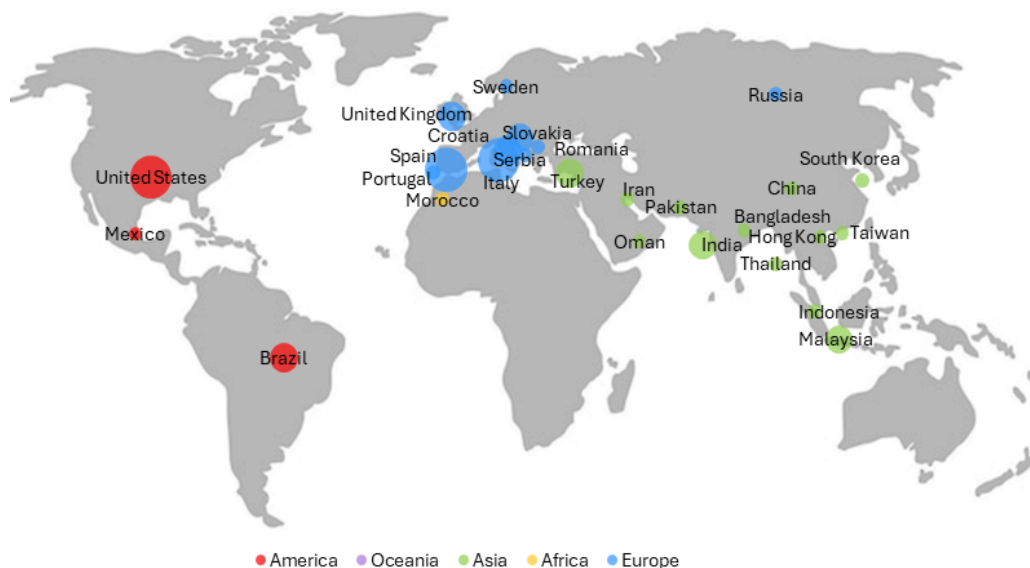
N	Authors	Article	Citations	Journal
1	Boes, et al., (2016)	Smart tourism destinations: ecosystems for tourism destination competitiveness	542	International Journal of Tourism Cities
2	Jeong, et al., (2020)	Tourists' Experiences with Smart Tourism Technology at Smart Destinations and Their Behaviour Intentions	396	Journal of Travel Research
3	Boes, et al., (2016)	Smart tourism destinations: ecosystems for tourism destination competitiveness	390	International Journal of Tourism Cities
4	Vecchio, et al., (2018)	Creating value from Social Big Data: Implications for Smart Tourism Destinations	340	Information Processing and Management
5	Del, et al., (2015)	Knowledge transfer in smart tourism destinations: Analysing the effects of a network structure	308	Journal of Destination

				Marketing and Management
6	Jovicic (2019)	From the traditional understanding of tourism destination to the smart tourism destination	307	Current Issues in Tourism
7	Ivars-Baidal, et al., (2019)	Smart destinations and the evolution of ICTs: ¿a new scenario for destination management?	294	Current Issues in Tourism
8	Wang, et al., (2013)	China's "smart tourism destination" initiative: A taste of the service-dominant logic	294	Journal of Destination Marketing and Management
9	Jeong, et al., (2020)	Tourists' Experiences with Smart Tourism Technology at Smart Destinations and Their Behavior Intentions	282	Journal Of Travel Research
10	Shafiee, et al., (2019)	Developing a model for sustainable smart tourism destinations: A systematic review	247	Tourism Management Perspectives

Note: Own elaboration

The global distribution of research on smart destinations, as presented in Figure 3, is analysed, revealing a concentration of scientific output in Europe and the Americas, with leading countries such as Spain (101), Italy (25), the United Kingdom (9), and the United States (27), along with Brazil (24) in Latin America. Participation levels in Asia are notably high, with Turkey (15), Indonesia (12), India (9), and China (7) all contributing significantly. In contrast, regions such as the Middle East and Africa demonstrate more moderate contributions, with countries including Oman, Iran, and Morocco all making noteworthy contributions. This phenomenon is indicative of a geographically diverse distribution, with a notable European predominance and a growing Asian participation.

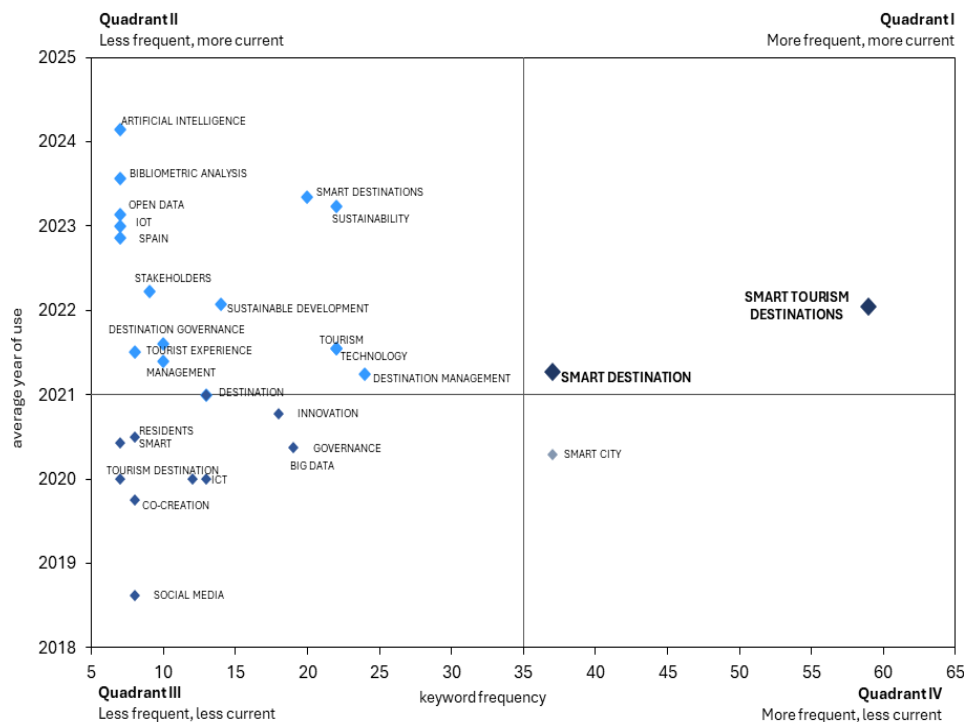
Figure 3 – Global distribution



Source: Own elaboration

The keywords are then analysed according to their average year of use in a scatter plot, in which the Y-axis represents the average year of use and the X-axis the frequency of occurrence of the words. As illustrated in Figure 4, quadrant one positions the growing keywords, as they are the most researched and of recent use. The second quadrant comprises groups of emerging concepts. These concepts are used infrequently, yet they have a very recent average year of use, reflecting their current relevance. Finally, quadrant four features declining concepts, which, although extensively researched, have an older average year of use, suggesting a decrease in their usage.

Figure 4 – Main keywords



Source: Own elaboration

Regarding keywords, the first quadrant is characterised by terms such as "Smart Tourism Destinations" and "Smart Destination," which have been the focus of numerous research studies in recent years, particularly in 2021 and 2022. The second quadrant encompasses emerging concepts such as "Artificial Intelligence," "Bibliometric Analysis," "IoT," and "Open Data," which have demonstrated recent utilisation, with an average year of use in 2023. Finally, quadrant four features terms such as "Social Media," "Tourism Destination," and "Co-creation." These terms, although frequently researched, have an average year of use dating back to 2019 and 2020, suggesting a decreasing trend in their current relevance.

DISCUSSION

The subsequent section is structured around a critical analysis of the findings on research trends in smart destinations, followed by a comparison with previous studies to identify both convergences and divergences. In the ensuing analysis, the principal research lacunae within the field are examined, thus giving rise to the formulation of an agenda aimed at addressing them. The paper then goes on to present the theoretical, political and practical implications of the results, together with a discussion of the study's limitations.

RESULTS ANALYSIS

A thorough analysis of the results indicates that the field of smart destinations is undergoing a period of sustained expansion, marked by a substantial increase in scientific output. This growth is indicative of a growing interest within the academic community. Nevertheless, this increase has not resulted in a homogeneous theoretical consolidation due to the persistent high levels of conceptual dispersion. The existence of multiple definitions of "smart destination" and the integration of smart city, digital tourism, and governance approaches have resulted in a fragmented knowledge structure, where currents converge without consolidated articulation. Within this framework, the temporal behaviour of publications allows for the identification of a progressive evolution of the field, shifting from approaches focused on co-creation of value, interaction among stakeholders, and competitiveness based on emerging technologies, towards perspectives oriented towards data analytics, technological risk management, and sustainability.

This pattern demonstrates growth and expansion of the conceptual scope, incorporating dimensions such as open data governance, technology adoption, and pro-environmental behaviour, thus consolidating integrative and applied models. The analysis of the most cited articles corroborates this theoretical evolution, demonstrating a transition from conceptual frameworks to explanatory approaches with increased empirical support. The field is structured by foundational studies which take the logic of service and competitiveness ecosystems as their point of departure (Boes et al., 2016). These studies integrate technology, human capital and governance as central axes. Subsequent research delves deeper into the tourist experience mediated by technologies and its behavioural implications (Jeong & Shin, 2020). Moreover, the integration of approaches to big data, knowledge transfer, and networks serves to reinforce a multidimensional framework oriented towards value creation. Regarding the geographical dimension, scientific production is concentrated in Europe and the Americas, with differences in the approaches of leading countries.

Spain is prioritising the implementation of advanced analytics and big data in the context of tourism management. The United States, on the other hand, is emphasising resilience and conceptual integration. Italy is engaged in the development of governance frameworks, while Brazil places significant emphasis on technological innovation through patent analysis. Finally, Turkey incorporates sustainability as a strategic axis. This regional specialisation has been demonstrated to contribute to the development of the field, although it has also been shown to reveal biases in knowledge generation. The thematic analysis by quadrants demonstrates a reconfiguration of the field, rather than a complete replacement of approaches. The consolidation of core concepts is evident in the growing terms, which are indicative of the relationship between technology, management and sustainability. Concurrently, emerging concepts signal a transition towards artificial intelligence and advanced governance. The persistence of declining terms such as ICT, social media, and co-creation reflects processes of theoretical maturation, showing a shift from technological approaches toward integrated models oriented toward experience, value, and sustainability (González-Reverté, 2019; Akbaba, 2024).

COMPARISON WITH OTHER STUDIES

The results are consistent with previous studies that demonstrate accelerated growth in research on smart destinations and related areas, especially in the last decade. This period has been characterised by a sustained expansion of knowledge driven by the integration of digital technologies, sustainability, and user experience. In accordance with the findings of extensive reviews of the field, scientific production is adapting to the dynamics of global transformation in tourism and the increase in interdisciplinary approaches (Clements &

Giovanardi, 2026). In addition, recent studies on smart tourism and hospitality have corroborated the pivotal role of technology in shaping the user experience, thereby validating the consolidation of key terms identified (Cheng et al., 2026). Conversely, the findings indicate persistent conceptual fragmentation, suggesting that the transition from conventional approaches to smart destinations has not yet been fully integrated. Whilst certain studies propose the implementation of structured frameworks for the development of tourism and sustainability, this analysis identifies theoretical overlap among diverse currents, which limits the consolidation of a unified paradigm.

This discrepancy is particularly salient in contrast to studies employing sectoral or regional methodologies, where the dynamics exhibit enhanced conceptual cohesion (Panta, 2026). In terms of geography, the findings align with existing literature, highlighting a concentration of knowledge in developed countries and regional inequalities in scientific production. However, the study provides an additional level of analysis by identifying patterns of thematic specialisation by country, thereby broadening the understanding of the global configuration of knowledge. This result is consistent with research that addresses structural factors in destination choice and tourism development, where the influence of regulatory and economic contexts is recognised (Aligüem et al., n.d.). In thematic terms, the results of the present study are in alignment with those of recent studies that identify sustainability, innovation, and governance as central axes of contemporary tourism (Abdujabbarovich, 2026). Nevertheless, the study introduces a differentiating contribution by classifying the concepts as emerging and declining, which allows the field to be interpreted as a system in dynamic reconfiguration rather than as a linear evolution, thereby strengthening the analysis of research trends.

RESEARCH GAPS

In this context, Table 2 presents a concise summary of the main research gaps identified, along with guiding questions for addressing them in future studies. This enables the formulation of coherent and cumulative research agendas, with the objective of enhancing the theoretical, methodological and applied development of the field. It also fosters the establishment of a cohesive scientific framework that contributes to the overcoming of current limitations and the consolidation of knowledge about smart destinations.

Table 2 – Research gaps

Category	Research Gap	Future Research Question
Governance	Lack of multilevel governance integration models	How can multilevel governance improve smart destination performance?
Ethics	Limited ethical frameworks for data-driven tourism systems	What ethical models regulate data use in smart destinations?
Interoperability	Low integration between tourism platforms and urban systems	How can interoperable systems enhance smart destination efficiency?
Measurement	Absence of standardized performance indicators	What metrics effectively evaluate smart destination outcomes?
Resilience	Insufficient linkage between smartness and crisis resilience	How do smart systems enhance destination resilience to disruptions?
User Diversity	Underrepresentation of diverse tourist profiles	How do smart solutions adapt to diverse user needs?
Policy Impact	Weak evaluation of public policy effectiveness	What policies effectively drive smart destination transformation?

Economic Impact	Limited evidence on long-term economic outcomes	What are the long-term economic effects of smart destinations?
Human Capital	Lack of skills frameworks for smart tourism workforce	What competencies are required for smart tourism professionals?
Data Governance	Weak frameworks for data ownership and control	Who should govern data in smart tourism ecosystems?

Source: Own elaboration

RESEARCH AGENDA

Considering the identified trends, the research agenda is oriented towards consolidating the field and interrogating its underlying assumptions. This response is informed by the recognition of conceptual fragmentation and the absence of substantial theoretical integration. There is an imperative to transition towards analytical frameworks that transcend the mere accumulation of concepts and elucidate intricate dynamics that extend beyond the instrumental relationship between technology and tourism. These frameworks must incorporate a comprehensive analysis of power, governance, and decision-making processes within smart destinations. Methodologically, a shift towards predictive and explanatory approaches is proposed to address the scarcity of robust designs, integrating advanced analytics, simulation, and hybrid models, along with longitudinal and comparative studies that allow for understanding the evolution of destinations and improving the validity of results in different contexts.

From a territorial perspective, the agenda proposes the following: first, the overcoming of the concentration of knowledge by including diverse contexts; secondly, the addressing of limited geographical representation; and thirdly, the questioning of the transferability of dominant models. This implies the recognition of heterogeneous and non-linear technological trajectories. In terms of the technological dimension, the proposal calls for a shift towards critical evaluations that address the dearth of evidence on real impacts. These evaluations should encompass not only benefits but also risks, externalities, and effects on governance, privacy, and data control. The proposal further calls for the enhancement of the social dimension within the field, with a view to addressing the current low level of inclusion of local actors. This is to be achieved through the implementation of participatory approaches that facilitate the integration of residents and communities into the design and evaluation processes. The overarching objective of this initiative is to consolidate more legitimate, inclusive, and sustainable smart destination models.

IMPLICATIONS

From a theoretical perspective, the results redefine the field of smart destinations as a complex, dynamic, and nonlinear system, where the integration of approaches proves insufficient. The development of analytical frameworks is required that articulate technology, tourism, and governance while simultaneously explaining their tensions, contradictions, and differential effects, moving beyond dominant normative views. This necessitates theories with enhanced explanatory and predictive capacity, thereby facilitating comprehension of the actual configuration of transformation processes in diverse contexts. From a political standpoint, the findings call into question the uncritical adoption of digitalisation agendas, illustrating that the incorporation of technology does not inherently ensure outcomes in terms of sustainability, equity, or territorial development. The design of public policies should regulate data use, reduce power asymmetries, and prevent the reproduction of inequalities among destinations. Furthermore, multilevel governance frameworks should be strengthened to overcome centralized approaches and improve the adaptability of tourism systems.

In practical terms, the results indicate that destination management should be geared towards generating value for multiple stakeholders and not limited to technological implementation. The integration of data-driven decision-making with ethical, social and territorial criteria is imperative, with consideration given to the risks associated with technological dependence and the intensive use of information. In this sense, collaborative governance can be regarded as a structural requirement for sustainability. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to redesign the processes of planning, participation, and evaluation using inclusive, critical, and adaptive approaches.

LIMITATIONS

The study is subject to certain limitations, which can be attributed to the selection of databases, language restrictions, and the exclusion of grey literature. These factors have resulted in a reduction in the scope of the analysis and the inclusion of relevant contributions. Moreover, the utilisation of particular keywords imposes limitations on document retrieval and engenders potential biases within the composition of the corpus. Methodologically, the bibliometric approach is limited in its capacity to facilitate in-depth content analysis, as it is oriented towards quantifying patterns. Nevertheless, the results obtained provide a consistent and representative perspective on the development of the field.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the field of smart destinations reveals a development characterised by a complex dynamic, in which the evolution of scientific production, theoretical contributions, geographical distribution, and thematic trends do not follow a linear trajectory, but rather a process of expansion with conceptual tensions and continuous reconfigurations. Knowledge has been configured from multiple approaches that broaden its scope, but still demand greater theoretical articulation and methodological consistency. Within this framework, the study offers a comprehensive vision that transcends the identification of patterns and guides the critical redefinition of the future development of the field.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS (CREDIT)

Conceptualization and writing—original draft preparation, AVA, MLBA, SCA, ETV, JCPV, and PARC; writing—review and editing, AVA, MLBA, SCA, JCPV, and PARC.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

FUNDING

This research was funded by the Instituto Superior Tecnológico Vida Nueva.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study did not involve human participants or animals and therefore did not require ethical approval.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors declare no acknowledgements.