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# A content analysis of rural tourism research

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**Abstract:** *Rural tourism plays an important social and developmental role through the provision of additional income, especially in mountainous and disadvantaged areas. It contributes to the development and revitalization of rural areas, while strengthening the protection of natural resources. Consequently, in the last decades there has been much research examining the phenomenon of rural tourism, the problems faced by rural tourism businesses, etc. Although, there have been too many studies on rural tourism, they have not examined the progress of rural tourism research. Very little analysis has been conducted on the content of articles that examine this important area. The purpose of this study is to determine the progress in rural tourism research up to date by using content analysis technique on published articles in the most significant academic journals, with the aim of identifying focus areas and providing future research directions.*

**Keywords:** Rural tourism, content analysis, research methods and techniques

**JEL Classification:** L83, M1, O1

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism is suggested as an “alternative” solution for peripheral development, because it contributes to the decrease of sub employment in the rural sector, the increase of the family income and consequently to the socio-economic support and reformation of the local rural communities (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Eusébio, & Figueiredo, 2013; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011; Yeh & Fotiadis, 2014).

Several researchers examined rural tourism demand incentives (Caroline Lego & Natalie, 2009; Nickerson, Black, & McCool, 2001; Reid, 2007) and others analyzed rural tourism supply incentives (Almeida, Correia, & Pimpão, 2013; Dimitrovski, Todorović, & Valjarević, 2012; Fotiadis, Vassiliadis, & Piper, 2013)). There are studies on women partnerships and their role in rural tourism development (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Anthopoulou, 2010), the role of local communities (Andriotis, 2011; Kontogeorgopoulos, Churyen, & Duangsaeng, 2013; Verbole, 2000) small enterprises (Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2000; Kompola, 2014; Loureiro, 2014) and local authorities (Park, Lee, Choi, & Yoon, 2012). Although the research on rural tourism is developing at a very fast rate, there are few articles about the growth of this sector and the lack of studies.

The aim of the present study is to evaluate the progress of rural tourism research so far, to define the trends of the research over the years and define the trends of the future research directions. In order to be successful in our study we will use content analysis. Content analysis is a quantitative method for the study of texts. It analyses texts “regarding the presence and frequency of specific terms, narratives or concepts”. It may include the counting of the number of lines or the quantity of space various issues take. In the past, it has been used in psychology and communicative research. But it is often used in text analysis by the media (newspaper and magazine articles, electronic media shows, as well as in visual content).

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## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODS

General publications, textbooks, conference proceedings, and academic journals have been increased in number, because of the economic significance and rapid growth of tourism development in the past decades. Academic journals are featuring the direction of research in a field, since academic articles are based on theory, previous work and statistical analysis in order to extend the body of knowledge. At present, there are more than 140 hospitality and tourism-related journals worldwide (EBSCO Publishing, 2008), but with different quality standards and editorial policies. Consequently, a review in research progress includes an analysis of all publications in a field. Guided by journal-ranking literature (e.g. ESSEC Research Centre, 2007; The Centre for Leisure Management Research, Deakin University, 2006), 12 academic journals in the field of tourism were selected

for analysis in this study. In total, 215 journal articles that were published in these 12 tourism journals for the 20-year period from 1991 to 2010 were examined. Due to the great number of articles that appeared during the keyword search “rural tourism”, the authors decided to examine only those articles that the words “rural tourism” appeared either on the title of the article, either to the abstract of the article or on the list of the article’s keywords. Only full research articles were included in the analysis. Comments, research notes, book reviews, and conference proceedings issues were not included. The journals selected were: *Annals of Tourism Research (ATR)*, *Journal of Agrarian Change (JAC)*, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management (IJCHM)*, *International Journal of Tourism Research (IJTR)*, *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research (JHTR)*, *Journal of Leisure Research (JLR)*, *Journal of Rural Studies (JRS)*, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism (JST)*, *Leisure Sciences Tourism (LST)*, *Tourism Geographies (TG)*, *Tourism Management (TM)*.

It should be noted that the selected journals differ in terms of dates of publication commencement. For example, ATR, JHTR, and TM have a publication history of more than 25 years, whereas others have been published for fewer years at the time of writing. The other journals fall within this range. For the current study, the most contemporaneous period of the past 20 years, 1991 to 2010 inclusive, was selected to capture recent trends in tourism destination research.

This study adopted a content analysis technique by establishing categories and counting the number of instances when those categories were used in a particular item of text to produce descriptive information on previous research contents. Here the content of relevant articles in the 12 journals was analyzed in terms of the subject area, the nature of research, statistical techniques used, and regional research focus to provide information on the progress of rural tourism research for the period of investigation. The detailed steps undertaken in the content analysis follow.

First, details of each of the 215 articles were compiled in chronological order. Then each article was summarized in a table format divided into columns by year, title, journal, subject area and nature of research. On completion, a series of content analysis was conducted. The first analysis dealt with an article’s subject area, classified as one of eight areas: supply – demand and management, public policy, marketing, sustainable development, economic development, cultural studies, local impact and others.

Second, each article was analyzed according to its nature of content, differentiating conceptual and empirical papers. Conceptual articles were defined as those that describe and discuss concepts and did not employ a statistical analysis or those that employ basic calculations based on hypothetical data (e.g. menu analysis using a spreadsheet programme). Empirical articles (qualitative or quantitative) are defined as those that employ one or more statistical analysis ranging from basic to multivariate (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). Thereafter, empirical articles were further classified according to statistical methods employed in the analysis. The subcategories used were descriptive analysis, correlation analysis, factor analysis, cluster analysis, regression analysis, analysis of variance, discriminant analysis, conjoint analysis, and others (Gallarza et al, 2002).

A final analysis examined articles’ research focus in terms of geographic region, with Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania representing the key subcategories. If an article was unclear as to its regional focus, it was identified as Unclassified for analysis purposes, while if an article looks for more than one destination, it was identified as MultiDestinations.

### 3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The 215 articles have been evaluated by the authors according to their judgment. Some of the articles could have been in two of the categories but the authors decided to classify the articles into the category they regard as the most representative.

In Table 1 we can observe that most of the articles have been published in the scientific journal Tourism Management (52, 24.2%) in Annals of Tourism Research (45, 20.9%), and the Journal of Sustainable Tourism follows (40, 18.6%). The least publications are found in Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research (1, 0.5%). We would like to mention that we conducted a research for the Tourism Economics journal and the Journal of Sport Management, but we did not include them in the Table because we could not find any articles on rural tourism (Abstract, Title, Keywords).

Table 1: Subject area by journal

Journal	Subject Area								Total
	Supply, Demand, Management	Public Policy	Marketing	Sustainable Development	Economic Development	Cultural Studies	Local Impacts	Others	
ATR	6	6	2	2	9	5	10	5	45 (20.9%)
JAC					1		1		2 (0.9%)
IJCHM	2								2 (0.9%)
IJTR	7	1	2	3	6	2	6	2	29 (13.5%)
JHTR								1	1 (0.5%)
JLR							1	3	4 (1.9%)
JRS	3	1		3	2			2	11 (5.1%)
JST	12	4	2	8	4	2	4	4	40 (18.6%)
JTR	3		2					1	6 (2.8%)
LST	1						1	2	4 (1.9%)
TG	4	2	3	1	3	1	5		19 (8.8%)
TM	15	4	8	9	6	1	8	1	52 (24.2%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>53 (24.7)</b>	<b>18 (8.3)</b>	<b>19 (8.8)</b>	<b>26 (12.1)</b>	<b>31 (14.4)</b>	<b>11 (5.1)</b>	<b>38 (17.7)</b>	<b>19 (8.9)</b>	<b>215 (100.0)</b>

As we can see in the Table, during the last two years there has been an increase in the number of articles related to rural tourism. Simultaneously, we can observe that there is a relatively high number of articles in 1994, because of the JST journal’s special edition on rural tourism. Table 1 shows that most of the articles are related to supply, demand and management (53, 24.7%) while the articles about Local Impacts are second (38, 17.7%) and the articles about Economic Development follow closely (31, 14.4%). The least articles are about cultural studies (11, 5.1%) and marketing (18, 8.3%).

Table 2: Subject area by year

Year	Subject Area								Total
	Supply, Demand & Management	Public Policy	Marketing	Sustainable Development	Economic Development	Cultural Studies	Local Impacts	Others	
1991			1				1		2 (0.9%)
1992	1			1					2 (0.9%)
1993	1	1					1		3 (1.4%)
1994	3	1		2	1	2	1	2	12 (5.6%)
1995		1		1			1		3 (1.4%)
1996	1	1		1			2	2	7 (3.3%)
1997	3	1						0	4 (1.9%)
1998	2	1	1	1			2		7 (3.3%)
1999	4		2	1	2		3	1	13 (6.0%)
2000		3		1		1	2	2	9 (4.2%)
2001	5	1		1	1	1	5	0	14 (6.5%)
2002	4	1			1		1	1	8 (3.7%)
2003	2			1	4	1	1		9 (4.2%)
2004	4	2	2	1	4	2	1		16 (7.4%)
2005	3	1	2	2	2		2	3	15 (7.0%)
2006	5	1	1	2			1	1	11 (5.1%)
2007	6	2	4	2	2	2	2	3	23 (10.7%)
2008	5			3	6		4	0	18 (8.4%)
2009	1	1	4	2	4	1	2	1	16 (7.4%)
2010	3	2	2	4	4	1	6	3	23 (10.7%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>53 (24.7)</b>	<b>18 (8.3)</b>	<b>19 (8.8)</b>	<b>26 (12.1)</b>	<b>31 (14.4)</b>	<b>11 (5.1)</b>	<b>38 (17.7)</b>	<b>19 (8.9)</b>	<b>215 (100.0)</b>

The most productive years for articles are 2007 & 2010 (23, 10.7%) while the least productive ones are after 2003. We can observe that the empirical studies (153, 71.2%) are almost three times more than the conceptual studies (62, 28.8%). The highest number of conceptual studies are in 1994 and 2004, while the most empirical studies are in 2007 & 2010. Through the observation of Table 3 we can ascertain that in every journal the empirical studies are more than the conceptual ones. The JAC journal has published only conceptual studies while the IJCHM and the JHTR journals only empirical ones. The number of articles in these journals is too limited to draw specific conclusions about these journals. In Tourism Geographies Journal, there is the best balance between empirical-conceptual studies. There is also high analogy in Tourism Management, Journal of Rural Studies and Annals of Tourism Research

Most of the studies have used quantitative research (131, 60.9%) while qualitative research has been used in percentage (47, 21.9%); at the same time, in 17.2% either the method of research was not discernible or both methods had been used.

We examine which statistical methods have the various researchers employed in order to reach safe conclusions for the article they have published in one of the examined scientific journals. We should mention that the authors of the current study, in cases where there was an abundance of different methods, they decided to select one as the most representative or as the one providing the most significant results. Even though there was a large number of empirical studies and although most of them had quantitative character, we can observe that they mainly use descriptive analysis (67, 31.2%) and then follow the researches that have employed a statistical method different from the most usual ones (40, 18.6%).

Almost all the other statistical techniques have very low percentages. Factor analysis and Cluster Analysis (13, 6.0%) are the second most widely used statistical methods. All the rest display especially low percentages, which means that there is a great gap in research for future researchers. It is interesting that in the articles evaluated there is not even one con-joint analysis, which can be regarded as very remarkable for the analysis of the tourists’ preferences.

Table 3: Nature of research by journal

Journal	Subject Area		Total
	Conceptual	Empirical	
ATR	13 (28.9)	32 (71.1)	45 (100.0)
JAC	2 (100.0)		2 (100.0)
IJCHM		2 (100.0)	2 (100.0)
IJTR	11 (37.9)	18 (62.1)	29 (100.0)
JHTR		1 (100.0)	1 (100.0)
JLR	1 (25.0)	3 (75.0)	4 (100.0)
JRS	3 (27.3)	8 (72.7)	11 (100.0)
JST	16 (40.0)	24 (60.0)	40 (100.0)
JTR	1 (16.7)	5 (83.3)	6 (100.0)
LST	1 (25.0)	3 (75.0)	4 (100.0)
TG	3 (15.8)	16 (84.2)	19 (100.0)
TM	11 (21.2)	41 (78.8)	52 (100.0)
<b>Total</b>	<b>62 (28.8%)</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>215</b>

In table 4 we can see that most of the researches are related to Europe (92, 42.8%). Second comes the continent of America (47, 21.9%) and then the continent of Asia (27, 12.6%); Africa follows with almost the same percentage (23,10.7%). Until 2000 there were only two articles about Africa and until 1998 there was not even one article about Australia. In the scientific journal *Leisure Sciences Tourism*, all the articles come from America and there is not any article from any other continent. It is interesting that in *Annals of Tourism Research* there is not any article about Africa. At the same time, we observe that there are 3 multidestinations mainly due to some comparative studies between countries of different continents. In six cases, we could not determine whether the authors were referring to a specific country; usually because of the general character of the articles.

Table 4: Regional focus by publication

Journal	Subject Area							Total
	Africa	America	EurAsia	Europe	Oceania	Multidestinations	Unclassified	
ATR		18	11	13	3			45(100.0)
JAC	1			1				2(100.0)
IJCHM				2				2(100.0)
IJTR	5	2	2	14	5	1		29(100.0)
JHTR		1						1(100.0)
JLR	1	2		1				4(100.0)
JRS		3		7	1			11(100.0)
JST	8		2	23	1		6	40(100.0)
JTR		1		3	2			6(100.0)
LST		4						4(100.0)
TG		4	3	9	3			19(100.0)
TM	8	12	9	19	2	2		52(100.0)
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b> <b>(10.7)</b>	<b>47</b> <b>(21.9)</b>	<b>27</b> <b>(12.6)</b>	<b>92</b> <b>(42.8)</b>	<b>17</b> <b>(7.9)</b>	<b>3</b> <b>(1.4)</b>	<b>6</b> <b>(2.8)</b>	<b>215</b> <b>(100.0)</b>

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

The current study demonstrates a lack of research on rural tourism issues comparing to the importance of tourism development in a global context. However, in the past ten years it is apparent that the interest of the academic community in rural tourism has increased significantly.

This study has been limited to the analysis of articles in 12 leading tourism and hospitality journals, although there is an increase in the number of journals that deal with hospitality and tourism issues. However, this limitation may be a good opportunity for further research for improving the understanding of progress in rural tourism research by including a larger number of journal publications, in addition to other published materials that deal with tourism destinations such as textbooks, conference papers, and reports.

By this research information into subject areas, research methods and regional focus of articles that are published in 12 leading academic tourism and hospitality journals for a 20-year period are provided. Across all journals, throughout the period of assessment, supply –demand and management was found to be the most frequently researched area. Although different research interests preoccupy researchers today, the scope of research should be further expanded, considering the rapid changes in the market environment. For example, there is a need for more studies evaluating political, economic, social, cultural, environmental and technological impacts of rural tourism development.(Fotiadis, 2011; Fotiadis, Michalko, & Ratz, 2008; Fotiadis & Vassiliadis, 2010; Michalko & Fotiadis, 2006).

Throughout this research, it is evident that the number of empirical articles has increased rapidly comparing to the conceptual ones. This may happen because of editorial policies, or because researchers' interest dealt with testing, exploring and developing the application of numerous ideas in the development of rural tourism development. However, it is suggested that a more balanced approach is thoughtful in order to produce more methodologically sound research articles using the appropriate statistical techniques based on strong theoretical frameworks to further advance rural tourism development, planning and management as a recognized field of study.

Finally, the current study noted a predominant research focus on European and American destinations. Future contributors may wish to broaden their research scope by investigating other growing international markets to create an awareness of the state of the tourism industry in other parts of the world.

In summary, this study can be used as a useful reference guide for those researchers who intend to research further neglected areas of great interest for the academic and business community and identify the best applicable research methods. Hopefully, the lack of research that has been recognized throughout this study can draw further interest to this promising area of research.

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