







# “ESG research trends in tourism: A bibliometric analysis and future directions”

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# ESG RESEARCH TRENDS IN TOURISM: A BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

## Abstract

This bibliometric analysis aims to delineate the dominant research trends in the existing literature and identify prospective avenues for future inquiry regarding ESG in tourism. Drawing on 478 peer-reviewed publications from the Scopus database (1978–2024), the analysis utilizes the PRISMA framework for systematic screening and VOSviewer software for visualization. The findings indicate that although ESG-related concepts began to emerge in the late 1970s and the term “ESG” was officially introduced in 2004, its integration into tourism research has only accelerated since 2016. The study identifies the United Kingdom, China, and Spain as the leading contributors to this domain, with significant research activity also observed in other European and Asian countries. Additionally, journals such as *Sustainability*, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, and *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* serve as the primary publication platforms. Keyword co-occurrence analysis reveals five dominant thematic clusters: (1) CSR toward customers and financial performance, (2) CSR toward destinations and communities, (3) CSR toward employees, (4) CSR in the context of COVID-19, and (5) ESG and sustainable development. This study identifies two primary gaps in the existing literature: first, a predominant focus on CSR, suggesting that in-depth studies specifically dedicated to ESG remain relatively limited; and second, a significant dearth of research on digital transformation. The study proposes a comprehensive future research agenda for ESG in tourism, with a specific focus on exploring the integration of digital transformation across all ESG-related topics as a critical driver for advancing ESG practices in the tourism industry.

**Keywords** bibliometrics, ESG, CSR, tourism, digital transformation

**JEL Classification** Z32, Q01, Q56

## INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is a significant driver of global economic growth. In numerous nations, tourism not only contributes directly to GDP but also generates spillover effects, stimulating the development of various ancillary sectors such as transportation, telecommunications, accommodation, food services, retail, and insurance (Hwang & Lee, 2019; Manzoor et al., 2019). However, the rapid expansion of the tourism industry also poses considerable challenges and exerts adverse impacts on the environment, society, and local communities in destination countries (Baloch et al., 2023; Fun et al., 2014). The sector is responsible for approximately 8–11% of global greenhouse gas emissions, primarily stemming from transportation, food and beverage services, and hospitality operations (WTTC, 2021). This dual nature of tourism underscores the need for sustainable tourism development.

Environmental, social, and governance (ESG), an emerging concept that integrates social harmony, environmental management, and economic development, is critical for promoting sustainable development. ESG integrates its three core pillars into corporate operations

and management in a manner similar to the corporate social responsibility (CSR) framework (Zeng et al., 2024). In practice, numerous hospitality and tourism organizations publish ESG reports to enhance brand value and as a strategic tool to attract investors, customers, and employees (e.g., InterContinental Hotels Group, Hotel Grand Central, Vinpearl, etc.).

Despite the growing practical significance of ESG in tourism, several fundamental scientific challenges persist within this domain. First, the terminological ambiguity regarding “ESG” versus “CSR” has resulted in conceptual overlap. Scholars frequently use these terms interchangeably across various tourism industry contexts without achieving clear conceptual delineation. This terminological inconsistency significantly hinders the comparison of empirical findings across studies.

Second, the rapid growth of publications on ESG in tourism, particularly following the integration of ESG pillars into the World Economic Forum’s Travel & Tourism Development Index 2021, has outpaced efforts to systematically map the evolution of this research landscape. In the absence of a comprehensive bibliometric analysis, the scientific community lacks the essential foundation to elucidate knowledge flows and research themes, identify research gaps, and guide future scholarly endeavors.

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## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The conceptual foundations of ESG trace back to 1978, when scholars first examined the relationships among organizational theories, behaviors, and social issues. The term “ESG” was later formalized in the 2004 United Nations report, and its relevance within the tourism sector gained global recognition with the introduction of the World Economic Forum’s 2021 Travel and Tourism Development Index, marking a shift from the earlier competitiveness oriented index. According to the International Finance Corporation (IFC, 2021), ESG refers to a framework of environmental, social, and governance criteria that guide corporate and investment decision making, particularly in assessing risks, opportunities, and impacts. Although related to CSR, ESG is widely viewed as a more comprehensive framework because it systematically integrates governance, an aspect only indirectly addressed by traditional CSR (Yadav & Saini, 2023). While CSR typically reflects a firm’s voluntary commitment to environmental and social goals (Tencati et al., 2004), ESG embeds these concerns directly into corporate operations and management processes (Zeng et al., 2024). Moreover, ESG provides quantifiable metrics that help address the measurement limitations of CSR and reduce risks of colour washing, including whitewashing and greenwashing (Putzer & Posza, 2024).

The tourism industry exerts considerable pressure on the environment and local communities.

Consequently, ESG considerations are becoming increasingly important, and the integration of ESG into the tourism industry is inevitable (Putzer & Posza, 2024). In the tourism industry, the Environmental (E) pillar of ESG focuses on the effective management of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (particularly in the airline and cruise sectors), food waste reduction (restaurant industry), and water conservation (hotel industry), alongside sustainable procurement, green operations, and environment-related opportunities (Back, 2024). The Social (S) pillar encompasses factors such as employment equality and compliance, occupational health and safety, employee well-being, community engagement, customer satisfaction, and the preservation of cultural heritage (Back, 2024; Putzer & Posza, 2024). The Governance (G) pillar encompasses a code of ethics and conduct, sustainable development strategy, risk management, and a commitment to transparency and accountability (Matsali et al., 2025; Putzer & Posza, 2024).

Bibliometric analysis is a systematic and rigorous quantitative method widely used to objectively evaluate and intellectually map a scientific domain. By applying statistical techniques to bibliographic data, this approach enables a comprehensive examination of publication metrics such as publication and citation counts, author contributions, keywords, journals, and geographic origins. Fundamentally, bibliometric techniques aim to delineate influential scholars and seminal works, reveal key thematic clusters, visual-

ize intricate collaboration networks, and identify both established and nascent research frontiers (Donthu et al., 2021).

In recent years, the surge in bibliometric studies regarding the evolution of ESG has underscored its emergence as a pivotal focus area within both academic and business literature. Recent bibliometric analyses have been conducted to delineate the intellectual structures of the general ESG domain (Ahuja & Rani, 2025; Kogi et al., 2025; Shakil, 2024), as well as specialized sub-fields such as ESG performance (Al Azizah & Haron, 2025), ESG risk (Nguyen, 2025), and greenwashing (Bhullar et al., 2025; Sneideriene & Legenzova, 2025). Several contemporary bibliometric papers have highlighted the role of ESG in enhancing corporate financial performance (Khan, 2022; Pathan & Mohanty, 2025) and fostering financial stability (C. Zheng et al., 2025). Adopting a similar methodological lens, other bibliometric investigations have explored the intersection of ESG with interdisciplinary themes, including fintech (Trotta et al., 2024), digital transformation (Kozar & Bolimowski, 2025), emerging technologies (Alqudah et al., 2025), and the business environment (Finley et al., 2025).

However, to the best of our knowledge, there remains a paucity of bibliometric research dedicated to ESG within the tourism sector, despite the burgeoning scholarly interest in this domain. A recent review by Legendre et al. (2024) offered valuable insights into the field's trends and trajectories through performance analysis and science mapping, utilizing 704 publications from the Scopus database. However, the study's temporal coverage was restricted to 2021, thereby failing to capture the most recent exponential surge in research output. Similarly, while the bibliometric study by Putzer and Posza (2024) covered CSR and ESG literature from 1990 to 2023, it primarily focused on keyword co-occurrence analysis. Consequently, it lacked a comprehensive examination of critical metrics, such as publication trends, authorship patterns, and influential journals.

Taken together, the body of reviewed literature evidences a substantial volume of bibliometric and meta-analytical research examining the evolution and intellectual structure of the broader ESG domain. Nevertheless, regarding the specific context

of ESG in tourism, existing bibliometric contributions remain fragmented. While valuable, these prior analyses have not fully encompassed the comprehensive scope necessary to adequately reflect the evolutionary trajectory of this field.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to investigate historical and current trends in ESG research within the tourism sector and to identify future research directions through a bibliometric analysis. In doing so, the research maps the intellectual structure of the domain, identifying foundational works and prevailing scholarly shifts. Furthermore, the research synthesizes these findings to propose critical avenues for future inquiry, thereby bridging existing knowledge gaps.

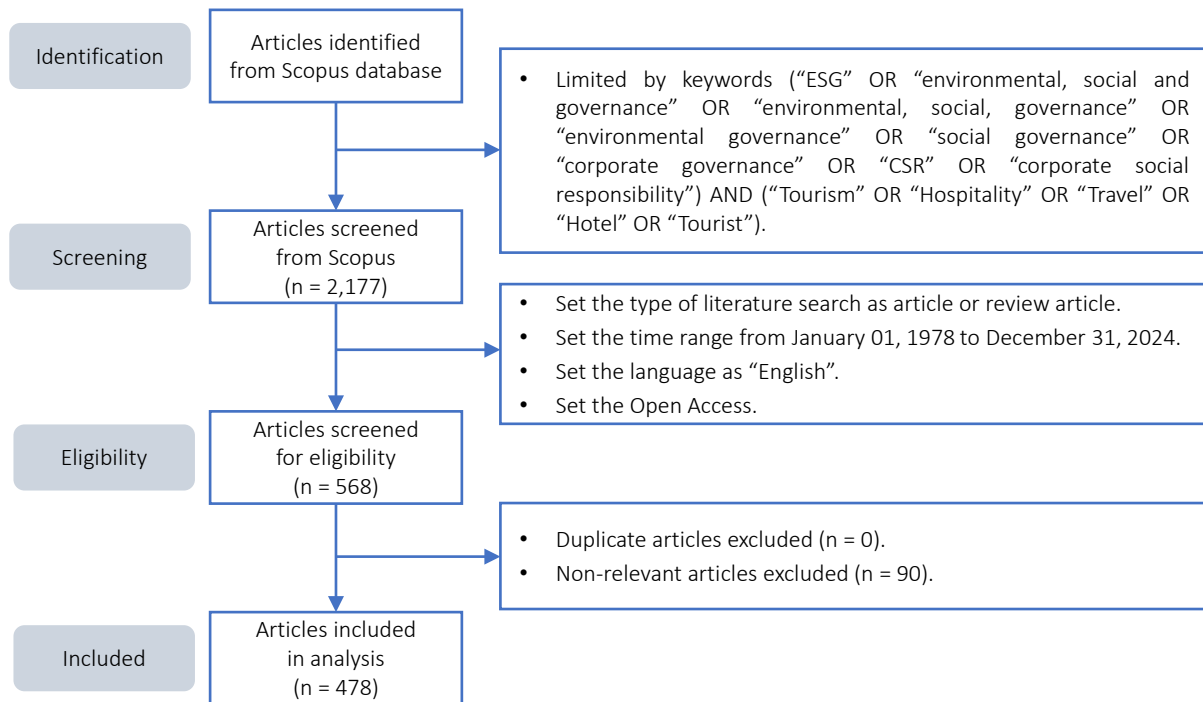
## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study extends previous research by conducting a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of literature on ESG and related concepts (e.g., CSR) published between 1978 and 2024. This method facilitates the systematic analysis of large volumes of scientific data to map the intellectual evolution of a field, identify current trends (Putzer & Posza, 2024), and uncover research gaps that can shape future research agendas (Mukherjee et al., 2022).

### 2.1. Data collection

The data for this bibliometric analysis were systematically retrieved from the Scopus database. Scopus was selected due to its recognized reliability, comprehensive coverage (Bui et al., 2023; Kumar et al., 2021; Niñerola et al., 2019; Yadav & Saini, 2023), advantage in social science research (Kumpulainen & Seppänen, 2022), and user-friendly interface, which facilitates convenient data extraction (de Granda-Orive et al., 2011).

To ensure a rigorous and transparent methodology, this study adopted the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. PRISMA ensures the transparency, completeness, and reproducibility of the research (Capucho et al., 2025; Putzer & Posza, 2024; Zeng et al., 2024). As illustrated in Figure 1, the PRISMA process involves four key stages to systematically select the final corpus of relevant literature for analysis.



**Figure 1.** PRISMA flow diagram

The identification stage commenced on June 1, 2025. Initially, a keyword search using [TITLE-ABS-KEY (ESG)] yielded 16,040 documents. However, this preliminary search captured numerous irrelevant publications due to the polysemy of the “ESG” acronym across disciplines. To refine the process, a more targeted query was developed. Acknowledging the conceptual overlap between ESG and CSR (Bosi et al., 2022; Broadstock et al., 2020; Legendre et al., 2024), the search string was expanded to incorporate keywords related to both domains within the tourism context. The final query applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords was as follows:

[TITLE ABS KEY (“ESG” OR “environmental, social and governance” OR “environmental, social, governance” OR “environmental governance” OR “social governance” OR “corporate governance” OR “CSR” OR “corporate social responsibility”) AND (“Tourism” OR “Hospitality” OR “Travel” OR “Hotel” OR “Tourist”)].

This comprehensive query yielded an initial dataset of 2,177 documents (see Figure 1).

In the subsequent screening stage, a sequential filtering process was applied to refine the data-

set based on specific criteria. First, the dataset was filtered to include only peer-reviewed articles and reviews, which reduced the count to 1,636 publications. The selection was then restricted to English-language documents, resulting in 1,582 articles. Subsequently, the publication timeframe was set from 1978 to 2024. This period was chosen because the start year aligns with the emergence of ESG related concepts (Legendre et al., 2024), while the exclusion of 2025 publications mitigates potential chronological bias (Gao et al., 2021), a step that yielded 1,476 articles. Finally, the selection was limited to Open Access publications, yielding a final sample of 568 articles for analysis.

In the eligibility phase, the collected database was further refined by eliminating any duplicate articles using Endnote 21 platform; no duplicates were identified. Subsequently, we read the titles and abstracts of the articles to assess the relevance of each of the 568 publications. The primary criterion was a clear focus on ESG or its core components within the tourism context. Publications that did not meet this core criterion were excluded. This process resulted in a final dataset of 478 articles deemed suitable for analysis.

## 2.2. Data analysis

The research dataset in CSV format was collected from Scopus and processed using VOSviewer software (version 1.6.20), a widely recognized tool for bibliometric mapping and network visualization (Rawangngam et al., 2025). The analysis focused on keyword co-occurrence analysis, which was used to elucidate the intellectual structure, identify dominant thematic clusters, pinpoint research gaps, and propose avenues for future research. Additionally, this study systematically examined performance and descriptive indicators to identify publication trends and the most productive journals and countries. Furthermore, quantitative metrics, such as total publications, total citations, and average citations per publication, were utilized to comprehensively evaluate author productivity and impact. This integrated approach provides a robust foundation for identifying both core and emerging themes within the research landscape of ESG in tourism.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Publication trends

The trend analysis reveals a marked increase in publications on ESG related research in tourism from 2008 to 2024 (Figure 2). The field’s development can be characterized by three distinct phases. The initial period (2008–2015) saw modest growth, with an annual output of just one to ten articles. The year 2015 marked a critical turning point with

the adoption of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. These global events provided significant momentum, initiating a period of accelerated growth beginning in 2016, with output climbing from 14 publications in 2017 to a record 45 in 2019. The most significant surge occurred post 2020, with output jumping to 70 publications in 2021 and reaching its peak of 88 in 2022, before stabilizing at 77 articles per year in 2023 and 2024. This upward trend aligns with the emergence of a more global perspective on ESG in the tourism sector, notably reflected in the integration of ESG related pillars into the World Economic Forum’s Travel & Tourism Development Index 2021. The data strongly indicate a growing academic interest in ESG-related issues within the tourism domain.

### 3.2. Authorship and journal analysis

The authorship analysis identifies the most influential researchers based on their publication output and citation impact (Bosi et al., 2022). As detailed in Table 1, Han, H. emerges as the most prolific scholar with 11 publications. He is followed by Ahmad, N. (7 publications) and Samad, S. (5 publications). Han also leads in influence, with 760 citations. Other highly cited authors include Taheri, B. (347 citations) and Ahmad, N. (306 citations).

The analysis of publication outlets (Table 2) reveals the key journals disseminating ESG research in tourism. The journal Sustainability is the most dominant outlet, with 109 publications. A strong presence is also noted from core tourism and hospi-

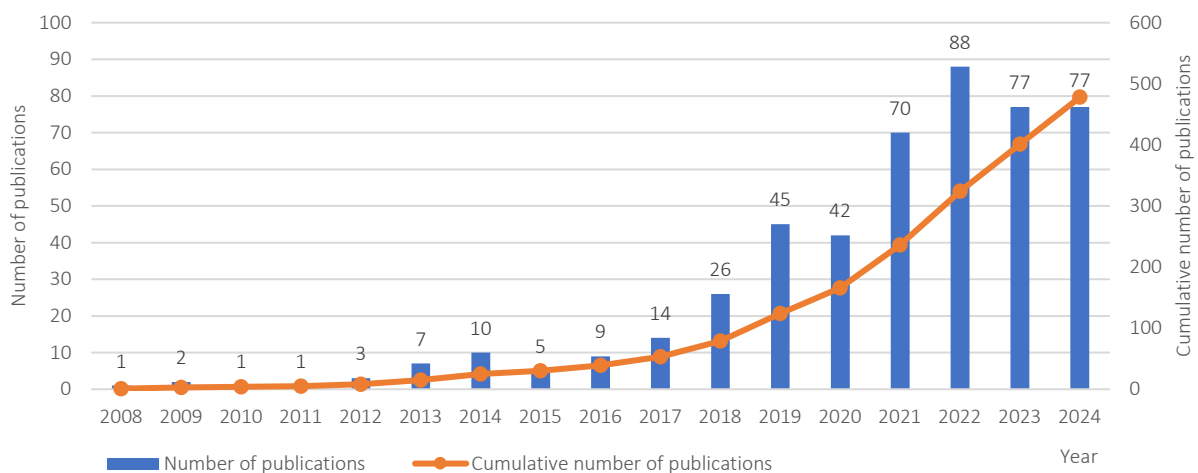


Figure 2. Publication trends by years, 2008–2024 (n = 478)

**Table 1.** Top 10 productive authors

Rank	Author (Affiliation)	Total number of publications	Total citations	Average Citations per Publication
1	Han, Heesup (Sejong University)	11	760	69.1
2	Ahmad, Naveed (Virtual University of Pakistan)	7	306	43.7
3	Samad, Sarminah (Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University)	5	114	22.8
4	Taheri, Babak (Heriot-Watt University)	4	347	86.8
5	Úbeda-garcía, Mercedes (University of Alicante)	4	240	60.0
6	Marco-lajara, Bartolomé (University of Alicante)	4	240	60.0
7	Ariza-montes, Antonio (Andrés Bello University)	4	147	36.8
8	Comite, Ubaldo (University Giustino Fortunato)	4	125	31.3
9	Franzoni, Simona (University of Brescia)	4	59	14.8
10	Sarwar, Huma (University of Brescia)	4	59	14.8

**Table 2.** Top 10 journals with the highest number of publications

Rank	Journal	Total number of publications	%
1	Sustainability	109	49.10
2	International Journal of Hospitality Management	20	9.01
3	Journal of Sustainable Tourism	17	7.66
4	Tourism Management	16	7.21
5	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	13	5.86
6	Frontiers in Psychology	12	5.41
7	Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management	10	4.50
8	International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	9	4.05
9	Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites	8	3.60
10	Journal of Travel Research	8	3.60

tality journals, including the International Journal of Hospitality Management (20 publications), the Journal of Sustainable Tourism (17 publications), and Tourism Management (16 publications). The interdisciplinary nature of the field is evidenced by contributions from journals such as Frontiers in Psychology (12 publications) and Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management (10 publications). This distribution indicates that while Sustainability serves as a primary hub, ESG research in tourism is widely disseminated across a diverse range of specialized and interdisciplinary academic journals.

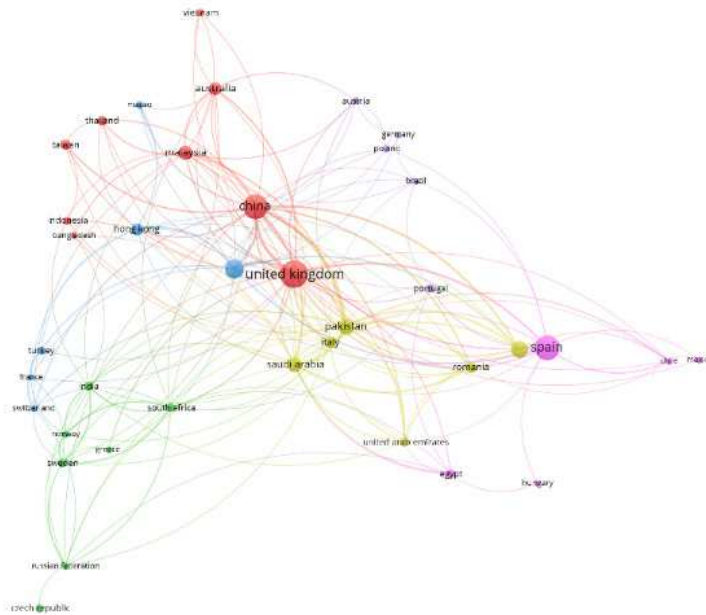
### 3.3. Country distribution analysis

The geographical distribution of research output (Table 3) indicates that the United Kingdom is the most prolific and impactful country, leading with 92 publications and 4,886 total citations. While China (78 publications) and Spain (76 publications) also demonstrate high productivity, Spain exhibits a greater citation impact with an average of 36.9 citations per publication compared to China's 26.3. Notably, some regions demonstrate

exceptionally high impact relative to their output; for instance, Hong Kong (20 publications) and Australia (22 publications) have the highest average citation rates at 43.1 and 41.0, respectively. The active involvement of other nations, including South Korea, Pakistan, and Malaysia, underscores the diverse and global nature of ESG research in the tourism domain.

**Table 3.** Top 10 countries with the highest number of publications

Rank	Country	Total number of publications	Total citations	Average Citations per Publication
1	The United Kingdom	92	4886	53.1
2	China	78	2048	26.3
3	Spain	76	2802	36.9
4	The United States	45	1623	36.1
5	South Korea	37	1366	36.9
6	Pakistan	34	1039	30.6
7	Saudi Arabia	28	715	25.5
8	Malaysia	26	390	15.0
9	Australia	22	902	41.0
10	Hong Kong	20	862	43.1



**Figure 3.** Network analysis of co-authorship based on countries

Furthermore, the cross-country co-authorship network (Figure 3) illustrates the collaborative landscape. Among the 88 contributing countries, 38 have published at least five papers. The network analysis reveals six distinct collaborative clusters, with those colored red, green, blue, and yellow being the most prominent. For example, the red cluster highlights a strong collaborative hub that includes the United Kingdom, China, Australia, and several Southeast Asian nations such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

### 3.4. Most influential publications analysis

Table 4 presents the most influential publications in the field, ranked by total citations. The single most-cited article, with 482 citations, was authored by Han, H. and published in the Journal of Sustainable Tourism. A notable geographical trend also emerges, with the United Kingdom-based researchers authoring four of the top ten publications. An interesting paradox is revealed

**Table 4.** Top ten most-cited publications

Rank	Title	Corresponding Author (Country)	Year	Number of Citations	Journal
1	Consumer behavior and environmental sustainability in tourism and hospitality: a review of theories, concepts, and latest research	Han, Heesup (South Korea)	2021	482	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
2	Online travel reviews as persuasive communication: The effects of content type, source, and certification logos on consumer behavior	Sparks, Beverley A. (Australia)	2013	417	Tourism Management
3	Sustainable-responsible tourism discourse – Towards 'responsustable' tourism	Mihalic, Tanja (Slovenia)	2016	354	Journal of Cleaner Production
4	Corporate social responsibility: The disclosure-performance gap	Font, Xavier (the United Kingdom)	2012	267	Tourism Management
5	Tourism and corporate social responsibility: A critical review and research agenda	Coles, Tim (the United Kingdom)	2013	253	Tourism Management Perspectives
6	Exploring corporate social responsibility and financial performance through stakeholder theory in the tourism industries	Theodoulidis, Babis (the United Kingdom)	2017	249	Tourism Management
7	Effects of tourism CSR on employee psychological capital in the COVID-19 crisis: from the perspective of conservation of resources theory	Mao, Yan (China)	2021	244	Current Issues in Tourism

**Table 4 (cont.).** Top ten most-cited publications

Rank	Title	Corresponding Author (Country)	Year	Number of Citations	Journal
8	The COVID-19 pandemic and organisational commitment of senior hotel managers	Filimonau, Viachaslau (the United Kingdom)	2020	237	International Journal of Hospitality Management
9	Can corporate social responsibility protect firm value during the COVID-19 pandemic?	Qiu, Shangzhi (China)	2021	217	International Journal of Hospitality Management
10	Corporate social responsibility and firm performance in the hotel industry. The mediating role of green human resource management and environmental outcomes	Úbeda-García (Spain)	2021	205	Journal of Business Research

when comparing publication volume with citation impact. Despite being the most prolific outlet for ESG research (as shown in Table 2), the journal *Sustainability* does not feature any of the top ten most-cited articles. In contrast, outlets such as the *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, and *Tourism Management* appear to balance both high publication volume and high-impact scholarship.

### 3.5. Keyword analysis

Analysis of keyword frequency (Table 5) reveals that ESG research in tourism is predominantly focused on its social and environmental dimensions, particularly corporate responsibility and sustainability. The social pillar is the most prominent, evidenced by the high frequency of “Corporate Social Responsibility” (212 occurrences) and its acronym “CSR” (66 occurrences). This strong focus underscores the field’s emphasis on ethical business practices, stakeholder engagement, and community involvement. Environmental themes are also central, with keywords such as “Sustainability” (49 occurrences), “Sustainable development” (20 occurrences), and “Sustainable tourism” (18 occurrences) appearing frequently. Furthermore, the prevalence of industry-specific terms like “Tourism” (42 occurrences), “Hotel” (37 occurrences), and “Hospitality” (33 occurrences) indi-

cates that research is often anchored in the operational context of the hospitality and wider tourism sectors. Finally, the emergence of “COVID-19” (29 occurrences) as a frequent keyword highlights a recent research stream examining ESG practices and performance in the context of the pandemic.

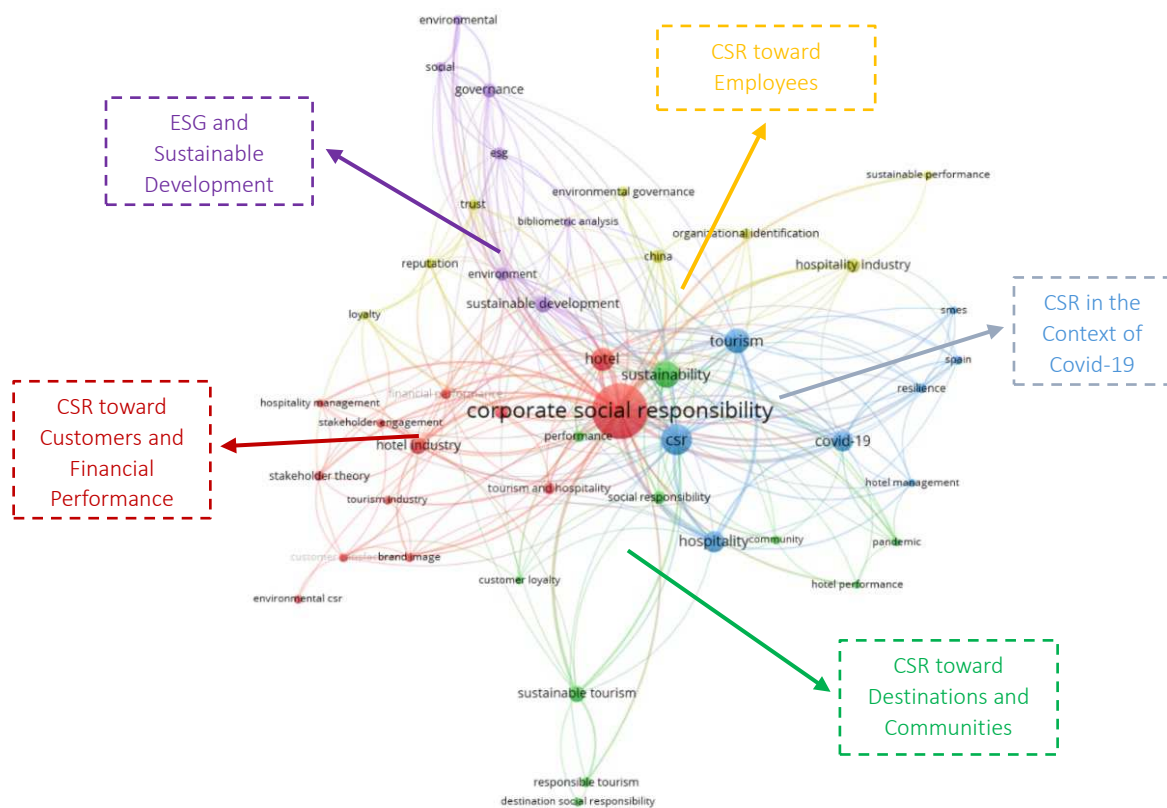
### 3.6. Co-occurrence author keyword network analysis

A co-occurrence analysis of author keywords was performed using VOSviewer to map the intellectual structure of the field (Figure 4). From a total of 1,501 identified keywords, 46 met the minimum occurrence threshold of five and were included in the visualization. In the resulting co-occurrence network, node size corresponds to keyword frequency, the connecting lines indicate the link strength between keywords, and color groups keywords into thematic clusters. The analysis revealed five distinct clusters, representing the primary research themes on ESG in the tourism sector from 2008 to 2024.

Cluster 1 (red) – “CSR toward Customers and Financial Performance”. This cluster includes main keywords such as “corporate social responsibility”, “hotel”, “hotel industry”, “tourism industry”, “tourism and hospitality”, “stakeholder theory”, “stakeholder engagement”, “brand image”, “customer satisfaction” and “financial performance”.

**Table 5.** Top 10 most important keywords for ESG in the tourism field

Rank	Keyword	Occurrences	Rank	Keyword	Occurrences
1	Corporate social responsibility	212	6	Hospitality	33
2	CSR	66	7	Covid-19	29
3	Sustainability	49	8	Hotel-industry	21
4	Tourism	42	9	Sustainable development	20
5	Hotel	37	10	Sustainable tourism	18



**Figure 4.** Co-occurrence analysis of author keywords

This cluster encompasses two primary research streams. The first examines the positive influence of CSR on customer behavioral outcomes, including satisfaction (Ramkissoon et al., 2020; Veloso et al., 2021), loyalty (Jiddi, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024), willingness to pay (Noh et al., 2024; Thomas, 2022), as well as purchase and advocacy intentions (Ahmad et al., 2023; Theodoulidis et al., 2017; Uyar et al., 2020). The second stream investigates the direct link between CSR practices and the financial performance of tourism and hospitality firms (Attia et al., 2023; Theodoulidis et al., 2017; Uyar et al., 2020). From a theoretical perspective, Stakeholder Theory serves as the dominant framework within this cluster, frequently used to explain the mechanisms linking CSR to both financial (Moneva et al., 2020; Theodoulidis et al., 2017) and customer-related outcomes (Niu et al., 2024). This theoretical prominence may be attributed to the critical role of stakeholder engagement in the successful implementation of CSR strategies.

Cluster 2 (green) – “CSR toward Destinations and Communities”. This cluster comprises “sus-

tainability”, “sustainable tourism”, “responsible tourism”, “destination social responsibility”, and “community”. Research within this cluster predominantly focuses on managing destination level issues to foster sustainable tourism development. This includes the protection of natural and cultural heritage (Font et al., 2019; Pereira et al., 2021), ensuring ecological security (Liu & Yin, 2022; Wang et al., 2023; X. Zheng et al., 2023) and destination planning (Garanti et al., 2024; Magio et al., 2021). A complementary research stream explores community-based responsible tourism from a micro level perspective. For example, studies in this vein examine how a hotel’s community engagement influences tourist behavior or investigate the motivations for local residents and small enterprises to participate in socially responsible activities, such as economic benefits and resource stewardship (Sarabia-Molina et al., 2022).

Cluster 3 (yellow) – “CSR toward Employees”. This cluster highlights keywords such as “sustainable performance”, “hospitality industry”, “trust”, “reputation”, “loyalty”, and “organizational identi-

fication". A primary research stream within this cluster examines the influence of CSR on a wide range of employee outcomes, including green behavior (He et al., 2021; Rahman Khattak et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2021), organizational citizenship behavior (He et al., 2019), loyalty (Gavurova et al., 2022), and task performance (He et al., 2019). Historically, this research has predominantly focused on the positive effects of CSR, largely neglecting potential negative employee perceptions. Addressing this gap, recent work by Hu et al. (2024) demonstrates that employee perceptions of CSR can be ambivalent, leading to varied engagement outcomes. A second research stream has examined the mediating role of organizational identification in exploring the mechanisms that link perceived CSR to employee outcomes (Freire et al., 2022; Guo et al., 2023; Kong et al., 2019). For instance, Freire et al. (2022) demonstrated that organizational identification, enhanced by a firm's CSR activities, subsequently boosts employees' organizational citizenship behaviors in the hotel sector.

Cluster 4 (blue) – "CSR in the Context of Covid-19". This cluster includes "tourism", "CSR", "covid-19", "hospitality", "resilience", "hotel management", and "smes". Research within this cluster primarily investigates how CSR activities enabled tourism firms to enhance their resilience and navigate the COVID-19 crisis (Afshan et al., 2022; Marco-Lajara et al., 2022). The underlying premise is that strong CSR practices build social capital and stakeholder trust, which in turn fosters support from customers and employees during crises (Bosi et al., 2022). A key research stream extends this focus by examining the direct impact of CSR engagement on firm performance during the pandemic (Fatima & Elbanna, 2023; Qiu et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2023; F. Zheng et al., 2023). For instance, F. Zheng et al. (2023) empirically demonstrated that CSR helped mitigate the negative financial impacts of the pandemic on firms in China, although this buffering effect was found to be modest.

Cluster 5 (purple) – "ESG and Sustainable Development". This cluster includes main keywords such as "esg", "environment", "environmental", "social", "governance", "sustainable development", and "bibliometric analysis". This cluster encompasses two distinct research streams. The

first investigates the impact of ESG practices on firm-level outcomes in the tourism industry, consistently finding a positive relationship between ESG performance and metrics like financial performance (Lee et al., 2023; Rodríguez-Fernández et al., 2019), firm market value (Ionescu et al., 2019), competitiveness (Nakipova et al., 2023). For example, Lee et al. (2023) suggest that ESG initiatives enhance business performance by fostering stakeholder trust and improving public perception. A second stream of research explores the role of ESG as a practical framework for achieving Sustainable Development Goals at various levels, from the corporate to the national (Boustani & Abidib, 2023; Kang, 2024; Matviaková, 2024; Oh, 2024). Finally, we observed that numerous systematic literature reviews and bibliometric analyses have been published to explore thematic trends in ESG-related research (Legendre et al., 2024; Putzer & Posza, 2024), indicating that the ESG literature is gradually gaining attention in the field.

The overlay visualization in Figure 5 illustrates the temporal evolution of the research landscape. As per the color-coded scale, darker blue nodes represent earlier publications, while green and yellow nodes signify more recent scholarly activity. The analysis reveals that the most frequent keywords in the 2020–2021 period centered on foundational concepts such as "corporate social responsibility", "csr", "sustainability", "hospitality", "tourism", "hotel industry", and "sustainable tourism". Subsequently, the 2021–2022 period saw the emergence of more specific research themes, including "environmental csr", "stakeholder theory", "environmental governance", "covid-19", "China", "hotel performance", and "brand image". Notably, the specific keyword "esg" itself only gained significant prominence and traction in 2023, appearing concurrently with associated terms like "sustainable performance", "hotel management", and "bibliometric analysis". This chronological trend strongly suggests that ESG is a nascent topic in the tourism sector, especially when contrasted with more established, traditional themes like "corporate social responsibility" or "sustainability".

The bibliometric analysis results show a sharp and sustained increase in research output on ESG in tourism, particularly since 2016. This surge corresponds to major global events such as the adoption



**Table 6.** Future research trends for ESG in tourism

Research Topic	Future agendas
CSR toward Customers and Financial Performance	How do consumers perceive and interpret companies' ESG efforts and disclosure? What are the potential negative impacts of corporate ESG practices on consumer perceptions and behaviors? Which aspect of ESG (E, S, G) should companies focus on first to yield the best results (especially when company resources are constrained)? How do digital ESG reports influence brand loyalty and financial performance?
CSR toward Destinations and Communities	What is the role of ESG strategies in destination marketing? What are the consequences of ESG policy changes in tourism destinations? How do government-level regulations affect destinations and companies' ESG strategizing? How do ESG strategies contribute to the preservation and promotion of local culture and heritage at tourism destinations? How can digital transformation applications be integrated into the ESG framework to manage tourist flows and mitigate the negative impacts of overtourism?
CSR toward Employees	How can ESG practices at the corporate level negatively affect employees? What are the competencies and skills required for employees in ESG-aligned organizations, and how can capacity-building initiatives address these needs? What are the impacts and ethical implications of using AI to monitor employee well-being in tourism?
CSR in the context of a crisis	How does the severity of crises impact the ESG and firm performance relationship? How does ESG help companies withstand external shocks like natural disasters and epidemics? How do ESG policies influence job security, resilience, and organizational support for employees during crises?
ESG and Sustainable Development	How to develop ESG strategies at corporate, local, national, and global levels to achieve Sustainable Development Goals? How can different ESG reporting frameworks be standardized to facilitate inter-organizational comparisons? How can ESG principles support the transition toward low-carbon, climate-resilient tourism models? How can blockchain technology improve the transparency of ESG reporting and combat greenwashing? How can an integrated AI framework for analytics and monitoring advance ESG practices in the tourism sector?

Furthermore, a critical research gap identified in this analysis is the distinct paucity of studies at the intersection of digital transformation and ESG in tourism, with only two relevant publications identified within our dataset. The first highlights the importance of digital communication in responsible tourism management (Camilleri, 2018), while the second explores digital transformation as an adaptive CSR strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic (Johann, 2022). This dearth of research is particularly striking given the widespread scholarly and industry focus on digitalization within tourism.

In the current era of digitalization, technology is a pivotal enabler for advancing ESG performance and achieving sustainability goals. In the environmental dimension, technological applications

can optimize resource allocation and minimize ecological footprints. Socially, digital tools can foster inclusive employment and enhance community engagement. From a governance perspective, digitalization improves transparency and accountability, offering a potent tool against greenwashing. Beyond the firm level, destination managers can leverage technology to enrich the tourist experience, promote heritage conservation, and optimize visitor flows. Therefore, this study strongly advocates for future research to explore the integration of digital transformation across all ESG-related topics, positioning it as a critical pathway to accelerate the industry's sustainability transition.

Table 6 presents potential future research directions for ESG in the tourism sector.

## CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to systematically map the intellectual structure and thematic evolution of research on ESG in tourism. Specifically, the paper aimed to investigate publication trends, identify key contributors (authors, journals, and countries), analyze high-impact works, and delineate historical research themes.

The findings reveal that highly cited publications have largely concentrated on the relationship between CSR, consumer behavior, and corporate financial performance, reflecting the strong conceptual roots of

ESG research in the CSR tradition. Consistent with this observation, the keyword co-occurrence analysis identified five dominant thematic clusters, with a clear predominance of CSR-oriented topics. This pattern suggests that, despite the growing use of the ESG terminology, dedicated and comprehensive investigations explicitly centered on the ESG framework in tourism remain relatively limited.

Building on these insights, the study highlights two critical research gaps. First, future scholarship should move beyond the prevailing CSR lens and develop more theory-driven and empirically rigorous studies grounded explicitly in the comprehensive ESG framework. Second, and more notably, the analysis reveals a substantial paucity of research at the intersection of ESG and digital transformation. Given the transformative potential of digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence and blockchain, to enhance environmental efficiency, foster social inclusion, strengthen governance transparency, and deepen stakeholder engagement, integrating digital transformation into ESG research in tourism represents a vital and promising avenue for future inquiry. Accordingly, future studies should explore how these digital technologies can be systematically embedded across all ESG dimensions within the tourism industry, at both the firm and destination levels.

This study has several limitations. The analysis was confined to the Scopus database and English-language publications. Therefore, future studies could expand the scope to include additional databases such as Web of Science, IEEE Xplore, and Google Scholar, as well as incorporate multilingual literature to provide a more comprehensive understanding of ESG research in tourism. Despite these limitations, this study significantly contributes to elucidating the research trajectory of ESG in the tourism sector and identifying gaps for further exploration.

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