

Rural tourism: A systematic literature review on definitions and challenges

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The definition of rural tourism remains unclear and only a few studies have mapped the current state of knowledge in this field. Through a systematic quantitative literature review, this study extends the previous literature by investigating rural tourism definitions and challenges faced within developed and developing contexts. The analysis of definitions reveals four key aspects of rural tourism that include location, sustainable development, community-based features, and experiences. While rural tourism in both developed and developing contexts emphasised location as a main defining characteristic, sustainable development and community-based aspects appear prominently in the literature related to developing countries, and the experience dimension appears more frequently in the literature related to developed countries. The results suggest that rural destinations face internal and external challenges. The greatest challenges for developed and developing contexts arise from issues related to internal resources, although external challenges were found to be greater in developed contexts. The mapping of the current state of knowledge suggests several directions for future research in this domain, and response to the pandemic.

Keywords: rural tourism, definitions and challenges, rurality, systematic literature review, developed countries, developing countries

1. Introduction

Rural tourism (RT) is not a new concept in the literature with case studies dating from the late nineteenth century (Gao & Wu, 2017; Perales, 2002). Often described as a means to regenerate socio-economic development (Oppermann, 1996; UNWTO, 2017; Quaranta et al., 2016) or to revitalise declining rural productivity (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012; Kortoci & Kortoci, 2017; Su, 2011), RT retains its relevance, with tourists' increasingly seeking authentic experiences (Guan et al., 2019; Kastenholtz et al., 2012).

A universal definition of RT lacks consensus (de Sousa & Kastenholtz, 2015; Pina & Delfa, 2005), although some early research attempted to formulate such a

definition (Gilbert, 1989; Greffe, 1994; Lane, 1994). Therefore, a precise definition remains elusive as RT is complex, embraces multifaceted activities, and varies across regions and countries (Hernández Maestro et al., 2007; Pina & Delfa, 2005). Moreover, it seems that few studies investigating this aspect exist. Consequently, conceptualising RT remains difficult (Frochot, 2005) and has implications for planning and management (Lane, 1994).

A similar level of complexity was found in the implementation of RT, in relation to its development and management and by refuting arguments that RT could be considered a panacea for rural areas (Clarke et al., 2001; Iorio & Corsale, 2010; Koster & Lemelin, 2009; McComb et al., 2017). Lane and Kastenholz (2015) specifically reviewed the literature on RT development and concluded that the economic dimensions of RT remain a major focus of research interest and confirmed that the characteristics of RT were economically determined (H. Kim, 2018; Park & Yoon, 2011; Sharpley, 2007). Yet there is little research exploring how a country's economic status sets the context for RT.

A seminal paper by Lane (1994) underlined an overarching discussion about the five conditions used to define RT: location in rural areas, functionality, scale, character and pattern of the place. However, these conditions seem to be arguable. Studies by Nicola and McKenna (1998) and Komppula (2014), for instance, underlined that RT does not have to be located in rural areas. It could be in urban areas that incorporate rural functions. The different interpretations of rural areas might imply that the scope of RT study could have evolved to reach the urban spectrum, yet still being associated with traditional and rustic characteristics. Furthermore, one cannot ignore the impact of COVID-19 on RT studies. Many studies highlight a shift of tourist travel demands towards more mindful and meaningful tourist activities after the pandemic

(Seraphin & Dosquet, 2020; Stankov et al., 2020; Wen et al., 2020; Zhu & Deng, 2020).

RT brings a vast opportunity to satisfy the demand of the post-pandemic tourists who seek stress-relief and rejuvenation within a nature-based environment (Ozdemir & Yildiz, 2020) or engagement with physical and psychological wellbeing activities (Vaishar & Štátná, 2020; Wen et al., 2020; Zhu & Deng, 2020).

This study intends to address the two identified gaps by mapping the definitions of RT in the research and by identifying the challenges evidenced by developed and developing countries. Challenges in this study refer to any obstacles, issues, or insufficient capabilities, that may impede RT. Papers which did not provide empirical analysis were not included in the comparative analysis, these papers were only used in the analysis of definitions. A comparative analysis between developed and developing countries aims to investigate whether the economic status of a destination influences definitional interpretations and challenges to RT. The study also identifies which type of context is under-researched. Another purpose of differentiating between the developed and developing countries is to gain a comprehensive understanding of RT and to diminish a stereotypical bias of definition as raised by Nair et al. (2015). The next section of the paper presents the methodology, followed by the results and discussion of definitions and challenges. The last section presents recommendations based on the literature review, and advances future research avenues on RT studies in response to the pandemic.

2. Methodology

This study undertook a systematic quantitative literature review (SQLR) as this method aims to identify, synthesise, and analyse previous studies through a review process, which presents results in a more logical and structured manner (Pickering & Byrne, 2014; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006; Marasco et al., 2018). The method is also easily

replicated and produces reliable results.

The SQLR protocol consists of three stages. The first stage is the identification of the specific keywords that are relevant to both the research topic and the research questions. The keywords are searched within a variety of scholarly databases, as this increases comprehensiveness and favours triangulation of the results (Pickering & Byrne, 2014). The second stage relates to establishing the structure of the research database, which includes the selection criteria, analytical categories, and revision after testing a small number of samples. The third and last stage, requires the entering of the data into the research database and the production of summary tables for analysis purposes. It is acknowledged that a major limitation of this method is its exclusive use of online search results. However, with most journals now providing electronic issues, this potential bias is unlikely to significantly impact on the investigation.

This study used seven databases to ensure the comprehensiveness of the results: Science Direct, Scopus, Web of Science, SAGE Publications, EBSCOHost (Hospitality & Tourism Complete), Emerald, and Proquest. The search used the term “rural tourism” as a keyword and was limited to title, abstract, and/or keywords in the first phase. This search resulted in the identification of 6,224 articles. The second step involved filtering the results, using two exclusion criteria. The first exclusion criterion stipulated English language only and the second criterion was related to quality. Only peer-reviewed articles, published in journals with a minimum Q2 ranking in Scopus and were listed by the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA, 2020) were included. There was no limitation in relation to the date of publication. This reduced the number of articles to 358, which with the removal of duplicates was reduced to 237. Abstracts were then screened for relevance and this process reduced the selected literature to 218.

The third step involved re-screening the articles according to further selection criteria on eligibility and research scope, as devised by Xiao and Watson (2019). The texts of the selected 218 articles were analysed to verify that the studies discussed definitions and evidenced some challenges. Eventually, this process yielded 115 articles. Due to the potential that some relevant articles were not identified during the two screening processes, a cross-check, devised by Pickering & Byrne (2014), of the 115 articles' reference lists was undertaken against the results of a Google Scholar search. Through this process, 10 additional articles were included. As a result, 125 studies were identified as eligible and tabulated in a summary table. The preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) flowchart (Figure 1) illustrates the process of selection.

Figure 1 here

Tabulation included two categories, publication information and research content, with a country classification reflecting the case study as being either a developed or developing country based on the average aggregate growth (from the sum of gross domestic product (GDP) of individual countries measured at 2012 prices and exchange rates) recognised by the United Nations (2019, p. 168). In this study, a developed country refers to a country with a growth rate above the average aggregate growth whereas a developing country is one below the average growth (United Nations, 2019). This study does not analyse according to the Western vs. Eastern centric approach since some Eastern countries, for instance, Japan and South Korea, are developed countries. Hence, our comparison of the definitions and challenges is not based on geographical or cultural consideration; this is acknowledged as a limitation and can be further examined in future research.

A content analysis was conducted on the summary table by extracting the descriptive information relating to definitions and challenges. By exploring the extractions, patterns were found. The content was then coded in NVivo Software through several nodes found within the patterns. The nodes were location, sustainable development, community-based aspects, experience, as well as internal and external challenges. An article may have been coded in more than one node if the content addressed several categories. The study then utilised the cross-tabulation features in the NVivo software and the gap of the percentage was then identified and analysed.

The review found that the 125 articles were mostly published in tourism-related journals (Tourism Management 15%), Journal of Sustainable Tourism 10%) and Annals of Tourism Research 8%), multidisciplinary journals (*Sustainability* 13%), and rural-oriented journals (*Journal of Rural Studies* 4%, and *Agricultural Economics* 2%). Overall, the majority of the case studies focused on Spain (11%), Portugal and the United Kingdom (10% each), then China (8%) and Malaysia (5%) (Figure 2). Those articles with multiple case studies tended to focus on developed countries, with one article having conducted a comparative study in both developing and developed contexts. Seven articles did not employ case studies and were only included in the definition analysis yet were excluded from the comparative analysis. Using the United Nations' economic classifications (United Nations, 2019), the results revealed that there was far less research relating to the developing context (25%) than the developed (75%). This was despite a significant growth of published papers since 2001 and a dramatic increase since 2011. Only one article was recorded between 1981 and 1990, eight in the 1991 to 2000 period; 33 between 2001 and 2010, and 83 recorded between 2011 and 2020. The next section presents the findings relating to RT definitions and challenges.

Figure 2 here

3. Rural tourism definitions

Overall, only 36% of the reviewed articles explicitly defined RT (Appendix 1). The remaining conceptualised rural tourism without providing a definition. The analysis of the definitions and conceptualisations of RT resulted in three major findings. Firstly, specification of the location of this type of tourism remains a constant within the definitions, secondly, there was no definitional consensus, and thirdly, definitions became incrementally more complex over time. For example, authors may have focused on economic perspectives (Gannon, 1994) defining RT as “a collection of businesses that creates sales of goods and services to tourists” (p. 55). Others emphasised the nature of the experience and psychological perspectives such as “an experience to reconnect with a past, to appreciate nature, local traditions, celebrations and art forms, a connection with what is perceived as a simpler life or a way to return to childhood” (Nogueira & Pinho, 2015, p. 325) and “RT can be viewed as a phenomenon resulting partly from the wish to escape the urban environment and the need to reaffirm personal identities in the face of growing urbanisation” (Kaaristo, 2014, p. 268). In this context, most authors preferred to delimit features, such as location (“tourist activity developed in rural areas”), motivation (“contact with a rural way of life and/or nature”), and length of stay (“short, often for only a weekend”) (Hernández Maestro et al., 2007, p. 951).

Past studies generally define RT through three approaches: (1) using previous knowledge (e.g. citing directly or indirectly other researchers’ definitions); (2) using official policy documents (e.g. citing directly or indirectly the definitions devised by a ministry or intergovernmental organisation); (3) conceptualising own definitions (e.g. conducting a critical reflection on academic and practical definitions used in a unique study context). Overall, there is no clear association between the country context and

the approach taken to define RT. The analysis of the reviewed literature shows that authors mostly employed the first approach (22 articles in the developed countries and 6 articles in the developing countries) (Appendix 2), with Lane's (1994) being the most cited definition. Lane (1994, p. 14) defined RT as "The tourism which satisfies these forms: located in rural areas, functionally rural, set in rural scale, traditional in character, representing the complex pattern of rural environment, economy, history and location." Few scholars employ the second (3 articles in the developed countries, and 1 article in a developing country) and the third approach (6 articles in the developed countries and 2 articles in the developing countries). The second approach accentuates that the definitions of RT in the developed countries are well-established based on the networks in their regions such as OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, e.g. Qiu et al., 2019) and PRIVETUR (Portuguese Association for Rural Tourism) in Portugal (Jesus & Franco, 2016). It is worth noting that the OECD's definition is also used in a case study conducted in non-member OECD countries such as in Iran (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012). It might imply a lack of RT specialist networks/organisations in these developing countries.

As most authors define RT by describing key tourism activities in rural destinations such as farm-based tourism, nature-based tourism, adventure tourism, wellness tourism, spiritual tourism, nostalgia tourism, heritage tourism, cultural tourism, agrotourism, ecotourism and other related activities in rural areas (e.g., Kaptan Ayhan et al., 2020; Roberts & Hall, 2004), providing a consensus definition of RT is challenging (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). To fill this academic gap, our analysis provides four themes (Table 1 and Table 2) that could encapsulate the various definitions of RT. These are location (where RT takes place), sustainable development (how RT and its development are expected to be sustainable), community-based features (how RT encourages local

community enhancement and/or empowerment) and the experiences provided. The following section expands on these themes by comparison according to economic status and to evaluate whether this status influenced definitions. Within this context, we suggest to define RT as a type of tourism located in areas within a destination that are characterised by rural functions (such as traditional, locally-based, authentic, remote, sparsely populated and mainly agricultural areas) where the tourists can physically, socially, or psychologically immerse themselves in this specific destination. Further, it could be argued that RT aims to revitalise rural resources for local socio-economic benefits and environmental sustainability through active local community empowerment and involvement. The key themes of definitions will be further discussed below.

Table 1 here

3.1 Location

Location was a major theme in the reviewed literature and a most commonly appeared defining characteristic of RT (77.7%). Several authors (Barke, 2004; Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004; Frochot, 2005; Lane, 1994) based their definitions on what constitutes rural areas from a social and geographic perspective. Lane (1994), for instance, proposed RT as a continuum where a place may sit anywhere on a spectrum from rural to urban areas, based on three considerations, population density, functionality, and accessibility. With rural areas being defined in terms such as a ‘remote’, ‘sparsely populated’ area, which possesses a rural function within its social structures. From a social perspective, several authors associated RT with agricultural activities (Daugstad, 2008; Shen et al., 2019; Thompson, 2004), while others such as Almeida et al. (2014) used the combination of pristine nature and traditional culture to form a unique sociological element. From a more geographic perspective, it was generally agreed that

RT was located in less populated areas, although an exact determination of what was to be considered as less populated varied. For instance, Barke (2004) suggested a maximum of ten thousand residents, whereas Šimková (2007) advocated an area with less than a hundred inhabitants per one kilometre square classified as less populated. Features of the location, such as accessibility to the area and an emphasis on remoteness and isolation, also appeared to be significant elements within RT definitions. Several papers, such as Fleischer & Felsentein (2000), Ghaderi & Henderson (2012), L. Huang (2006), Situmorang et al. (2019), Skuras et al. (2006) relied on these concepts to define both rural area and RT.

Location was related to ‘rural areas’ for 52.53% of the articles within this theme, with mention of ‘farms or agricultural areas’ (14.14%), ‘countryside’ (8.08%), peripheral, lagging or marginalised areas (6.06%) and small-town or village (6.06%). Due to the complexity of defining rural areas, some authors employed ‘non’ or ‘outside’ followed by its antonym, for instance non-urban or outside a metropolitan area (13.13%). This theme was equally prevalent with a case study both in developed and developing contexts (36.69 and 35.14% respectively) but some differences were noticeable when scrutinising sub-themes (see Figure 3). The use of ‘non-urban areas’ was more than double in developed contexts (16.18% against 6.45%), while the use of ‘villages or small towns’ was more than double in developing contexts (9.68% against 4.41%). For instance, in China, RT was associated with traditional villages (Feng et al., 2018; Gao & Wu, 2017; Guan et al., 2019), whereas in Italy, it was often linked with farms (Garau, 2015; Lagravinese, 2013; Quaranta et al., 2016). This result is a reminder that functions do not always define RT, as underlined by Lane and Kastenholz (2015).

Overall, the results outline that although ‘countryside’, ‘rural’, and ‘farm’ were once primarily used to define RT, there seems to be an increased flexibility, as

defining characteristics might be specific to different countries or contexts. For instance, ‘quiet’ was used to describe rural areas in Estonia (Kaaristo, 2014), but not in a South African study (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004). Other case studies, from England (Garrod et al., 2006) and Finland (Komppula, 2014), also argued a town could be defined as RT if the town had a rural function.

Figure 3 here

3.2 Sustainable development

Sustainable development tended to be discussed within nearly 41% of the reviewed literature and was prevalent in both developed and developing country literature/cases (20.26% and 22.97% respectively). Subcategories related to the expectation of positive outcomes: to provide economic development (39.76%), to maintain social and cultural preservation (30.12%), and to ensure environmental conservation (30.12%) (Table 2). For example, Prince (2017) and Trukhachev (2015) considered RT not merely as an economic contributor, but a type of development reflective of, and contributing to, a place’s socio-cultural and natural identity. Similarly, Lo et al. (2019) defined RT by its dependence on natural and cultural features that characterised the rural environment. RT development appears to encourage procedures that are consistent with the natural and social values of a place (Fotiadis et al. 2019).

As Figure 3 depicts, attention on economic viability seems more prominent in developing contexts (51.85%), than in developed (33.93%). Conversely, in developed contexts, definitions were more likely to highlight the preservation of social-culture and environment (33.93% and 32.14% respectively) than in developing contexts (22.22% and 25.93% respectively). In general, the results confirmed that sustainable development was prominent in both groups of studies, even though attention to cultural and environmental preservation was higher in developed contexts. The under-

representation of economic benefit in developed contexts may signify that a more stable economic position has prompted a shift towards preservation and economic considerations have become a lesser priority.

3.3. Community-based aspects

A community-based focus was the third theme, present in nearly 41% of the reviewed literature, and across the developed and developing contexts (20.92% and 20.55% respectively). There was a focus on local character, local participation, and stakeholder integration, expressed individually or in combination. For instance, RT was repeatedly characterised as being small-scale (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012) and traditional (Khartishvili, 2019). Examples emphasised local participation including de Sousa & Kastenholz (2015) who posited that RT should be “controlled by the local community” (p. 1239) and Nair et al. (2015) incorporated stakeholder integration, calling for stronger governmental-business cooperation.

Overall, the results highlighted the importance of local and local communities in RT, although the analysis also demonstrates that the country’s economic status influences how the term ‘local’ is interpreted. As presented on figure 3, while the literature from developing contexts expressed greater interest in participation (nearly two times more than developed contexts), studies in developed contexts tended to concentrate on local character and stakeholder integration (more than three times higher for the latter)

3.4 Experience

Experience as a theme was found in nearly 41% of the reviewed articles with an equal prevalence in economic locations (22.22 % and 20.27%). The theme of experience includes the physical, social, or psychological experience of tourists. Figure 3 suggests

that physical experiences were described equally in both developed (58.97%) and developing contexts (52.63%) and were often related to authentic tangible attractions, such as enjoying a close connection with the natural landscape (e.g. Cantallops et al., 2015) and appreciating local culture (e.g. MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003). Social experiences were of higher interest in the developing (42.11%) than developed context (28.21%) and were reported as ‘a rural way of life’ (e.g. Ezeuduji, 2017), personalised contact with local communities (e.g. Sanagustin-Fons, 2018), and acquiring local knowledge from the experience (e.g. Koster & Lemelin, 2009). Psychological experience was less commonly cited in developing (5.26%) rather than developed contexts (12.82%), and related to emotions, such as relaxation (e.g. Kaaristo, 2014), escapism (e.g. Nogueira & Pinho, 2015), nostalgia (e.g. Kastenholz et al., 2012), and a quest for identity (e.g. Polo Peña et al., 2012b). These results reconfirm the broad spectrum of experiences associated with RT.

4. The challenges

The challenges associated with RT were grouped into internal (80.15%) and external categories (19.85%). Internal challenges referred to the limitations of internal resources, especially in relation to countryside capital, such as the tangible elements, perceptual notions, and endeavours to establish supply (Garrod et al., 2006; Z. Su et al., 2019). For example, social and political barriers (e.g. Garau, 2015), limited workforce (e.g. Iorio & Corsale, 2010), poor planning and management (e.g. Park & Yoon, 2011), lack of marketing strategies (e.g. Arbogast et al., 2017), insufficient financial support (e.g. Pujiastuti et al., 2017), limited physical amenities (e.g. Trukhachev, 2015), and a lack of sustainable strategies (e.g. Lagravinese, 2013). External challenges related to elements outside or apart from rural resources, such as unstable tourist demand (e.g. Eusebio et al., 2017), threats from competitors (e.g. Haven-Tang & Jones, 2012), and potential

conflict with external resources, such as investors outside the destination (e.g. Christou & Sharpley, 2019). A full list of articles and categories are presented in Table 2. The internal and external challenges are elaborated below and presented in Table 3.

Table 2 here

Despite the different economic contexts, this review found both contexts faced similar challenges in a comparable hierarchy. Firstly, the internal challenges were a primary concern for both developed (85.47%) and developing contexts (93.65%). Analysis found that social and political challenges rated the highest (developed 20.11% and developing 25.40%). The review also identified many social issues, such as a lack of cooperation in vertical and horizontal social networks, evidenced by price wars, social conflict, and distrust amongst stakeholders (e.g. Barke, 2004; Haven-Tang & Jones, 2012; Pilving et al., 2019). Political issues such as a high dependency on government support and different political interests were also identified, for instance in Briedenhann & Wickens (2004) and Chen et al. (2018).

Table 3 here

The workforce was presented as another common internal challenge. For example, Fleischer and Felsenstein (2000) evidenced how the lack of human capital decreased competitiveness in the national market, which was exacerbated by younger generations preferring to leave the village. In turn, others highlighted the need for more hospitality skills (Ilbery et al., 2007; Situmorang et al., 2019), and for increased planning and management (Gao & Wu, 2017; Loureiro, 2014). Moreover, the results demonstrated that RT also struggles with marketing, financial investment, and the provision of physical infrastructure (Almeida et al., 2014; Clarke et al., 2001; Fong & Lo, 2015). Several scholars (Garau, 2015; L. Huang, 2006; Nieto et al., 2011) have outlined the lack of proficiency in utilising advanced technology such as social media

and websites in their marketing strategy. Financially, there is often a reluctance to invest due to low return expectancy (Krol, 2019; Sharpley, 2002). Physical challenges concern the struggles that RT faces in relation to a site's tangible features. For example, access to might be difficult (Arbogast et al., 2017; Situmorang et al., 2019), hygiene and sanitation might be lacking (Long & Nguyen, 2018; Shen et al., 2019), waste management may not be prioritised (Feng et al., 2018; Kortoci & Kortoci, 2017), and infrastructure and amenities may be insufficient (Garau, 2015; Kortoci & Kortoci, 2017; Martínez Roget & González, 2006; Muresan et al., 2016).

Finally, a lack of sustainable strategy was a dilemma when fostering RT (Daugstad, 2008; Gilbert, 1989), spawning anxiety for resource commodification and natural resource exploitation for the sake of tourism (Garrod et al., 2006; Kaptan Ayhan et al., 2020). There is recognition of the challenge in balancing rural development while preserving daily rural life (Cahyanto et al., 2013). Another paradox relates to the need to provide originality while controlling quality. Rural destinations are required to remain authentic, yet this authenticity might be perceived as low quality compared to urban standards (Shen et al., 2019). Furthermore, it was noted that RT growth can shift residents' attitudes to a more profit-based orientation (Christou & Sharpley, 2019), and being too economically successful may instead endanger the sustainability of RT (Gilbert, 1989).

External challenges, such as poor tourism demand, threats from competitors, and external resources, were also discussed in the literature, more so in the developed context at 14.53% than in the developing context at 6.35%. It was also emphasised that low demand was related to an inability to appeal to the mass market (W. Huang et al., 2016; Perales, 2002) and dependence on seasonal patterns (Cantallops et al., 2015; Ciolac et al., 2017; Z. Su et al., 2019). Uncertain demand creates economic

inconsistencies (Christou & Sharpley, 2019), which can result in RT being regarded as a supplementary revenue stream (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012; Kortoci & Kortoci, 2017; Su, 2011). Destinations may also face difficulties in building and prevailing over competitors as several studies cited the domination of more mature or popular destinations than initiating rural tourism destinations (Almeida et al., 2014; Feng et al., 2008). It was also observed that the intervention of external resources may cause economic leakage or social conflict within destinations (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008; W. Huang et al., 2016; Zou et al., 2014).

Figure 4 here

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper presented the findings of a systematic literature review of journal articles published between 1989 and 2020 and explored issues related to how RT has been defined within the literature and the challenges for RT in developed and developing contexts. The substantial increase in publications within the field demonstrates a growing interest in RT, mostly from within the disciplines of tourism and rural studies. Yet, this review was not without limitations. The research was limited to English peer-reviewed journals. Future research could benefit from the inclusion of publications in other languages to provide additional insights into RT in different socio-cultural contexts. The term “rural tourism” was used to identify relevant articles and might have excluded RT scholarship using “sustainable tourism” and “responsible tourism” as preferred keywords. At last, there were only a few RT studies in developing contexts, so attention to this context may deserve greater scholarly attention. In the same way, the scope of the review was limited to an exploration of definitions and challenges to RT but further review could focus on policies, strategies, and actions that have been implemented or proposed to overcome these challenges. Despite these limitations,

several key findings emerged.

Delivering a definition in one sentence is challenging and may result in the loss of relevant characteristics (Streifeneder, 2016). As observed in this review, four fundamental features have been considered to defining RT for both developed and developing contexts: (1) Location is of utmost importance, most commonly understood as a geographic and social perspective; (2) Sustainable development is a core value of RT; (3) The role of indigenous communities is preponderant to manage RT; (4) RT should provide rural experiences.

So, what does it mean? First, the analysis highlights that the definition of RT is by no means influenced by economic conditions. Second, the constancy of location to define RT but the increasing complexity in defining location, not only mirrors the world's fast-paced urbanisation, but actually questions the way contexts have been traditionally divided. It becomes increasingly difficult to contrast urban from rural areas, even more so when there are changes in activities and income provenance (Oswald et al., 2003). Several studies included 'nature' or 'nature tourism' in definitions of RT (e.g. Qiu et al., 2019; Kastenholz et al., 2018), yet it might be agreed that nature is not always synonymous with rural areas. As such, it might be time to revisit the meaning of location and rural areas specifically. Norberg-Schulz (1980) insisted that *loci* was defined by the physical characteristics and social features and perhaps this could be used as a starting point?

This review also finds that tourism is expected to positively promote rural communities' quality of life and sustainable development in rural areas (Gannon, 1994). This expectation was reflected in the requirement for community-based aspects and sustainable development embedded within definitions in both early (e.g. Lane, 1994) and more recent studies (e.g. Fotiadis et al., 2019). Many of the challenges explored in

this review remain. A roadmap for sustainable rural development has been researched (de Graaf et al., 2009) and it may be necessary to conduct similar research with respect to tourism context. Attempts have been made to advocate, conceptualise, and implement an integrated RT approach (Cawley et al., 2007; Ilbery et al., 2007; Saxena et al., 2007). The applicability of the approach, however, requires further validation, especially in the global south (Saarinen & Lenao, 2014).

The review also found that a RT experience is similar to other types of tourism, as Frochot (2005) asserts that “most forms of tourism can take place in a rural environment” (p. 336). Sanagustin-Fons et al. (2018) also noted that RT provides activities and experiences that might resemble other tourism types, for instance, spiritual tourism (e.g., Sharpley & Jepson, 2011), cultural tourism (e.g., MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003), adventure tourism (e.g., Silva & Leal, 2015), and in particular farm tourism (e.g., Thompson, 2004). These types of tourism may diversify rural tourist attractions and experiences, however, a diversity of attractions might dispel the uniqueness of the experience. Uniqueness may be conceptualised by establishing definitions applicable to a specific country or context. RT has been redefined at a national level, for instance, in Malaysia (Nair et al., 2015) and a statute in Portugal (Ribeiro & Marques, 2002). These examples evidence that redefining RT within a specific context or case helps convey the rural destination experience by identifying the unique characteristics of a destination. While it may be difficult to achieve global consensus on a definition of RT, a country specific definition may be more achievable.

Several key challenges were identified in this review and can be classified as external or internal. These challenges are not unique to RT, yet they reveal that solutions and best practice remain elusive and more research is needed to address these challenges. For example, it remains unclear how challenges are addressed in a prime

priority. There is an unclear correlation between the challenges, although this aspect might be relative since each country faces distinct challenges influenced by factors such as social culture and government policies (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004; Gao et al., 2009; McComb et al., 2017). Future research discussing more in-depth empirical analysis of the challenges might be of importance, while conducting quantitative study would be useful to analyse the relationship amongst the inherent challenges in RT.

This review suggests that RT faces a lack of interest or awareness of tourism knowledge by the hosts (Kaptan Ayhan et al., 2020; Khartishvili et al., 2019; Krol, 2019; Pato & Kastenholz, 2017). Future research could focus on investigating residents' attitudes and perceptions towards RT to increase the motivation for local communities in relation to RT development. Many studies have investigated the tourist perspectives (San Martin & Herrero, 2012; Qiu et al., 2019), yet few have focused on the host communities. Cross-disciplinary research, combining for instance leadership (e.g. Haven-Tang & Jones, 2012; Ulrike, 2004) and psychology (Quaranta et al., 2016) is emerging and may be worthy of further development. Studies may also investigate how to effectively adjust RT development to reflect current travel behaviour and the use of technology, as there is a lack of research that explores how RT could adapt to self-managed online booking systems (e.g. airbnb), facilitate collaboration with online travel agents, or utilise social media for marketing.

Challenges identified relate to a lack of access to resources, such as a quality workforce (Iorio & Corsale, 2010; Koster & Lemelin, 2009; Muresan et al., 2016) and investment (Pato & Kastenholz, 2017; Sharpley, 2002; Su, 2011), or an inability to capitalise on local resources for RT development, as reflected by a lack of planning (e.g. Khartishvili, 2019) and government support (e.g. Hwang & Lee, 2015). While resources, both tangible and intangible, have been identified as a key element of

effective integrated RT development (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008), this review suggests a lack of focus on a resource-based perspective in RT related investigations. Further research into RT may be conducted under a resource base framework to understand the dynamic capabilities in rural destinations and to investigate how internal and external resources may be effectively identified, mobilised, utilised, and maintained in ways that maximise RT benefits.

Despite COVID-19's adverse impact on tourism overall, recent scholarship shows that the pandemic might provide new opportunities for RT (Seraphin & Dosquet, 2020; Stankov et al., 2020; Wen et al., 2020; Zhu & Deng, 2020) although it also brings new challenges to rural destinations such as health risks (Carr, 2020). The following suggestions attempt to provide a framework for decision-makers and policy-makers to address the expected transformation of rural tourism post COVID-19. Firstly, maintaining a network of health quality assurance in a rural destination seems to be a primary prerequisite. Tourists' travel decision-making is positively related to their perceived risk towards a destination, especially health, psychological and social risks in this COVID-19 pandemic (Matiza, 2020). Wen et al. (2020, p. 6) asserted that "Tourists are more likely to seek out destinations with established infrastructure and high-quality medical facilities following the COVID-19 outbreak." However, this might be challenging as building infrastructure (e.g. a hospital) depends on political willingness and high financial support (Fleischer & Felsentein, 2000; Garau, 2015; Kortoci & Kortoci, 2017) which could be unachievable in a short time. A plausible solution would be an urban-rural partnership model (Epstein & Jezeph, 2001) which supports urban-rural tourism's re-emergence (Cheng et al., 2020; Juschten & Hössinger 2020). Therefore, a proper urban-rural or intra-rural health service network should be further investigated.

Secondly, and as a direct sub-topic, knowledge and awareness about hygiene and sanitation are necessary for both residents and tourists. Zhu and Deng (2020) emphasised that risk knowledge is of paramount importance for tourists' travel plans, also emphasised in a study by Ye et al. (2020) that shows that tourists have become more concerned about potential health risks before deciding to travel. From a residents' perspective, Carr (2020) showed how residents' health risks have become significant, yet studies discussing residents' preparedness and awareness of health risks regarding tourism reopening in rural areas are limited. A resilience-based framework (Sharma et al., 2021) could be adapted and used in the RT settings, learning from best practices in urban areas that are often considered more resilient to tourism pressure (Bramwell, 1994). Also, practitioners need to understand the best way to transfer risk knowledge to the residents. A lesson might be learnt from a non-crisis context related to information transfer in a tourism setting. Cole (2006) evidenced that the government initiatives to share tourism knowledge to the local community show limited effectiveness. Although the residents tend to be more supportive of tourism development in the pandemic situation (Ramkisson, 2020), empowering them to be self-aware of health risks and mitigation could be more challenging. Moreover, a possible distrust across stakeholders' levels (e.g. government and communities) might be an obstacle to achieve the expected results, even more so if distrust already existed prior to the pandemic (Khartishvili, 2019; McComb et al., 2017; Quaranta et al., 2016). Therefore, future research is required to gain a deeper understanding of health knowledge transfer, health risk prevention, and stakeholders' trust and cooperation in health risk mitigation in a pandemic and travel-related situation in rural areas. Planners and managers also need to examine and ensure how well-prepared the community is to mitigate the possible risks. In the case that the potential perceived health risk outweighs the economic or social

benefit to the community, the stakeholders should consider implementing preventive and repressive rules before letting the destinations open to the tourists, or probably, consider postponing while assuring that the residents are fully ready.

A third suggestion concerns the use of technology post pandemic, as not only technology has been acknowledged to promote RT opportunities (Garau, 2015; Marzo-Navarro et al., 2017), but the current pandemic literature advises that technology can be an alternative to physical tourism experiences (Stankov et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2021). However, as mentioned in the analysis, there are some challenges regarding the availability of resources to support the use of technology in rural areas because of the lack of either human capabilities (e.g., Ohe, 2018) or infrastructure (e.g., San Martín & Herrero, 2012). Poor physical resource availability for Internet access also remains an issue (Ruiz-Martínez & Esparcia, 2020). Therefore, there is a need to reconsider strategies and priorities to enhance the use of technology in rural areas. Research into how to best increase human resource capabilities is necessary (Ohe, 2020) while concurrently encouraging more political support and initiatives in improving technology infrastructure in rural areas.

Overall, achieving sustainability in RT requires overcoming vulnerability and challenges; this remains an ongoing issue. The literature has shown that vulnerability factors evolve along RT definitions, therefore demonstrating the intertwining of both aspects. Vulnerability is also closely related to availability and access to key resources. RT is a fluid phenomenon, evolving with time and place characteristics, yet relying on incremental core values that today form parts of the UNWTO recommendations (2017) and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015). For example, a clean environment is a core value that no one could imagine not to defend in the future. As

such, in the same way that planners envision the future of cities, future research could concentrate on the visions for RT and associated values, thus solidifying the core of RT.

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Figure 1. The PRISMA Flowchart

Figure 2. Geographical distribution of rural tourism case studies

Figure 3. The results of comparative analysis in the definitions

Figure 4. The major themes of RT definitions and challenges found in the literature and its comparison between the developed and the developing countries

Figure 1. The PRISMA Flowchart

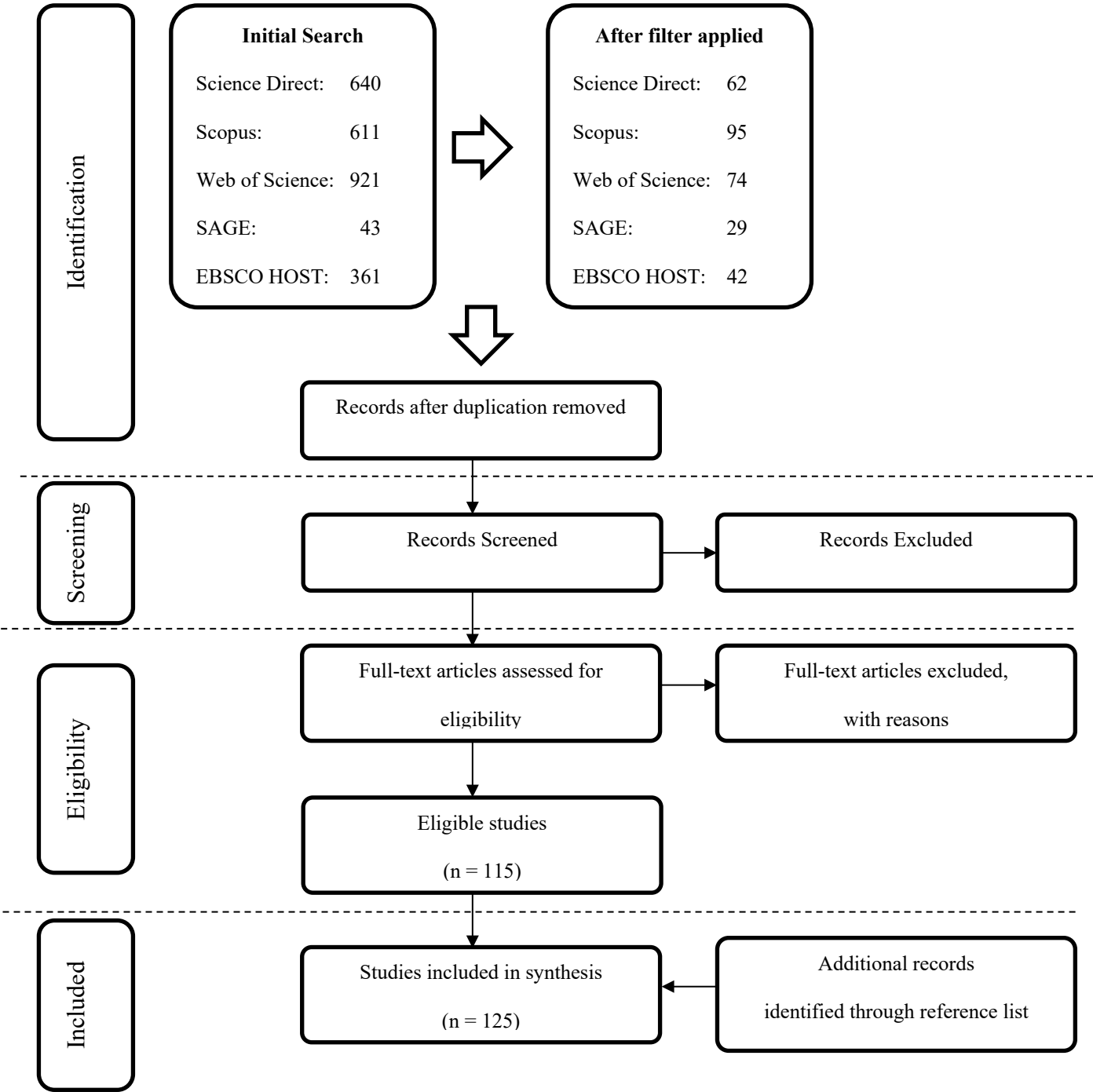


Figure 2. Geographical distribution of rural tourism case studies

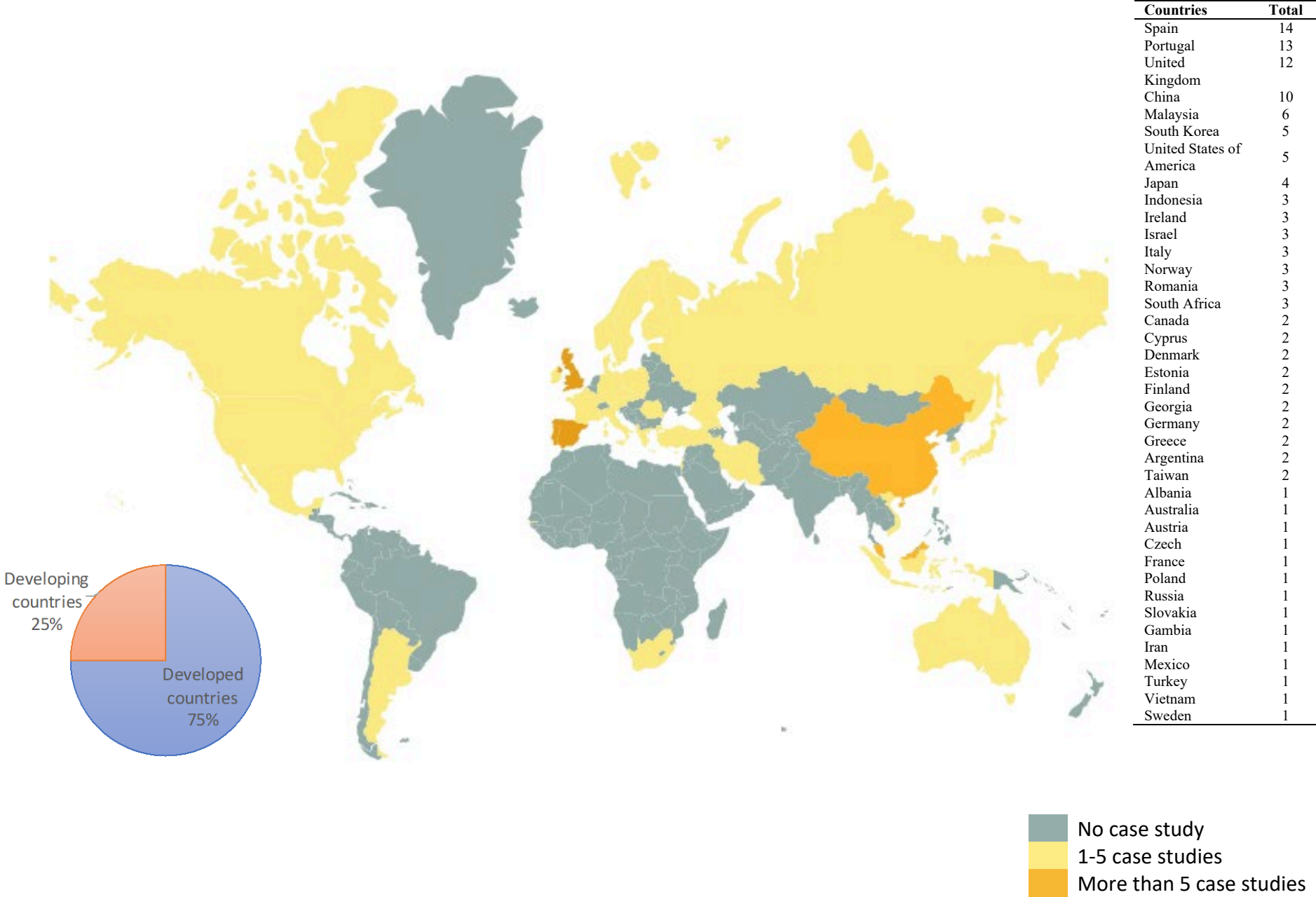
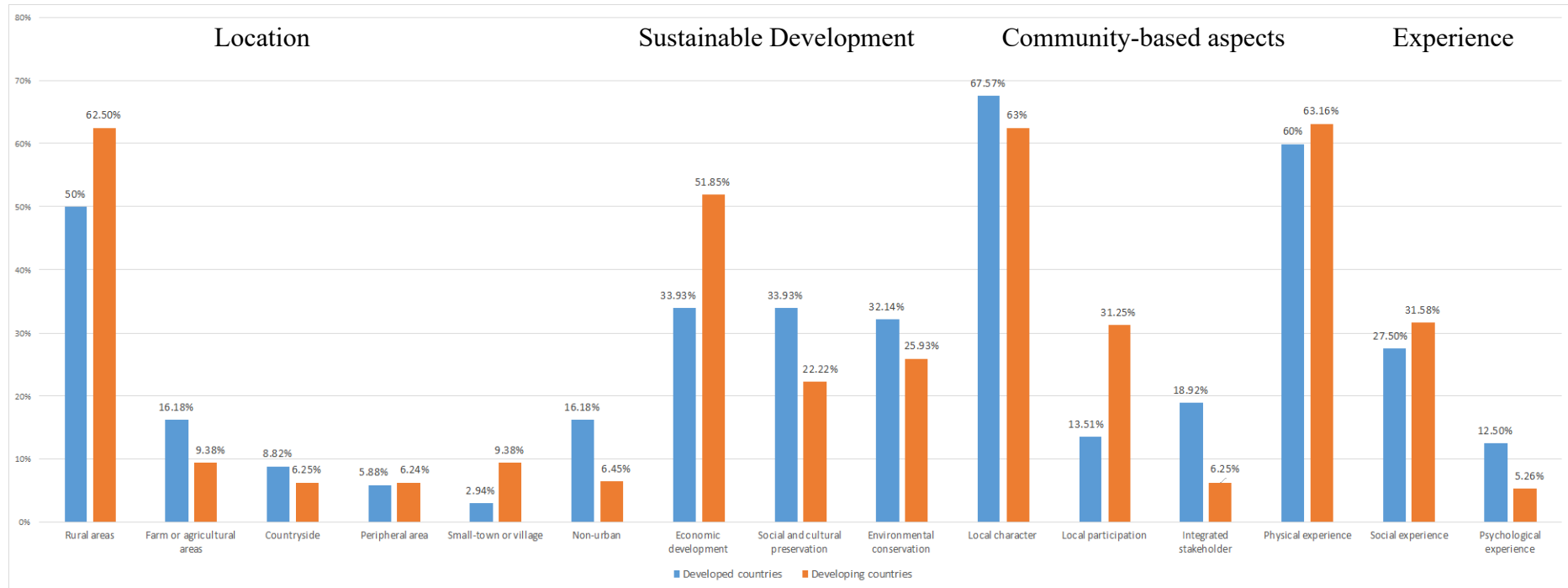
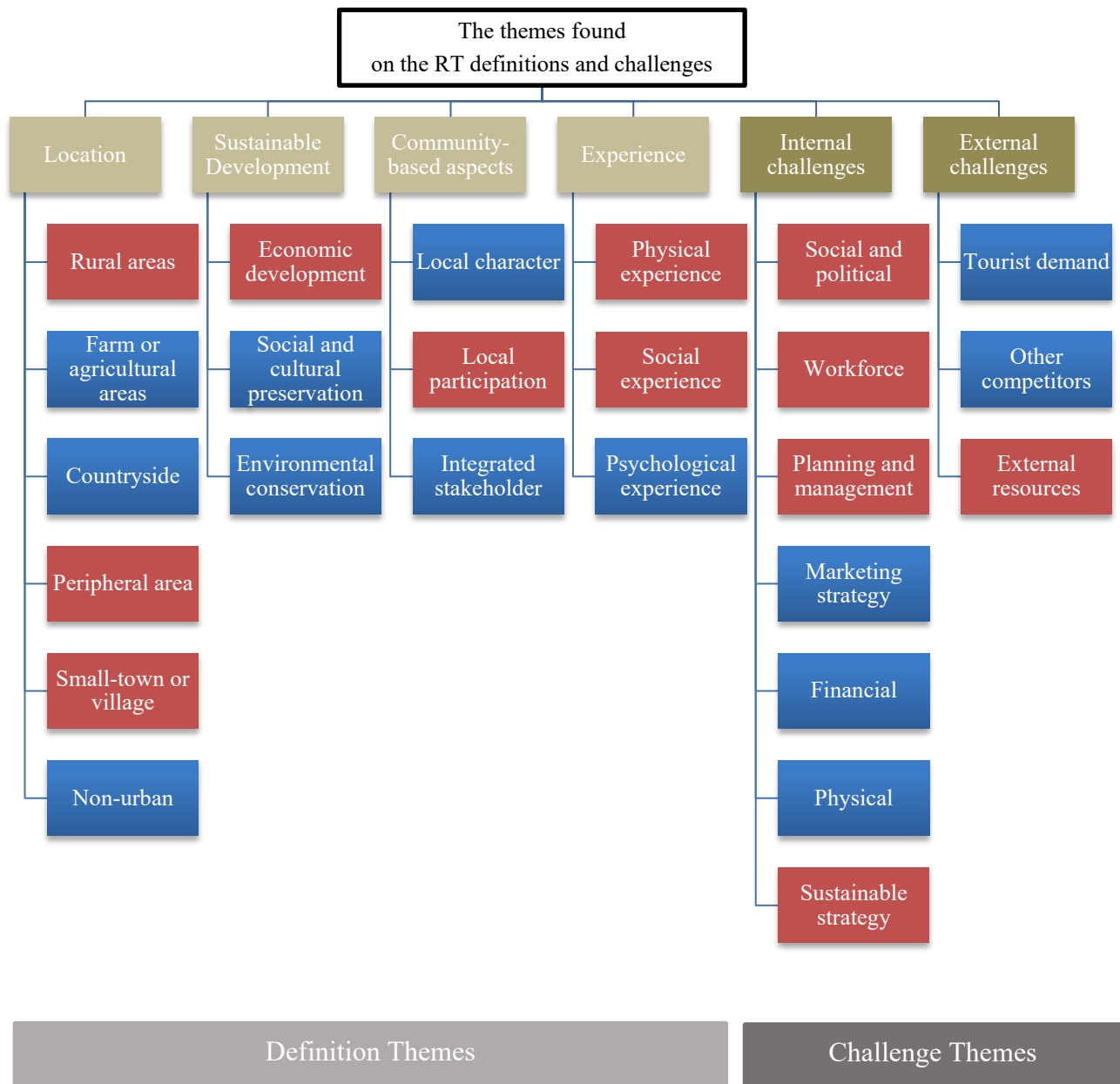


Figure 3. The results of comparative analysis in the definitions





The colours represent the dominant coding found in the comparative analysis

- found predominantly in the developed countries
- found predominantly in the developing countries

Figure 4. The major themes of RT definitions and challenges found in the literature and its comparison between the developed and the developing countries.

Table 1. Four emerging themes and their keywords within 118 rural tourism studies

Themes and authors***	DC %	Ding C %
Location : 82/118 and 99 references	36.60	35.62
Rural areas (52.53%, n = 52)		
Farms or agricultural areas (14.14%, n = 14)		
Countryside (8.08%, n = 8)		
Peripheral, lagging or marginalised area (6.06%, n = 6)		
Small-town or village (6.06%, n = 6)		
Non-urban/metropolitan/city area (13.13%, n = 13)		
Sustainable development : 48/118 and 83 references	20.26	23.29
Economic development (39.76%, n = 33)		
Social and cultural preservation (30.12%, n = 25)		
Environmental conservation (30.12%, n = 25)		
Community-based aspects : 47/118 and 53 references	20.92	20.55
Local character (66.04%, n = 35)		
Local participation (18.87%, n = 10)		
Integrated stakeholders (15.09%, n = 8)		
Experience : 48/118 and 58 references	22.22	20.55
Physical experience (56.9%, n = 33)		
Social experience (32.76%, n = 18)		
Psychological experience (10.34%, n = 6)		
Challenges (118/118 and 242 references)		
1. Internal challenges (115/118 and 212 references)	85.47	93.65
1.1 Social and political (21.49%, n = 52)	20.11	25.40
1.2 Workforce (18.6%, n = 45)	17.32	22.22
1.3 Planning and management (13.64%, n = 32)	12.29	17.46
1.4 Marketing strategy (11.16%, n = 27)	11.73	9.52
1.5 Financial (9.92%, n = 23)	10.61	7.94
1.6 Physical (6.61%, n = 16)	7.26	4.76
1.7 Sustainable strategy (6.2%, n = 15)	6.15	6.35
2. External challenges (28/118 and 30 references)	14.53	6.35
2.1 Tourists' demand (7.85%, n = 19)	9.50	3.17
2.2 Other competitors (3.31%, n = 8)	3.91	1.59
2.3 External resources (1.24%, n = 3)	1.12	1.49

**One paper might have multiple-coding, thus a single paper might be counted as more than one reference

***The percentage in this column represents the number of references within each category

Table 2. The emerging themes of the definitions and challenges within 118 rural tourism studies

Themes and Authors***	DC %	Ding C %
Location: 82/118 and 99 references	36.60	35.62
Rural areas (52.53%, n = 52) Arbogast et al. (2017), Briedenhann and Wickens (2004), Cahyanto et al. (2013), Cantallops et al. (2015), Carneiro et al. (2015), Chen et al. (2018), Ciolac et al. (2017), Clarke et al., (2001), de Sousa & Kastenholz, (2015), Ezeuduji (2017), Fleischer and Felsenstein (2000), Fong and Lo (2015), Fong et al. (2017), Fotiadis et al. (2014), Frochot (2005), Gao and Wu (2017), Gao et al. (2009), Garau (2015), Ghaderi & Henderson (2012), Guzman-Parra et al. (2015), Hernandez Maestro et al. (2007), W. Huang et al. (2016), Hurst and Niehm (2012), Iorio & Corsale, (2010), Jepson and Sharpley (2015), Jesus & Franco (2016), Kieffer and Burgos (2015), H. Kim (2018), Krol (2019), Martinez Roget and González (2006), Marzo-Navarro et al. (2016, 2017), McComb et al. (2017), Muresan et al. (2016), Nair et al. (2015), Nieto et al. (2011), Ohe and Kurihara (2013), Park and Yoon, (2009), Pesonen et al. (2011), Pilving et al. (2019), Polo Peña et al. (2012b), Pujiastuti et al. (2017), Prince (2017), Qiu et al. (2019), Rid et al. (2014), San Martín and Herrero (2012), Šimková (2007), Situmorang et al. (2019), B. Su (2011), Z. Su et al. (2019), Trukhachev (2015), Zou et al. (2014)		
Farms or agricultural areas (14.14%, n = 14) Barke (2004), Dinis et al. (2019), Garau (2015), Hwang and Lee (2015), Kaptan Ayhan et al. (2020), Khartishvili et al. (2019), H. Kim (2018), S. Kim and Jamal (2015), Lagravinese (2013), Ohe (2018), Quaranta et al. (2016), Reichel et al. (2000), Situmorang et al. (2019), Thompson (2004)		
Countryside (8.08%, n = 8) Clarke et al. (2001), Gilbert (1989), Eusébio et al. (2017), Kastenholz et al. (2012), Nicola and McKenna (1998), Reichel et al. (2000), Silva and Leal (2015), B. Su (2011)		
Peripheral, lagging or marginalised area (6.06%, n = 6) Fleischer and Felsenstein (2000), Fleischer and Pizam (1997), Nicola and McKenna (1998), Sanagustin-Fons et al. (2018), Skuras et al. (2006), Xue and Kerstetter (2019)		
Small-town or village (6.06%, n = 6) Cawley and Gillmor (2008), Feng et al. (2018), Gao and Wu (2017), Garrod et al. (2006), Guan et al. (2019), Komppula (2014)		
Non-urban/metropolitan/city area (13.13%, n = 13) Fong and Lo (2015), Gilbert (1989), Kaaristo (2014), Khartishvili et al. (2019), Hurst and Niehm (2012), Kortoci and Kortoci (2017), Long and Nguyen (2018), Lewis and D'Alessandro (2019), Oppermann (1996), Pesonen et al. (2011), Polo Peña et al. (2012a), Prince (2017) Quaranta et al. (2016)		
Sustainable development: 48/118 and 83 references	20.26	23.29
Economic development (39.76%, n = 33) Almeida et al., (2014) Cahyanto et al. (2013), Cawley et al. (2007), Chen et al. (2018), Ciolac et al. (2017), Feng et al. (2018), Fong et al. (2017), Gao et al. (2009), Garau (2015), Gilbert (1989), Haven-Tang and Jones (2012), L. Huang (2006), Ilbery et al. (2007), Iorio and Corsale (2010), Lagravinese (2013), Liu (2006), Marzo-Navarro et al. (2016, 2017), Nair et al. (2015), Oppermann (1996), Park and Yoon (2011), Pato and Kastenholz (2017), Polo Peña et al. (2012a, 2013), Quaranta et al. (2016), Reichel et al. (2000), Rid et al. (2014), Saxena and Ilbery (2008, 2010), Situmorang et al. (2019) Skuras et al. (2006), Trukhachev		

(2015), Xue & Kerstetter (2019)

Social and cultural preservation (30.12%, n = 25)

Cawley and Gillmor (2008), Cawley et al. (2007), Fotiadis et al. (2019), Gao and Wu (2017), Gao et al. (2009), Garau (2015), Ghaderi and Henderson (2012), Gilbert (1989), Ilbery et al. (2007), Iorio and Corsale (2010), Kieffer and Burgos (2015), MacDonald and Jolliffe (2003), Marzo-Navarro et al. (2016), Nair et al. (2015), Park and Yoon (2011), Perales (2002), Polo Peña et al. (2012a, 2012b, 2013), Quaranta et al. (2016), Ribeiro and Marques (2002) Saxena and Ilbery (2008, 2010), Sharpley (2002) Trukhachev (2015)

Environmental conservation (30.12%, n = 25)

Almeida et al. (2014), Cawley et al. (2007), Chen et al. (2018), Clarke et al. (2001), Fotiadis et al. (2019), Gao and Wu (2017), Gao et al. (2009), Garau (2015), Ghaderi and Henderson (2012), Gilbert (1989), Ilbery et al. (2007), Jesus and Franco (2016), Kieffer and Burgos (2015), Lagravinese (2013), Marzo-Navarro et al. (2016), Nair et al. (2015), Ohe (2008), Perales (2002), Polo Peña et al. (2012a, 2013), Quaranta et al. (2016), Ribeiro and Marques (2002), Saxena and Ilbery (2008, 2010), Trukhachev (2015)

Community-based aspects: 47/118 and 53 references

20.92 20.55

Local character (66.04%, n = 35)

Cahyanto et al. (2013), Cawley and Gillmor (2008), Chuang (2013), Ciolac et al. (2017), Daugstad (2008), de Sousa and Kastenholz (2015), Fleischer and Felsenstein (2000), Fleischer and Pizam (1997), Fong and Lo (2015), Fotiadis et al. (2019), Gao et al. (2009), Garau (2015), Ghaderi and Henderson (2012), Gilbert (1989), Haven-Tang and Jones (2012), Hjalager et al. (2018), Khartishvili et al. (2019), S. Kim and Jamal (2015), Komppula (2014), Lagravinese (2013), Liu (2006), Nicola and McKenna (1998), Pato and Kastenholz (2017), Pina and Delfa (2005) Polo Peña et al. (2012a, 2013), Prince (2017), Ribeiro and Marques (2002), Sharpley (2002, 2007), B. Su (2011), Su et al. (2019), Thompson (2004), Villanueva-álvaro et al. (2017), Xue and Kerstetter (2019)

Local participation (18.87%, n = 10)

Briedenhann & Wickens (2004), de Sousa and Kastenholz (2015), Gao and Wu (2017), Guan et al. (2019), Haven-Tang and Jones (2012), Nair et al. (2015), Ohe (2018), Pina and Delfa (2005), Rid et al. (2014), Wilson et al. (2001)

Integrated stakeholders (15.09%, n = 8)

Cawley et al. (2007), Ciolac et al. (2017), McComb et al. (2017), Ilbery et al. (2007), Nair et al. (2015), Pato and Kastenholz (2017), Saxena and Ilbery (2008, 2010)

Experience: 48/118 and 58 references

22.22 20.55

Physical experience (56.9%, n = 33)

Cantalops et al. (2015), Chin and Lo (2017), Dinis et al. (2019), Fleischer and Pizam (1997), Frisvoll et al. (2016), Frochot (2005), Gilbert (1989), Hwang and Lee (2015), Jepson and Sharpley (2015), Kaaristo (2014), Kastenholz et al. (2018), Kieffer and Burgos (2015), H. Kim (2018), Lo et al. (2019), Loureiro (2014), MacDonald and Jolliffe (2003), Muresan et al. (2016), Nair et al. (2015), Nieto et al. (2011), Nogueira and Pinho (2015), Perales (2002), Pilving et al. (2019) Polo Peña et al. (2013), Pujiastuti et al. (2017), Qiu et al. (2019), Rid et al. (2014), San Martín and Herrero (2012), Sanagustin-Fons et al. (2018), Sharpley and Jepson (2011), Shen et al. (2019), Situmorang et al. (2019), B. Su (2011), Trukhachev (2015), Zou et al. (2014)

Social experience (32.76%, n = 18)

Briedenhann (2009), Christou and Sharpley (2019), Chuang (2013), Ezeuduji (2017), Gilbert (1989), Hernández Maestro et al. (2007), Kaptan Ayhan et al. (2020), S. Kim and Jamal (2015), Koster and Lemelin (2009), Loureiro (2014), Marzo-Navarro et al. (2017), Nair et al.

(2015), Pesonen et al. (2011), Pujiastuti et al. (2017), Ribeiro and Marques (2002), San Martín and Herrero (2012), Shen et al. (2019), Thompson (2004)

Psychological experience (10.34%, n = 6)

Gilbert (1989), Kaaristo (2014), Kastenholz et al. (2012), Nogueira and Pinho (2015), Polo Peña et al. (2012b), Shen et al. (2019)

Challenges (118/118 and 242 references)

Internal challenges (115/118 and 212 references)

85.47 93.65
20.11 25.40

Social and political (21.49%, n = 52)

Arbogast et al. (2017), Barke (2004), Briedenhann (2009), Briedenhann and Wickens (2004), Cawley and Gillmor (2008) Cawley et al. (2007), Chen et al. (2018), Clarke et al. (2001), Feng et al. (2018), Fleischer and Pizam (1997), Fong et al. (2017), Fong and Lo (2015), Frisvoll et al. (2016), Garau (2015), Ghaderi and Henderson (2012), Guan et al. (2019), Haven-Tang and Jones (2012), Hjalager et al. (2018), L. Huang (2006), Hwang and Lee (2015), Ilbery et al. (2007), Iorio and Corsale (2010), Jesus and Franco (2016), Khartishvili et al. (2019), Komppula (2014), Koster and Lemelin (2009), Liu (2006), Long and Nguyen (2018), Loureiro (2014), MacDonald and Jolliffe (2003) Martínez Roget and González (2006), Marzo-Navarro et al. (2016), McComb et al. (2017), Nair et al. (2015), Nicola and McKenna (1998), Perales (2002), Pilving et al. (2019), Quaranta et al. (2016), Rid et al. (2014), Sanagustin-Fons et al. (2018), Saxena and Ilbery (2008, 2010), Sharpley (2002, 2007), Sharpley and Jepson (2011), Šimková (2007), Situmorang et al. (2019), Trukhachev (2015), Villanueva-álvaro et al. (2017), Wilson et al. (2001)

17.32 22.22

Workforce (18.6%, n = 45)

Barke (2004), Briedenhann (2009), Briedenhann and Wickens (2004), de Sousa and Kastenholz (2015), Feng et al. (2018), Fleischer and Felsenstein (2000), Fong and Lo (2015), Fotiadis et al. (2019), Gao et al. (2009), Guan et al. (2019), Hjalager et al. (2018), L.Huang (2006), W. Huang et al. (2016), Hwang and Lee (2015), Ilbery et al. (2007), Iorio and Corsale (2010), Kaptan Ayhan et al. (2020), Krol (2019), Khartishvili et al. (2019), H. Kim (2018), Komppula (2014), Kortoci and Kortoci (2017), Koster and Lemelin (2009), Liu (2006), MacDonald and Jolliffe (2003), McComb et al. (2017), Muresan et al. (2016), Ohe (2008, 2018), Perales (2002), Pesonen et al. (2011), Prince (2017), Quaranta et al. (2016), Reichel et al. (2000), Rid et al. (2014), San Martín and Herrero (2012), Sanagustin-Fons et al. (2007), Sharpley (2002), Shen et al. (2019), Silva and Leal (2015), Situmorang et al. (2019), Trukhachev (2015), Wilson et al. (2001), Xue and Kerstetter (2019)

12.29 17.46

Planning and management (13.64%, n = 32)

Arbogast et al. (2017), Carneiro et al. (2015), Chuang (2013), Ezeudjuji (2017), Fong et al. (2017), Fotiadis et al. (2014), Gao and Wu (2017), Garau (2015), Ghaderi and Henderson (2012), Guan et al. (2019), Hjalager et al. (2018), Hurst and Niehm (2012), Ilbery et al. (2007), Iorio and Corsale (2010), Jepson and Sharpley (2015), Kastenholz et al. (2018), Khartishvili et al. (2019), Koster and Lemelin (2009), Lewis and D'Alessandro (2019), Liu (2006), Lo et al. (2019), Loureiro (2014), MacDonald and Jolliffe (2003), Nogueira and Pinho (2015), Ohe and Kurihara (2013), Park and Yoon (2011), Perales (2002), Pujiastuti et al. (2017), Reichel et al. (2000), Su (2011), Villanueva-álvaro et al. (2017), Wilson et al. (2001)

11.73 9.52

Marketing strategy (11.16%, n = 27)

Arbogast et al. (2017), Briedenhann and Wickens (2004), Chin and Lo (2017), Frisvoll et al. (2016), Garau (2015), Garrod et al. (2006) Gilbert (1989), Hernández Maestro et al. (2007), L. Huang (2006), W. Huang et al. (2016), Hurst and Niehm (2012), Ilbery et al. (2007), Iorio and Corsale (2010), S. Kim and Jamal (2015), Kortoci and Kortoci (2017), MacDonald and

Jolliffe (2003), Marzo-Navarro et al. (2017), Nieto et al. (2011), Pato and Kastenholtz (2017), Polo Peña et al. (2012a, 2012b), Pujiastuti et al. (2017), Qiu et al. (2019), Reichel et al. (2000), Ribeiro and Marques (2002), Sharpley (2002), Su (2011)	10.61	7.94
Financial (9.92%, n = 23)		
Arbogast et al. (2017), Barke (2004), Briedenhann (2009), Clarke et al. (2001), Dinis et al. (2019), Eusébio et al. (2017), Fong and Lo (2015), Fotiadis et al. (2019), Ghaderi and Henderson (2012), Iorio and Corsale (2010), Komppula (2014), Kortoci and Kortoci (2017), Koster and Lemelin (2009), Liu (2006), Martínez Roget and González (2006), Nicola and McKenna (1998), Oppermann (1996), Pato and Kastenholtz (2017), Pesonen et al. (2011), Sharpley (2002), Silva and Leal (2015), Šimková (2007), Zou et al. (2014)	7.26	4.76
Physical (6.61%, n = 16)	6.15	6.35
Almeida et al. (2014), Barke (2004), Chen et al. (2018), Fotiadis et al. (2019), Frochot (2005), Garau (2015), Gilbert (1989), W. Huang et al. (2016), Kortoci and Kortoci (2017), Lagravinese (2013), Lo et al. (2019), Martínez Roget and González (2006), Muresan et al. (2016), San Martín and Herrero (2012), Situmorang et al. (2019), Trukhachev (2015)		
Sustainable strategy (6.2%, n = 15)	14.53	6.35
Cahyanto et al. (2013), Christou and Sharpley (2019), Daugstad (2008), Feng et al. (2018), Garrod et al. (2006), Gilbert (1989), Kaptan Ayhan et al. (2020), Kieffer and Burgos (2015), MacDonald and Jolliffe (2003), Park and Yoon (2009) Polo Pena et al. (2013), Sharpley (2007), Shen et al. (2019), Skuras et al. (2006), Thompson (2004)	9.50	3.17
External challenges (28/118 and 30 references)	3.91	1.59
Tourists' demand (7.85%, n = 19)		
Almeida et al. (2014), Arbogast et al. (2017), Cantallops et al. (2015), Christou and Sharpley (2019), Ciolac et al. (2017), Eusébio et al. (2017), Guzman-Parra et al. (2015), W. Huang et al. (2016), Hurst and Niehm (2012), Ilbery et al. (2007), Iorio and Corsale (2010), Kastenholtz et al. (2012), Koster and Lemelin (2009), Marzo-Navarro et al. (2017), Pina and Delfa (2005), Ribeiro and Marques (2002), Sharpley (2002), Silva and Leal (2015), Z. Su et al. (2019)	1.12	1.49
Other competitors (3.31%, n = 8)		
Almeida et al. (2014), Feng et al. (2018), Garau (2015), Haven-Tang and Jones (2012), Kaaristo (2014), Polo Peña et al. (2012a), Sharpley (2002), Skuras et al. (2006)		
External resources (1.24%, n = 3)		
Cawley and Gillmor (2008), W. Huang et al. (2016), Zou et al. (2014)		

**One paper might be multiple-coded, thus a single paper might be counted as more than one reference

***The percentage in this column represents the number of references within each category

Table 3. The challenges in the selected articles

Challenges	Percentage		Examples on selected articles	
	Developed countries	Developing countries	Developed countries	Developing countries
Internal challenges	85.47%	93.65%		
Social and political	20.11%	25.40%	Sluggish bureaucracy (Clarke et al., 2001)	Lack of government support (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012)
Workforce	17.32%	22.22%	Poor understanding of tourism (McComb et al., 2017)	Lack of expertise (Fong & Lo, 2015)
Planning and management	12.29%	17.46%	Lack of planning for rural tourism (Park & Yoon, 2011)	Struggling to establish a comprehensive planning (Gao & Wu, 2017)
Marketing strategy	11.73%	9.52%	Few attention to establish digital marketing (Garau, 2015)	Lack information sources provided for tourists (Marzo-navarro et al., 2017)
Financial	10.61%	7.94%	High investment, but low return (Dinis et al., 2019)	Rural tourism is only regarded to provide supplementary income (Liu, 2006)
Physical	7.26%	4.76%	Lack of amenities, infrastructure and other tourist facilities (Kortoci & Kortoci, 2017)	Poor access to the destination (Situmorang et al., 2019)
Sustainable strategy	6.15%	6.35%	The success should be limited, because the local communities are possibly to be selfish profit-minded (Christou & Sharpley, 2019)	The destination should stay agriculturally-oriented whilst also expected to meet high qualified standard (Shen et al., 2019)
External challenges	14.53%	6.35%		

Tourist demand	9.50%	3.17%	Having a very specific niche market (Iorio and Corsale, 2010)	Seasonality (Z. Su et al., 2019)
Other competitors	3.91%	1.59%	Low competitiveness comparing to other mass tourism destination (Sharpley, 2002)	Lack of establishing better competitive advantage against the competitors (Feng et al., 2018)
External resources	1.12%	1.59%	The tendency of external investment's intervention (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008)	The competition and threat of outsiders, who might take the job opportunities (Zou et al., 2014)

Appendix 1. The definitions of rural tourism (direct quotation)

Year	Author	Country Types*	Definitions approaches	Definitions
2015	Cantallops et al.	1	Previous researcher knowledge	It is difficult to define rural tourism but we can define it approximately as tourist activity in rural areas dedicated to tourism interested in enjoying and gaining knowledge of rural and other outdoor environments (Bardón, 1987; Bote, 1992; Crosby, 1993; Fuentes, 1995; Valdés, 1996) (p.126)
2017	Chin & Lo	2	Previous researcher knowledge	As stated by Erdeji et al. (2013), rural tourism is defined as the rural environment for visitors to experience and relax (p.470)
2017	Ciolac et al	1	Researcher critical conceptualisation	Speaking about typology, it can be noticed that if at first it was sufficient for this form of tourism to be located in rural areas, on measure of evolution leads to an emphasis on the originality/"wilderness" of the areas (p.3)
2001	Clarke et al	1	Researcher critical conceptualisation	Conceptually, rural tourism may be regarded as tourism in the countryside that embraces the rural environment as pivotal to the product offered (p.196)
2015	de sousa & Kastenholz	1	Previous researcher knowledge	There is still no consensual definition for "rural tourism" but, according to Lane (1994), ideally, it should be located in rural areas, be "functionally" rural, of small scale, of tradi-tional character, gradually growing and controlled by the local community (p.1239)
2018	Feng et al	2	Previous researcher knowledge	Although there are numerous concepts of rural tourism, its basic aspects include: taking place in rural areas; depending on the rural scenery and human activities as key tourist attractions; aiming to contribute to the development of rural areas; and being sustainable. (p.3)
2019	Fotiadis et al	1	Previous researcher knowledge	Rural tourism can be defined as "a tourism activity which consists of other smaller subcategories such as farm tourism, village tourism, which is growing in order to help, to develop and promote the "rurality tourism milieu" of each rural region through a sustainable procedure that sets out to be consistent with natural, social and community values" (p.2)

2016	Frisvoll et al	1	Previous researcher knowledge	Rural tourism is defined as activities that are focused on the consumption of rural experiences, cultures, land- scapes, and artefacts (Woods, 2011) (p.77)
2005	Frochot	1	Previous researcher knowledge	In fact, this lack of agreement stems in the first place from the difficulty in defining what constitutes a rural area...Lane (1994) indicates that this multi-faceted characteristic renders a definition problematic but nevertheless identifies four criteria to qualify rural tourism: tourism taking place in rural areas, built upon the specificities of the rural world (open space, rural heritage, etc.), rural in scale (usually implying small scale) and representing the complex pattern of the rural world (environment, economy, history and location). (p.335)
1994	Gannon	0	Researcher critical conceptualisation	By definition, rural tourism is a collection of businesses that create sales of goods and services to tourists (p.55)
2017	Gao & Wu	2	Previous researcher knowledge	Although it has been defined in many different ways, rural tourism has two basic features: it employs rural inhabitants, and involves recycling and revalorizing existing rural infrastructure and heritage resources as tourist accommodations and attractions (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). (p.224)
2009	Gao et al	2	Previous researcher knowledge	Lane (1994b) suggests that rural tourism, as a concept, is a form of tourism that is located in rural areas, is rural in scale, character and function, reflecting the differing and complex pattern of rural environment, economy, history and location. (p.439)
2012	Ghaderi & Henderson	2	Official policy documentation	Rural tourism can be broadly defined as tourism which takes place in rural areas, although the definition raises questions about what constitutes the latter. Notions of rural may be socially constructed and differ by country and culture. However, certain common attributes can be discerned of low population densities and only a small proportion of land given over to the built environment, creating an impression of space. There is an implication that social structures will be more traditional, the natural landscape will be prominent and that access could be difficult (OECD, 1994). (p.1)

1994	Grefe	0	Official policy documentation	Demand-side definition: A visit by a person: to any place other than his or her usual work or home environment and that is outside a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area; when exercising an activity other than one remunerated in the place visited. The purpose of such a visit may include pleasure, business, study, health or religion.' (United States Congress, 1989). Supply-side definition: Rural tourism is understood as staying with a local resident in a rural area" (p.23)
2015	Guzman-Parra et al.	1	Previous researcher knowledge	There is no academic or legal consensus regarding the concept of rural tourism, but it can be broadly defined as tourism which takes place in rural areas (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012).
2007	Hernández Maestro et al.	1	Researcher critical conceptualisation	A commonly agreed upon definition remains elusive. This study delimits rural tourism according to three main features: refers to tourist activity developed in rural areas, though the definition of rural area may differ among countries or even among regions within a country; The main motivation of rural tourists is contact with a rural way of life and/or nature; Stays are short, often for only a weekend. (p.1)
2018	Hjalager et al	1	Previous researcher knowledge	There is no uniform definition of rural tourism (Lane, 1994). The current study broadly describes rural tourists as people whose activities focus on the consumption of rural experiences, cultures, landscapes, and artefacts that occur on farms or in rural communities (Woods, 2011). As such, the chosen definition is wider than agritourism, which normally is understood as holidays on farms or closely related to farm owners and farm activities (Gil Arroyo, Barbieri, & Rozier Rich, 2013) (p.2)
2012	Hurst & Niehm	1	Previous researcher knowledge	Rural tourism is briefly defined as tourism occurring in rural or non-metropolitan areas (Siemens, 2007) (p.195)
2015	Jepson & Sharpley	1	Previous researcher knowledge	Rural tourism is seen to be defined by a combination of three factors: the countryside's tangible attributes, the manner in which tourists interact with those attributes and the cultural meaning or significance of the countryside, or by what is commonly and collectively referred to as a sense of (rural) place (Greider &

Garkovich, 1994; Manzo, 2003, 2005)." (P.1158)

2016	Jesus & Franco	1	Official policy documentation	According to PRIVETUR (Portuguese Association for Rural Tourism) (2013), rural tourism is a form of tourism located in rural areas in natural surroundings, joining a series of activities and services in order to ensure the development and evolution of these places (p.167)
2014	Kaaristo	1	Researcher critical conceptualisation	Rural tourism can be viewed as a phenomenon resulting partly from the wish to escape the urban environment and the need to reaffirm personal identities in the face of growing urbanisation (p.268)
2018	Kastenholz et al	1	Previous researcher knowledge	According to Clemenson and Lane (1997), rural tourism refers to a series of niche activities within a larger niche activity (e.g. ecotourism, nature tourism, farm, adventure, sports, food and wine, and cultural tourism), resulting in a complex, multifaceted activity, marked by continuously increasing diversity (Lane, 2009) (p.190)
2019	Khartishvili	1	Researcher critical conceptualisation	In the context of this paper, we refer to Rural Tourism in Georgia as tourism in less-urbanized areas of the country, in traditional natural and cultural landscapes, based on local resources, such as traditional agriculture and material as well as nonmaterial cultural heritage. (p.5)
2018	Kim	1	Previous researcher knowledge	Rural tourism can be defined as a wide range of attractions and activities that the visitors directly experience in agricultural or rural areas including farm-based, sport and health, hunting and angling, educational travel, arts and heritage tourism (Lane, 1994) (p.1)
1994	Lane	0	Researcher critical conceptualisation	The tourism which satisfies these forms: located in rural areas, functionally rural, set in rural scale, traditional in character, representing the complex pattern of rural environment, economy, history and location (p.14)

2019	Lo et al	2	Previous researcher knowledge	Rural tourism definition is defined as a rustic destination which is largely depending on natural environment, customs, and traditions of local communities that creates natural experiences for tourists (Wani and Shafi, 2013) (p.140)
2018	Long & Nguyen	2	Previous researcher knowledge	Rural tourism is defined as a type of tourism that relates to all activities occurring outside municipal areas and encompasses the natural and cultural heritage of rural regions (Quaranta et al., 2016) (p.1)
2015	Nair et al	2	Researcher critical conceptualisation	Rural tourism is functionally rural and provides the opportunity for tourists to directly involve, experience, enjoy and learn the unique cultural, natural and historical attractions and activities provided by the local communities in rural areas, with cooperation from the government and businesses in order to provide socio-economic benefits without exploiting the environment (p.334)
2011	Nieto et al	1	Previous researcher knowledge	Rural tourism, defined as a tourism that takes place in rural areas, motivated by tourists' desire to understand this way of life and come into contact with nature (Hernández-Maestro et al., 2007) (pp. 17-18)
2015	Nogueira & Pinho	1	previous researcher knowledge	Rural tourism is viewed as an experience to reconnect with a past, to appreciate nature, local traditions, celebrations and art forms, a connection with what is perceived as a simpler life or a way to return to childhood (p.325)
2018	Ohe	1	Previous researcher knowledge	As defined by Ohe (2011a, 2011b, 2012) from an economic point of view, rural tourism is a farm business activity that internalizes positive externalities, for example, recreational and/or educational effects, along with farm products generated by farmers (p.1)
1996	Oppermann	1	Previous researcher knowledge	Thus, rural tourism is defined as tourism in a non-urban territory where human (land a related economic) activity is going on, primarily agriculture; a permanent human presence seems a qualifying requirement (Dernoi, 1991, p. 4) (p.88)

2011	Pesonen	1	Researcher critical conceptualisation	Rural tourism can be defined as at least one overnight leisure trip to a place situated in a rural setting or in a setting outside cities and tourist centres, aiming to participate especially in other than urban activities (e.g. shopping). The clientele for rural tourism is often mostly domestic, although lots of efforts are targeted to improve rural tourism internationalisation" (p.32)
2005	Pina & Delfa	1	Previous researcher knowledge	there is no clear, exact definition of Rural Tourism common to the whole of our country.... According to Valde' s and Del Valle (2003), those principles pertaining to the characteristics of rural tourism which have been accepted and adopted by all the legislationsrefer to their location within a rural environment, to their offering a limited number of rooms/beds for guests, their being equipped with basic services and the requirement that they be architecturally consistent with the surrounding style. As regards the rent of these accommodations, they may be rented either in their entirety or on a room-by-room basis, sharing with other tourists or, in some cases, with the owners. Participation in farm work is also a possibility (p.952)
2012a	Polo Pena et al	1	Previous researcher knowledge	The present study adopts the generic concept of RT advanced by Blanco Herranz: "The singular expression of the new forms of tourism, characterised by: being developed outside urban centres; occurring on a small scale; using – in a variety of ways – the natural, cultural, heritage and accommodation resources available, and the services belonging to the rural environment; and contributing to local development and to the diversity of tourism competitiveness" (1996, pp. 27–28). (p.1047)
2013	Polo Pena et al	1	Previous researcher knowledge	First, this study adopts the generic concept of RT advanced by Blanco (1996, pp. 27–28), namely: The singular expression of the new forms of tourism, characterised by: being developed outside urban centres; occurring on a small scale; using – in a variety of ways – the natural, cultural, heritage and accommodation resources available, and the services belonging to the rural environment; and contributing to local

				development and to the diversity of tourism competitiveness (p.130)
2017	Prince	1	Previous researcher knowledge	Rural tourism is often conceptualized, as in this study, as a form of tourism functionally rural, displaying small-scale enterprises, traditional social structures and ways of living, agrarian economies and non-urbanized settings (Lane, 2009) (p.342)
2019	Qiu et al	1	Official policy documentation	OECD (1994) defines rural tourism as being located in rural destinations and as being functionally rural. It is firmly based on the rural world's special features of open space, contact with nature, rural heritage, and society (p.59)
2016	Quaranta et al.	1	Previous researcher knowledge	The central role of rural tourism, defined as all tourism related activities that take place outside of urban areas and involve the natural and cultural patrimony of rural territories, in promoting processes of local development has been widely recognized for decades (Tolstad, 2014) (p.2)
2002	Ribeiro & Marques	1	Official policy documentation	Turismo no Espaço Rural is, officially, defined as a form of tourism characterised above all by family welcome offered; it allows a more direct contact with Nature, the local people. Tourists have at their disposal specially personalised services and are able to enjoy a vast natural and cultural heritage' (p.213)
2012	San Martin & Herrero	1	Previous researcher knowledge	Rural tourism, defined as a tourist activity developed in rural areas and where the main motivation of individuals is contact with a rural way of life and/or nature (Hernández, Muñoz, & Santos, 2007) (p.341)
2015	Silva & Leal	1	Previous researcher knowledge	Though there is no standard definition of rural tourism, it is, nowadays, widely accepted in the scholarly literature that it embraces a range of tourism activities which take place in the countryside, such as agritourism, cultural tourism, ecotourism, nature tourism and adventure tourism (e.g. Lane, 1994; R. Sharpley and J. Sharpley, 1997) (p.1)

2015	Trukhachev	1	Previous researcher knowledge	There are many approaches to the definition of rural tourism. Following this idea, Ivolga defines as a kind of activity, related to organization of dedicated travels to rural areas, which provides tourists with a complex tourist product (accommodation, meals, excursion services and entertainment), reflects and preserves the natural and cultural identity of regions and ensures economic benefits for hosting communities through the development of employment opportunities and alternative sources of income for local population (p.3054)
2014	Ulrike	0	Researcher critical conceptualisation	The academic literature presents “rural tourism” as a form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture, nature and heritage of rural regions (p.1)
2014	Zou et al.	2	Researcher critical conceptualisation	Rural tourism is a leisure or holiday activity based on rural tourist attractions and other resources (p.1)

*1 is coded for the case studies in the developed countries; 2 is coded for the case studies in the developing countries; 0 is coded for the studies that use a region as a case study (e.g. Central Europe) or does not use any case study.

Appendix 2. The statistics of direct definitions approaches

Country type (code)	Previous researcher knowledge	Researcher critical conceptualisatio n	Official policy documentatio n
Developed countries (1)	22	6	3
Developing countries (2)	6	2	1
Not categorised (0)	0	3	1
Total	28	11	5