

Social innovation in tourism: a systematic literature review and the proposal of an analytical framework

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to systematically analyse social innovation in tourism (SIT) by reviewing 65 publications. It explores SIT's thematic, geographical and temporal scope; examines social needs, actor networks and governance; and proposes an analytical framework to guide future research and policymaking in tourism innovation.

Design/methodology/approach – This study employs a systematic literature review of 65 articles and conference proceedings from Scopus and Web of Science. A two-level analysis was conducted: examining temporal, geographical and thematic trends, and identifying social needs, actor networks and governance dynamics. Findings inform an analytical framework for future research and policymaking.

Findings – The analysis reveals that social innovation (SI) in tourism addresses multiple individual and community needs, fosters experience-based activities linked to local traditions and relies on strong actor networks and governance structures. The study highlights the critical role of network consistency and local governance in the success or failure of SI initiatives.

Research limitations/implications – The study offers a structured framework for analysing this topic, guiding future research on actor networks, governance and community impacts.

Practical implications – Practically, it supports policymakers and practitioners in addressing the needs and obstacles faced by local hospitality communities regarding social innovation, inclusivity and the promotion of local cultural heritage.

Originality/value – By integrating micro-, meso-, and macro-level analyses, this study advances theoretical understanding and provides practical insights for future research and policymaking.

Keywords Social innovation in tourism, Analytical framework, Tourism innovation research, Systematic literature review

Paper type Literature review

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1. Rising interest in social innovation in tourism

In recent years social innovation in tourism (SIT) (Sørensen, 2007) has emerged as a key topic in tourism innovation studies (Hjalager, 2010, 2015; Işık *et al.*, 2019), even though its systematization remains pending. This emergence can be connected to two factors: a historical limitation in tourism innovation studies and a transformation in the way innovation is conceived.

Scholars have identified gaps in tourism innovation research, particularly its technology-oriented focus, which overlooks the complexity of actors and networks (Wirth *et al.*, 2023; Gomezelj, 2016; Trunfio and Campana, 2019). Furthermore, research on tourism innovation policies is limited (Hall, 2009a; Hall and Williams, 2008; Hjalager, 2010, 2012), and uncertainties persist about the most crucial topics and fields of study (Işık *et al.*, 2019). The increasing interest in social innovation in tourism aligns with the shift of innovation from individual actors to territories and ecosystems (Autio and Thomas, 2014; Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000). Historically, innovation was a closed process, but recent trends emphasize open models, where knowledge is shared across organizations and networks (Chesbrough, 2003). This shift highlights the importance of a user-centric, community-oriented approach, focusing on local communities' needs and expectations (Borghys *et al.*, 2020; Carayannis and Campbell, 2009). Territories play a key role in the innovation process, with their unique knowledge and practices critical to innovation's success (Sassen, 2000; Ramella, 2015). This evolution in the understanding of innovation underscores the growing importance of social innovation, which offers new solutions to societal problems (Murray *et al.*, 2010).

This study seeks to address the “social gap” in tourism innovation by systematically reviewing existing literature on social innovation in tourism. While there is growing attention to the role of SIT within tourism studies, the rationale for conducting a systematic review has so far remained underdeveloped. To date, however, the concept of SIT has become a widely used term to describe various phenomena and has eluded precise definition and theorization. This lack of depth and clarity, we contend, has impeded nuanced and theoretically grounded engagements with the concept. In particular, there is a need to consolidate the fragmented and dispersed body of research, providing a comprehensive and critical framework to guide future studies and practical applications. This review seeks to fill this gap by offering the first systematic literature review specifically dedicated to SIT. By synthesizing existing contributions, it aims to clarify how SIT has been conceptualized and operationalized in tourism research, highlighting common trends, theoretical approaches and empirical findings. At a time when the field is expanding rapidly but lacks unified frameworks, this review intends to strengthen the theoretical foundations of SIT.

Utilizing articles and conference proceedings from Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) up to November 2023, the review encompasses a two-level analysis of 65 studies. In the first level, the focus was on temporal, geographical and thematic trends within the documents. The second level examines how the studies present social innovation initiatives, specifically in terms of social needs, target groups, ecosystems, actor networks and local governance. The paper is structured as follows: it begins with an introduction to the analytical framework, followed by an outline of the methodology. Section 4 presents the key findings, organized into two subsections. Section 5 discusses the results, offers concluding remarks and identifies study limitations to guide future research.

2. Connecting Social Innovation and tourism: analytical framework

Despite social innovation being a concept with a long history (Borelli and Busacca 2020; Godin 2015), the current debate emerged in the 2010s to propose an activation strategy (Oosterlync and Novy, 2019) in continuity with that of social investment (Hemerijck, 2017). In social investment initiatives, activation is pursued through labour market participation,

whereas in social innovation (SI) initiatives, activation has an entrepreneurial, collective or grassroots nature. Despite their differences, the two strategies share trust in the market as a form of integration between the economy and society (Busacca, 2022). Therefore, SI initiatives do not have a specific field of application (Moulaert, 2013) but are intended to experiment a new way of producing a welfare state based on the logic of gaining more solutions by spending fewer public resources (Busacca, 2019).

Social innovation has gained attention in tourism innovation studies over the past decade (Trunfio and Campana, 2019; Wirth *et al.*, 2023), focusing on new forms of cooperation and solutions to existing issues (Moulaert *et al.*, 2017; Neumeier, 2012). This field emerged from local community efforts to create opportunities for a better future and address challenges such as unemployment and abandonment. Scholars suggest that social innovations have the potential to solve region-specific challenges (Wirth *et al.*, 2023; Edwards-Schachter and Wallace, 2017) by incorporating collective actions and engaging society to develop new solutions (Bock, 2016).

Following the definitions of SI proposed by Oosterlynck and Novy (2019), Moulaert and MacCallum (2019), and Moulaert (2013), our goal was to investigate how SI initiatives can contribute to redesigning a different relationship between the tourism sector and local communities to combat poverty and other inequalities by offering new possibilities of access to social, cultural, and economic resources for target groups. These potential solutions are investigated at three levels: at “a” level, we attempt to understand what kind of needs are addressed and in whose benefit; at “b” level, we intend to understand who participates in innovation processes; at the “c” level, we investigate the governance processes, that is, the forms of collective social design that create the conditions for SI.

Indeed, as Trunfio and Campana (2019) suggest in their review of tourism innovation, SI is a new concept that produces social change (Swedberg, 2009) and introduces new solutions – products, services, models, processes and so on (Caulier-Grice *et al.*, 2012) – that influence social capital (Neumeier, 2012), local development and knowledge capabilities (Choi and Majumdar, 2015; Gallouj *et al.*, 2018; van der Have and Rubalcaba, 2016) (micro-level: individual and target groups’ needs). Furthermore, scholars highlight the multiple levels of interactions between diverse actors in tourism destinations, which could involve unusual key players, such as local communities, and nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (Trunfio and Campana, 2019) (meso-level: networks of actors). Wirth *et al.* (2023) in their review argue that social innovations in tourism are understood as new value propositions, new informal rules and cultures, different ways of thinking, and ways to lead to institutional change (Alegre and Berbegal-Mirabent, 2016; Polese *et al.*, 2018) (macro-level: governance and social design). Nevertheless, studies on how these initiatives emerged and which actors are involved are quite scant (Wirth *et al.*, 2023).

Based on this theoretical reconstruction, to better understand this topic, we conducted a systematic literature review of the topic to analyse the initiatives, actors, processes and diverse variables which scholars have until now considered. As we will see, most of the studies that we analysed deal with case studies; they discuss the topic not only at the theoretical level but also by recording the results of the SI applied in each case study.

3. Methodology

A systematic literature review is crucial to gain clarity on this new and emerging research field. Many authors, such as Caputo *et al.* (2016), emphasize that such reviews provide a comprehensive analysis of existing research, help researchers understand the current state of knowledge, identify gaps and establish a solid foundation for future studies. In a new and emerging field, a systematic literature review acts as a roadmap, guiding scholars through the existing body of work, enabling them to build upon existing insights and fostering a more

nuanced and informed approach to the subject matter. This methodological examination ensures that researchers do not duplicate their efforts, promotes efficiency and contributes to developing a well-informed and evolving research landscape. This is the main reason we decided to apply the systematic approach in analysing studies published on social innovation in tourism to fill the gap as previous literature reviews tend to focus on specific and sectoral topics (Aquino *et al.*, 2018; Trunfio and Campana, 2019; Moleiro, 2021; Wirth *et al.*, 2023), losing the opportunity to compare and discuss findings even on the basis of differences between themes and topics.

Two academic databases, SCOPUS and WoS, were used to reduce bias and improve reliability (see Figure 1). As discussed previously, the goal was to select all papers dealing with the specific field of research – social innovation in tourism. The string used was:

“TITLE-ABS-KEY (*social-innovation* AND *in* AND *tourism*)” for both software.

Both software identified 117 and 172 papers, respectively. The papers considered were those present in both repositories until the moment of selection, that is, until July 2023. We, then, proceeded with a manual selection of articles which:

- strictly dealt with both SI and tourism topics, excluding those that dealt only with tourism or SI by mentioning the other concept in a limited and non-foundational way; and
- were articles in journals or conference proceedings, while chapters in books were excluded because of copyright issues, which would have limited the subsequent analysis.

The total number of papers and proceedings selected for the review was 65; 43 documents were identified in both repositories: 11 in WoS and 12 in Scopus. The bibliographic information of the eligible papers was tabulated in an Excel spreadsheet.

Subsequently, the review was divided into two different levels of analysis:

- (1) In the “a” level of the analysis, we were interested in the following parameters:
 - year of publication;
 - country of affiliation of authors;
 - subject area of the journal/conference as identified in Scopus and WoS;
 - type of article (journal/conference proceedings);
 - number of citations;
 - keywords;
 - methodology (quantitative/qualitative/mixed/literature review); and
 - case study (country).

By employing an iterative method described below, at the end of this “a” level of analysis, six macro-thematic areas (clusters) have been identified related to SI in tourism: ICT- and technology-oriented innovations, rural tourism and ecotourism, environmentally sustainable development, local participation and community-based tourism (CBT), cultural heritage and creative industries and social entrepreneurship.

- (2) Subsequently, a “b” level analysis was applied: the “a” level analysis was conducted to select and register basic information about the papers, and the “b” level analysis was conducted to understand the impact of SI initiatives in “micro”, “meso” and “macro” dimensions, chosen by following an analytical framework based on the needs that SI initiatives deal with (micro-level, Maslow, 1943), the networks of actors involved in the initiatives (meso-level, Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1985) and the forms of governance

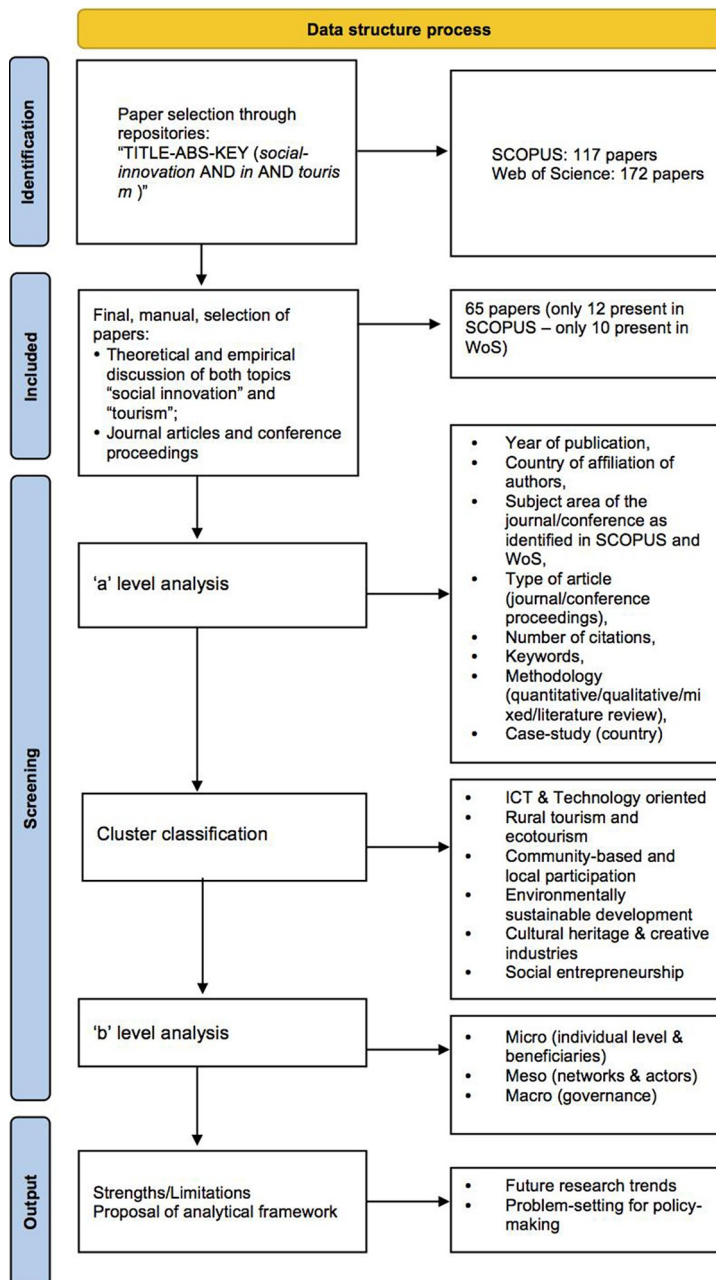


Figure 1. Data structure process (PRISMA)

Source: Authors' own work

characterizing the local contexts in which SI initiatives take place (macro-level, cfr. [Galego et al., 2022](#)):

- At the micro-level, the goal was to individuate the beneficiaries of the SI initiatives and the particular needs that such initiatives respond to at the individual level.
- At the meso-level, the goal was to individuate actors and networks, their typology and their organization.
- At the macro-level, the goal was to individuate the political orientation and governance profile of the context.
- Furthermore, the organizational level was added to understand how decisions are being made by organizations involved in the particular SI initiative under study.

To cluster, analyse and interpret the papers, we examined our data, that is, the papers, by employing an iterative method. This involved a continuous process of moving back and forth between the data and theoretical aspects, as outlined by [Corbin and Strauss \(1990\)](#). Each author individually reviewed the gathered data and shared and discussed their interpretations. Through this collaborative effort, we reached consensus on a unified interpretation. Multiple authors played a crucial role in enhancing the reliability of the analytical process.

4. Findings–overview

In the following section, we briefly present the findings of the papers analysed and divided into two levels of analysis. The “a” level focused on the collection of the most basic information; the “b” level analysis aimed at an in-depth reading of the papers. The “a” level analysis is discussed in two sections: the first tries to deliver a general overview (results and possible hypothesis) of the basic information extracted from the papers, and the second presents the clusters identified related to the macro-areas of the particular SI initiatives. The “b” level analysis tries to examine the core of the papers and extract all information (on a theoretical and empirical level), which could eventually indicate the major trends and knowledge gaps for future research.

4.1 “a” Level analysis

The papers start appearing in 2007 (1 paper), a more noticeable production begins in 2016 (6 papers) and it peaks in the year 2021 (12 papers) (see [Figure 2](#)). It is interesting to note that the production of papers began to rise around 2014, when tourist flow began to increase. The first peak was registered in 2018, another moment in which, in tourism studies, a great number of papers discussed the impacts of over-tourism, and as a result, SI initiative documentation also appeared in this research field. Nevertheless, the highest peak in the production of papers was registered at the moment of a shock event for tourism, the COVID-19 pandemic, with the aim of discussing possible solutions to respond to the immense impact of the pandemic (quarantines and multiple travelling restrictions) on tourism at a global level. Interestingly, these studies mostly discuss domestic and proximity tourism and SI initiatives created by and for local communities.

Of the authors, 43 were from Europe, 13 from Asia, 10 from Latin America, 2 from North America (USA and Canada), and 1 from South Africa (see [Figure 3](#)). This suggests that interest in the topic focuses primarily on countries with significant socioeconomic

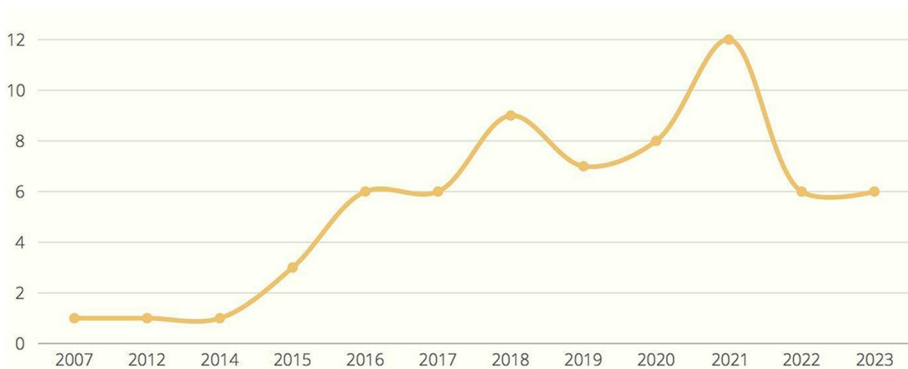


Figure 2. Trend of publication on SI in tourism
Source: Authors' own work

disparities. The number of authors and papers from Italy was considerably higher than those from other countries. Interestingly Italy is a country that suffered a noticeable tourism income deficit because of COVID-19 and also suffers from both over-tourism and under-tourism (Grandi, 2023; Pasquinelli and Trunfo, 2023).

Regarding the paper's subject area, as identified from Scopus and WoS, most papers came from social sciences (42 papers); 6 papers were related to business, management, and accounting; 5 were from economics, econometrics, and finance; 4 were from computer science; and 3 were from environmental sciences (see Figure 4). This result is quite different from other areas of SI studies, where management and territorial sciences – both urban and regional – tend to prevail.

Most papers were published in scientific journals (58), whereas papers from conference proceedings were quite limited (7).

Regarding the number of citations, most studies dealt with technology-oriented initiatives, environmental concerns and social enterprises.

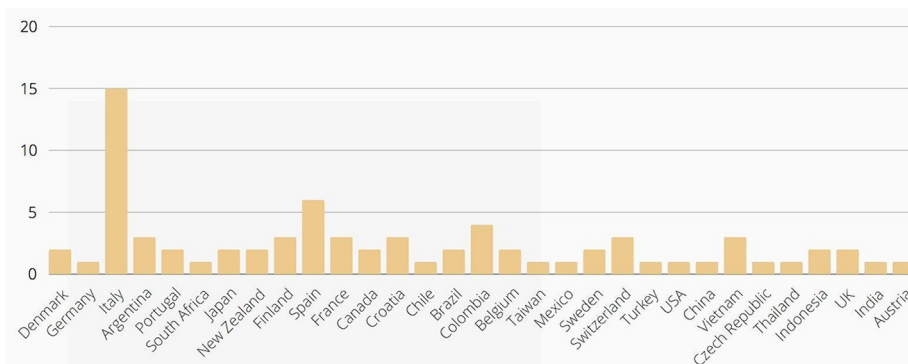


Figure 3. Trend of the authors' affiliation per number of publications
Source: Authors' own work

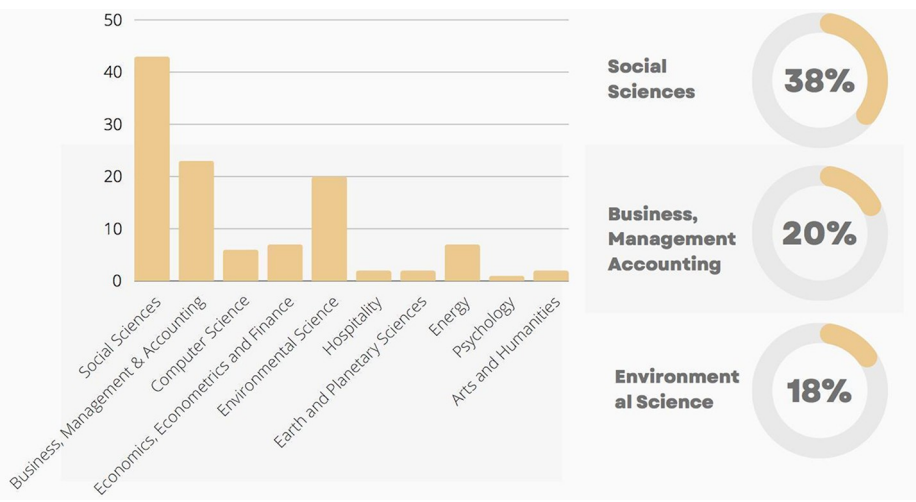


Figure 4. Subject area in Scopus and WoS
Source: Authors' own work

In total, 596 keywords were identified. The keywords “tourism” (8.2%) and “social innovation” (7.7%) were the most common. “Development” (2.8%) and “sustainable” (2.5%) were also part of the most frequently used keywords. “Governance”, “community” and “cultural” were also part of the most popular keywords (1.5%). Finally, “destination”, “community-based”, “smart”, “hospitality” and “destination” were among the most used ones.

Regarding the methodology applied (see [Table 1](#)), six papers presented a strictly quantitative approach: structural equation modelling, data evaluation, questionnaire elaboration, agglomeration theory, entropy method, statistics and confirmatory factor analysis. Twenty-nine papers presented qualitative methodologies, such as fieldwork, in-depth or semi-structured interviews, qualitative content analysis, focus groups, direct and participatory observation, ethnography and biography approach. Twenty papers used mixed methods, and 13 papers presented a theoretical analysis (literature review, critical review and systematic literature review). Here, the qualitative analysis methodology, as a winning method, seems to be related to the level of development in this research field, which is still in its early stages and requires exploratory and inductive studies for a better understanding.

Regarding the countries of the case studies presented in the papers (see [Figure 5](#)), interestingly, 31 cases were from within the European Union (EU) (Italy, Spain, Finland, Portugal, France, Sweden, Croatia, Denmark and Switzerland), 10 were from Asia (Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, China, India and Vietnam), 8 were from Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Colombia) and the rest were from the USA, Canada, Mexico and South Africa. We hypothesise that this result is related to the desire to help local communities (especially in EU and wealthier countries) in dealing with the inequality in opportunities and social conflicts the touristic phenomenon inevitably brings to the table. This result is also related to creating possible solutions for the phenomenon of under-tourism, which numerous countries, mainly those from the global south, are dealing

Table 1. Methodologies applied in the papers

Research methodology	No. of studies
<i>Quantitative</i>	
Social network theory	1
Agglomeration theory	1
Web portal interface	1
Confirmatory factor analysis	1
Structural equation modelling evaluation of data	1
Statistical package for the social science (SPSS)	1
Analysis of moment structure (AMOS) software	1
<i>Qualitative</i>	
Content analysis (documents, archive research, web, press release)	9
Semi-structured interviews	15
Direct/participatory observation	12
Focus groups	5
In-depth interviews	5
Ethnography	4
Living labs	1
Questionnaire	1
Literature review (systematic, critical)	13
<i>Mixed</i>	
Model of the hermeneutic spiral	1
Questionnaires/surveys	7
Expert interviews	11
Participatory observation	5
Design thinking	1
Indirect usability test	1
Grounded theory	1
Longitudinal case study with embedded design	1
Print, digital and social media clippings	1
Content analysis	2
Living labs	2
SWOT	1
Strategic dissemination	1
Workshops/focus groups	2
Statistics	1
Data from standardised interviews processed with SPSS software	1
Cross-tabulation and Pearson's chi-square test	1

Source(s): Authors' own work

with, and in which tourism is presented as a valuable resource for addressing poverty and unemployment.

4.2 Clusters and description

As discussed above, six clusters were identified based on the nature of each SI initiative in tourism as described in the papers (see [Figure 6](#)):

- (1) ICT and technology-oriented;
- (2) rural tourism and ecotourism;
- (3) environmentally sustainable development;

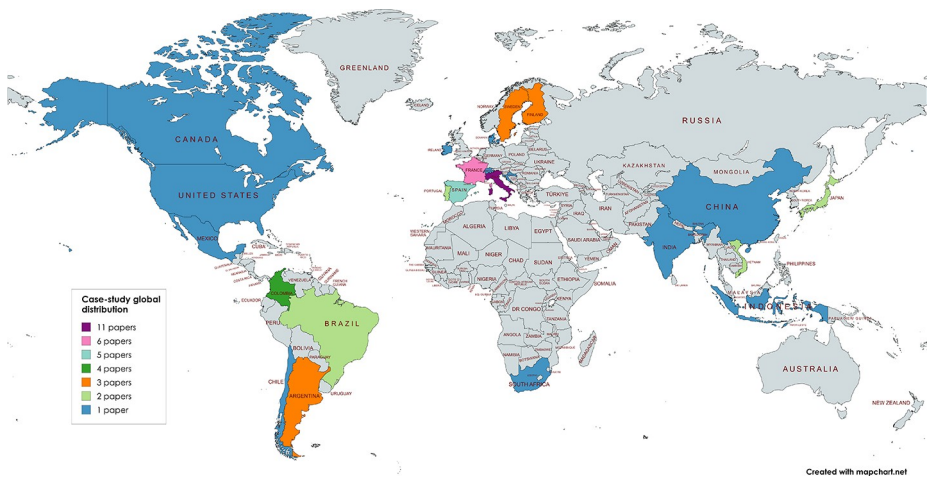


Figure 5. Global distribution of case studies
Source: Authors' own work



Figure 6. Knowledge map of SI in tourism literature – clusters
Source: Authors' own work

- (4) local participation and CBT;
- (5) cultural heritage and creative industries; and
- (6) social entrepreneurship.

By adopting an interactive tagging procedure (Caputo *et al.*, 2016), the authors first independently tagged the papers and then jointly reviewed the tags; the papers were classified according to the predominant subject of study.

Ten papers discussed ICT solutions and the contribution of digital platforms or technology solutions for offering visibility to enterprises (especially for small- or medium-sized enterprises) and attracting more customers. Six papers presented topics of rural tourism and ecotourism, in which the goal was to improve the quality of life in inner and rural areas through agriculture and agritourism. Fourteen papers discussed environmental sustainability, in which the main goal was to propose touristic development with a focus on climate change. Fifteen papers discussed the topic of local participation and CBT, focusing on the involvement of more social groups in the co-design and decision-making processes for local and inclusive tourism development. Eleven papers discussed the contribution of social enterprises in responding to the needs of vulnerable social groups through tourism. Nine papers dealt with the topic of cultural heritage and creative industries and how they can become triggers for urban or rural regeneration, as well as services and tourist flows. However, it is important to acknowledge that the boundaries between the clusters were often blurred, as many initiatives demonstrated overlapping and cross-cutting dynamics. In several cases, projects combined elements of cultural heritage valorisation, local participation and environmental sustainability, creating hybrid forms of SIT initiatives. This interaction between different dimensions suggests that many projects cannot be strictly assigned to a single category but rather operate across multiple fields simultaneously. Recognizing these intersections enriches the interpretation of the results and points to the multidimensional impacts that SIT initiatives can generate for local development. Future research could benefit from a deeper exploration of these overlaps, examining how different elements reinforce each other and contribute to complex processes of social change within tourism destinations. For the purpose of the classification, each paper was therefore assigned to the cluster that reflected its main focus, based on the primary theme discussed in the article.

4.2.1 ICT and technology orientation. In recent years, ICT has emerged as a potent SI in tourism, revolutionizing how travellers plan, experience, and share trips. It has introduced many impactful changes, such as OTAs (Online Travel Agencies, e.g. Expedia and Booking.com) offering easy booking options and democratizing travel. User-generated content platforms such as TripAdvisor and Airbnb enable travellers to share their experiences and make informed decisions. ICT promotes sustainable tourism practices, aids destinations in managing resources and reduces environmental impacts. Social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, facilitate communication between tourists and local communities. Despite its benefits, ICT in tourism presents challenges, including a digital divide and concerns regarding data privacy and cybersecurity, which require careful consideration and strategies (see Table 2). Many of the initiatives discussed in these articles show that digital resources are used to enhance the traditions and cultural resources of the territory, intersecting with the actors and themes of Cluster 5, and to encourage the participation of the local community (Cluster 4).

4.2.2 Rural tourism and ecotourism. Rural tourism and ecotourism are significant SIs that have recently gained attention. They promote sustainable travel in rural and natural areas and offer unique experiences. Rural tourism diversifies activities; spreads economic benefits; and preserves rural culture, landscapes and products. It boosts rural economies,

Table 2. ICT cluster (authors, paper titles, and case-study)

Authors	ICT and Technology-oriented cluster (10) Title	Case-study
Amersdorffer et al. (2012)	The economic and cultural aspects of the social web: Implications for the tourism industry	No
Barile et al. (2014)	ICT solutions for the or.C.HE.S.T.R.A. project: From personalized selection to enhanced fruition of cultural heritage data	Napoli-Italy
Lim and Park (2016)	Digital omotenashi project: a tourists' application design by a design thinking approach	Tokyo-Japan
Castro-Spila et al. (2018)	Social innovation and sustainable tourism lab: an explorative model	No
Polese et al. (2018)	Social innovation in smart tourism ecosystems: How technology and institutions shape sustainable value co-creation	Salerno-Italy
Trunfio and Campana (2019)	Drivers and emerging innovations in knowledge-based destinations: towards a research agenda	No
Van et al. (2020)	The role of human-machine interactive devices for post-COVID-19 innovative sustainable tourism in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam	Ho chi Minh-Vietnam
Errichiello and Micera (2021)	A process-based perspective of smart tourism destination governance	No
Presenza et al. (2021)	Tourism multi-sided platforms and the social innovation trajectory: the case of Airbnb	No
Gomez and Frias (2022)	Artificial intelligence and sustainable tourism development. The value of collaboration agreements	No

Source(s): Authors' own work

creates jobs and supports local businesses, with a focus on community involvement in planning and management and fostering social cohesion. Ecotourism prioritises the conservation of natural resources and biodiversity and promotes education and awareness. This involves visiting protected ecosystems, minimizing negative impacts and maximizing benefits for local communities and conservation. Both contribute to tourism sustainability by integrating social and environmental values, benefiting communities, protecting resources and improving travel experience. They emphasise responsible travel, cultural exchange, sustainability and community engagement for a more ethical tourism industry (see [Table 3](#)). Numerous SIs presented in this group of articles base their success on the enhancement of cultural heritage (Cluster 5) and on the objective of protecting and enhancing environmental resources (Cluster 3). In this way, SIs transform rural tourism into a factor of sustainability.

4.2.3 Environmentally sustainable development. Environmentally sustainable tourism aims to preserve natural resources while fostering economic growth and social well-being. It minimizes negative impacts and maximizes positive outcomes through innovative approaches. The goals include reducing the industry's ecological footprint by conserving energy and water, managing waste and minimizing pollution. Protecting natural resources and biodiversity is crucial to attract visitors and ensure longevity. SI involves empowering local communities in decision-making and promoting an equitable distribution of benefits. Awareness and educational initiatives educate tourists and operators about responsible practices, such as waste reduction and cultural respect, to

Table 3. Rural tourism and ecotourism cluster (authors, paper titles and case study)

Paper	Rural tourism and Ecotourism cluster (6)	
	Title	Caso-studio
López and Ramos (2015)	Innovation in services: the case of rural tourism in Argentina	Argentina
Tai and Yang (2016)	How to grow social innovation from the view of organizational scaling and diffusion: cases of eco-tourism communities in Taiwan	Taiwan
Chiodo <i>et al.</i> (2019a)	Collaborative processes and collective impact in tourist rural villages - Insights from a comparative analysis between Argentinian and Italian cases	Multiple-case study in Argentina, Italy
Chiodo <i>et al.</i> (2019b)	Agritourism in mountainous regions-insights from an international perspective	Multiple-case study in USA, Brazil, Italy and France
Arboleda <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Social innovation as a strategy to strengthen community rural tourism	Medellin-Colombia
Belliggiano <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Walking along the sheeptrack ... rural tourism, ecomuseums, and bio-cultural heritage	Italy-Piedmont and Molise, France-Provence Alpes-Cote d'Azur

Source(s): Authors' own work

ensure sustainable development (see Table 4). The SIs described in this group of articles tend to emphasize the importance of local participation (Cluster 4) and the possibility that new technologies (Cluster 1) contribute to more sustainable and less commercial forms of land use.

4.2.4 Local participation and CBT. Local participation and CBT are innovative approaches to tourism that aim to engage and empower local communities in decision-making and benefit-sharing. They recognize the value of local knowledge and cultural heritage in enhancing tourism authenticity and sustainability. CBT involves collaborating between locals and tourism stakeholders to manage activities, thus minimizing negative impacts and maximizing positive effects on economies, cultures and environments. It provides locals with opportunities to participate in planning and implementation and benefits from tourism, including homestays, cultural tourism and nature tourism. This active involvement generates income and employment and preserves cultural heritage while fostering intercultural understanding. Local participation ensures local involvement in tourism decisions and promotes ownership and sustainability through inclusive planning and resource management. Overall, these innovations empower communities, promote sustainable development, preserve cultural heritage and enhance the tourism experience for both locals and tourists (see Table 5). Local participation is a characteristic that distinguishes all the initiatives described in the six clusters, but in this cluster, participation as a plural process of decision-making and territorial governance becomes a social innovation in itself.

4.2.5 Cultural heritage and creative industries. Heritage tourism is a social innovation in tourism that focuses on visiting heritage sites and engaging in cultural activities to explore local traditions and histories. It offers educational experiences, allowing travellers to learn about different cultures and values. Creative industries contribute to SI by offering engaging experiences involving artistic and cultural elements. Destinations

Table 4. Environmentally sustainable development cluster (authors, paper titles and case study)

Environmentally sustainable development cluster (14)		
Paper	Title	Caso-studio
Sørensen (2007)	The geographies of social networks and innovation in tourism	Malaga (Costa del Sol)-Spain
Booyens and Rogerson (2016)	Responsible tourism in the Western Cape, South Africa: an innovation perspective	Western Cape-South Africa
Scott <i>et al.</i> (2016)	A report on the Paris Climate Change Agreement and its implications for tourism: why we will always have Paris	no
Murcia Garcia <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Sustainable tourism: a conceptualization of the viability in the city of Ibague based in a relevant state of the art	Ibague-Colombia
Batle <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Environmental management best practices: towards social innovation	Mallorca-Spain
Moreno Freites <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Social innovation, productive chain and sustainable value: proposal for tourist attractions in the municipality Usiacuri	Usiacuri-Colombia
Cigir (2018)	Creating a living lab model for tourism and hospitality businesses to stimulate CSR and sustainability innovations	no
Antošová <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Sustainable tourism planning in Bahia Solano, Colombia	Bahia Solano-Colombia
Milwood (2020)	Social responsibility and the SDGs: vignettes of Caribbean tour operators	5 Caribbean communities-USA
Trombadore (2020)	Green revitalization of historical settlements for responsible tourism in mediterranean areas: the multiscale approach of VIVIMED project and the experience of Albergo Diffuso	Two inner villages in Tuscany-Italy
Lapointe <i>et al.</i> (2021)	People, place, values: Living Labs as social innovation processes for tourism communities	Rivière-du-Loup, Quebec-Canada
Partanen (2022)	Social innovations for resilience—local tourism actor perspectives in Kemi, Finland	Kemi-Finland
Phi and Clausen (2021)	Fostering innovation competencies in tourism higher education via design-based and value-based learning	Denmark
Horgan and Baum (2023)	Addressing dereliction and devaluation in urban tourism: the case of Cork, Ireland	Cork-Ireland
Source(s): Authors' own work		

can organize craft workshops, art exhibitions, festivals or food events to celebrate local creativity. By involving tourists in these activities, destinations promote cultural exchanges, support local economies and nurture appreciation for local traditions. Cultural heritage and creative industries have a symbiotic relationship with tourism, inspiring artists to innovatively reinterpret traditional practices. Creative industries present cultural heritage in contemporary formats that appeal to modern travellers. Together, they contribute to sustainable tourism by offering immersive experiences, while preserving cultural legacies and benefiting local communities (Table 6). The initiatives described in this cluster tend to emphasize the participation of local communities (Cluster 4) and the central role of social enterprises (Cluster 6), which include community members who

Table 5. Local participation and CBT cluster (authors, paper titles and case study)

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Paper	Local participation and community-based tourism cluster (15)	
	Title	Caso-studio
Malek and Costa (2015)	Integrating communities into tourism planning through social innovation	Guimarães-Portugal
Amore and Hall (2016)	From governance to meta-governance in tourism? Re-incorporating politics, interests and values in the analysis of tourism governance	New Zealand
Martini <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Community participation, natural resource management and the creation of innovative tourism products: Evidence from Italian networks of reserves in the Alps	Italian Alps
Borgnet (2019)	From uncertain space: spatial trajectory of a social innovation ‘by withdrawal’. Study of the composition of the association of lodges and huts in Queyras (Hautes-Alpes, France)	Queyras-France
Lindberg <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Place innovative synergies for city center attractiveness: a matter of experiencing retail and retailing experiences	Pitea-Sweden
Spillare and Moralli (2019)	Social innovation and tourism: New trajectories of development in the context of the city of Bologna	Bologna-Italy
Basile <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Community participation as a driver of sustainable tourism. The case of an Italian village: Marettimo Island	Marettimo-Italy
Batista <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Environmental education in community-based tourism initiatives: a congruence for social innovation	No
Borgnet and Touzé (2021)	Transition of tourism and improvisation. (anti)-social innovations in the valleys of Valpelline and Ollomont (Aosta Valley)	Valpelline-Aosta Valley-France
Elias and Barbero (2021)	Social innovation in a tourist coastal city: a case study in Argentina	Argentina
Nurhasanah and Van den Broeck (2022)	Towards a sustainable metamorphosis of a small island tourism: Dynamizing capacity building, alternating governance arrangements, and emerging political bargaining power	Pahawang Island-Indonesia
Sarkki <i>et al.</i> (2022)	“Going out to get in”—roles of Forest conflicts in bottom-linked environmental governance progressing toward socio-political innovations	Inar/-Muonio-North Finland
Wirth <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Social innovations in tourism: Analyzing processes, actors, and tipping points	Swiss Mountain region
Partanen <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Community inclusion in tourism development: young people’s social innovation propositions for advancing sustainable tourism	Kemi-Finland
Sharma and Bhat (2023)	The role of community involvement in sustainable tourism strategies: a social and environmental innovation perspective	Jammu/Kashmir-India

Source(s): Authors’ own work

Table 6. Cultural heritage and creative industries cluster (authors, paper titles and case study)

Cultural heritage and creative industries cluster (9)		
Paper	Title	Caso-studio
Le Bel (2017)	Literary heritage and place building for communities: the case of Allier, France	Allier-France
Morales Yago <i>et al.</i> (2018)	The holidays of historical origin as an instrument to promote tourism in a peninsular Southeastern border area	Yecla/Villena-Spain
Karzen and Demonja (2020)	Importance of storytelling: How to create more resilient cultural heritage?	Croatia & European cases
Moleiro (2021)	Territorial cooperation networks, based on social innovation processes as new models of hospitality: the case of the historic houses	Italy-Portugal
Corbisiero (2021)	Urban social innovation practices: the case of Rione Sanità in Naples	Naples-Italy
Splendiani <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Social innovation project and tourism lifestyle entrepreneurship to revitalize the marginal areas. The case of the via Francigena Cultural Route	Via Francigena
Tresiana and Duadji (2022)	Developing Forest coffee cultural tourism and historical heritage megalithic sites in social innovation governance: How does it work in a sustainable way?	Indonesia
Gustafsson and Amer (2023)	Forsvik, Sweden: towards a people–public–private partnership as a circular governance and sustainable culture tourism strategy	Forsvik-Sweden
Qu and Zollet (2023)	Neo-endogenous revitalisation: enhancing community resilience through art tourism and rural entrepreneurship	12 islands-Japan
Source(s): Authors' own work		

intend to build alternative forms of tourism. Differing from expectations when dealing with culture and creativity, a central role for new technologies does not emerge. The cultural productions they refer to are predominantly traditional and use traditional means.

4.2.6 Social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurship in tourism is a pivotal SI aimed at tackling social and environmental challenges while establishing sustainable businesses within the industry. Social entrepreneurs identify pressing issues such as poverty, inequality and environmental degradation within destinations and devise innovative business models to address them while generating revenue. They prioritise inclusive practices, collaborate with marginalized communities and promote fair trade practices. Environmental sustainability is also a key focus, with entrepreneurs aiming to preserve natural resources and minimize the ecological impact of tourism.

Collaboration is fundamental to social entrepreneurship in tourism, with entrepreneurs partnering with local communities, NGOs and governments to collaboratively develop solutions. By fostering collaboration and shared responsibilities, entrepreneurs enhance the scalability and sustainability of their initiatives and create a network of organizations that work towards common goals (Table 7). In this cluster, the participation of the local community (Cluster 4) emerges as an essential characteristic. This participation includes both disadvantaged individuals – for the purpose of labour inclusion – and non-

Table 7. Social entrepreneurship cluster (authors, paper titles and case study)

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Paper	Social entrepreneurship cluster (11) Title	Caso-studio
Alegre and Berbegal-Mirabent (2016)	Social innovation success factors: hospitality and tourism social enterprises	Barcelona-Spain
Van Der Yeught and Bon (2016)	When social innovation generates responsible innovation: a dynamic capabilities-based analysis applied to small tourism organizations	Marseille-France
Alkier <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Challenges of social innovation in tourism	no
Quandt <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Social innovation practices in the regional tourism industry: case study of a cooperative in Brazil	Northeastern Brazil
Walker and Chen (2019)	Social innovation in tourism: unleashing the time-money constraint	no
Zebryte and Jorquera (2017)	Chilean tourism sector “B corporations”: evidence of social entrepreneurship and innovation	Chile
Aquino <i>et al.</i> (2018)	A conceptual framework of tourism social entrepreneurship for sustainable community development	no
Gómez-Carreto <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Social innovation, rural tourism and social enterprises. Evidence from the South-Southeast Mexico	Chiapas-Mexico
Celebi <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Bibliometric analysis of social entrepreneurship in gastronomy tourism	no
Mahato <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Design thinking for social innovation: Secrets to success for tourism social entrepreneurs	Vietnam
Suriyankietkaew <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Sustainable leadership practices and competencies of SMEs for sustainability and resilience: a community-based social enterprise study	Tung Yee Peng Village-Thailand

Source(s): Authors’ own work

disadvantaged individuals, in the latter case interested in enhancing cultural heritage (Cluster 5) and natural heritage (Cluster 3). In some cases, these initiatives take the form of rural itineraries (Cluster 2).

4.3 “b” Level analysis–overview

The “b” level analysis aimed to study the core of the topic, through in-depth reading and more accurate investigation of the contents of the papers. For this purpose, a three-level analysis was applied to analyse both the theoretical and empirical dimensions of the papers and to deliver the most useful and novel information on the topic and for policy-making. To understand the impact of SI on tourism in the contexts described through the initiatives proposed by the authors, the investigation had to follow a three-level analysis: individual/beneficiary (micro), network (meso) and governance (macro) dimensions. This threefold analysis aimed to measure and understand the construction, progress, success or failure of initiatives related to social innovation in tourism described and to analyse the general output of these initiatives, how and why they are constructed and by whom and in which conditions.

4.3.1 Micro-level (beneficiaries and needs). Regarding the “b” level analysis, the findings are divided into micro- (individual dimension), meso- (network dimension) and macro- (governance dimension) levels. At the micro-level, we investigate how SI initiatives translate into individual needs using Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). Studies have shown that SI initiatives primarily respond to safety needs, particularly employment and financial security. CBT initiatives address various needs and offer opportunities for co-design and decision-making (Elias and Barbero, 2021; Malek and Costa, 2015; Martini *et al.*, 2017; Nurhasanah and Van den Broeck, 2022) and blend economic and social inclusion through responsible tourism (Aquino *et al.*, 2018; Mahato *et al.*, 2021; Van Der Yeught and Bon, 2016; Zebryte and Jorquera, 2017).

These initiatives impact individuals’ needs, including protecting natural resources, generating income, fostering community connections and building self-esteem (Alegre and Berbegal-Mirabent, 2016; Batista *et al.*, 2021; Chiodo *et al.*, 2019b; Corbisiero, 2021; Murcia Garcia *et al.*, 2017; López and Ramos, 2015; Moleiro, 2021; Partanen, 2022; Trombadore, 2020; Wirth *et al.*, 2023). Rural and ecotourism initiatives offer opportunities for a new lifestyle and better quality of life (Arboleda *et al.*, 2020; Belliggiano *et al.*, 2021; Chiodo *et al.*, 2019a).

Regarding beneficiaries, most papers identify the “local community” without specifying its composition or diverse social groups (Elias and Barbero, 2021; Martini *et al.*, 2017; Spillare and Moralli, 2019).

4.3.2 Meso-level (networks and organization). The meso-level analysis aimed to investigate the local context in terms of the networks: actors, typology – “industrial district” or “strategic alliance” (Inkpen and Tsang, 2005) and orientation – “bonding” or “bridging” (Putnam, 2001) presented in each paper. All papers emphasize the importance of creating networks at both micro- (local) and macro- (global) levels (Amore and Hall, 2016; Sørensen, 2007). However, except for the ICT cluster, which focuses internationally, the remaining clusters focus on the local level (Batle *et al.*, 2018; López and Ramos, 2015; Mahato *et al.*, 2021; Partanen, 2022). Various actors, both public (administrations, universities and other institutions) (Elias and Barbero, 2021; Trombadore, 2020) and private (entrepreneurs, tourist providers, artists and inhabitants) (Milwood, 2020; Nurhasanah and Van den Broeck, 2022; Partanen *et al.*, 2023), are involved in all clusters, representing the “quintuple helix” model (Iaione, 2017). However, a knowledge gap exists regarding brokerage and network management processes, highlighting the need to understand how actors interact and the dynamics of networks (Aquino *et al.*, 2018; Wirth *et al.*, 2023).

4.3.3 Macro-level (governance and context orientation). The macro-level concerns the governance profile of the context; it aimed to identify the orientation (Della Lucia and Trunfio, 2012), incline toward innovation or conservation; typology of governance (Sabatier, 1986), top-down or bottom-up/collaborative; and who participates in governance procedures. A finding of great interest is that most papers do not provide information on the governance profile of the context, or at least until 2023, when it seemed that governance issues was increasingly being considered in the papers (Gustafsson and Amer, 2023; Horgan and Baum, 2023; Sarkki *et al.*, 2022; Tresiana and Duadji, 2022). This shift highlights the growing understanding that governance structures, decision-making processes and stakeholder engagement are critical factors for the success and scalability of such initiatives. The absence of governance-related discussions in earlier papers may have limited the ability to understand the broader contextual factors that influence the outcomes of social innovation. This recent trend suggests a promising direction for future research, which should explore how different governance models – whether top-down, bottom-up or hybrid – impact the design, implementation and effectiveness of social innovation in tourism. This would offer

deeper insights into the dynamics between governance, social innovation and local community development.

Furthermore, it is urgent to highlight that the papers deal with the term “community”, when referring to its right to participate in decision-making procedures, in a rather rhetoric level.

Nevertheless, at a practical level, “community” is a complicated term and is composed of multiple social groups with different needs (see the special issue dedicated to community hosted in the number 64(4) of the journal *The Sociological Review*). Even if participation is highlighted, it is necessary to understand that the community is not a one-dimensional actor but consists of diverse layers and figures. Another interesting finding is that little attention has been paid to conflicts between actors and interests (Partanen *et al.*, 2023; Sarkki *et al.*, 2022). There seems to be a knowledge gap regarding conflicts when different interests arise in participative governance when dealing with tourism development and SI (Elias and Barbero, 2021; Wirth *et al.*, 2023).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of a systematic literature review is to create order and systematize scientific production on a specific topic; however, it does not limit the possibility of formulating analytical considerations based on the relationship between the results and the theoretical framework of reference. In this section, we briefly discuss the results of our analysis organized by topics.

5.1 SI in tourism: a research field still in the process of being formed

The data presented in the previous section present this field as an emerging research field, recent enough but at the same time not that new, as the first papers date back to the 2010s. We note a broad convergence between the development of the international scientific debate on social innovation and tourism. Both topics were born in the same period and grew in parallel, although in much higher numbers in the social innovation debate. In this topic, the number of papers published annually started to grow noticeably from 2013, reaching the maximum in 2021, perhaps because of the effects of COVID-19 (both because of wider social and tourism factors). In fact, after a phase of rapid growth between 2010 and 2017, the literature on innovation has stabilized as a mature research field and is not very sensitive to external shocks, while that on our topic has accelerated in 2021 and then returned to the trend of previous years (pre-Covid).

Tourism as a sector is highly influenced by external factors; thus, it is not surprising that studies investigating touristic phenomena have also been influenced. From the emergence of the first papers in social innovation in tourism approximately 15 years ago, today, the topic’s literature is able to recall a wide repertoire of documents, which signals the achievement of a certain maturity of the research in this field. Furthermore, as highlighted by the numerous cross-references between the authors who deal with it, even when they adhere to different disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, we can define social innovation in tourism as a field of research in progress because around this topic, research from different theoretical, disciplinary and methodological perspectives was born, which aimed to investigate the same phenomenon.

However, the degree of maturity of the research field can still be considered low because of the prevalence of qualitative methodologies and exploratory studies. At the methodological level, approximately 90% of papers adopted a qualitative case study approach, mostly multiple cases with a comparative orientation based on direct observations and interviews. Indeed, case studies are used to formulate interpretative hypotheses in relation to still recent and little

investigated phenomena, that is, to understand “what” and “how” more often than “why” and the mechanisms shaping innovations. However, this has consequences in terms of knowledge production because exploratory research is not frequently used to build reference models and theories, and the knowledge produced is often considered too contextualized and limited. We do not intend to argue whether this reasoning is correct. Indeed, we believe that the history of scientific production is full of great discoveries and ideas derived from limited case studies, such as the original discoveries of the work process produced by research on pubs in Canada (Sosteric, 1996). However, we must admit that the selection mechanisms of scientific production tend to attribute greater scientific reliability to quantitative studies or studies based on a large number of case studies, which are therefore not exploratory.

5.2 Tourism: an economic sector to be developed, neglecting the risks generated by tourism development

Observing the geographical location of the authors of the analysed papers, we note that they operate in contexts with a strong tourist vocation, such as Italy, Spain, France, Croatia Colombia, Switzerland, Vietnam and Argentina. This suggests an influence of the context on the formation of the research agenda. However, when we delve into the aspect of geographical location through the localization of case studies, we obtain a further element of analysis. Research tends to concentrate on areas with a limited presence of tourism, both in tourist countries with fewer tourist areas (Chiodo *et al.*, 2019b; Moleiro, 2021) and countries that have not yet fully entered global tourism circuits (Tai and Yang, 2016; Van *et al.*, 2020). A limited number of studies deal with areas affected by over-tourism (Barcelona-Spain: Alegre and Berbegal-Mirabent, 2016; Caribbean: Milwood, 2020; Mallorca-Spain: Batle *et al.*, 2018; Naples: Corbisiero, 2021), despite the literature having produced numerous studies dedicated to the problems created by excess tourism (Koens *et al.*, 2018; McCool and Lime, 2001; Pizam, 1978; Van der Borg *et al.*, 1996). This aspect can be linked to the manner in which our topic is conceived in the analysed papers.

The authors consider social innovation in tourism as a strategy to encourage participation in the labour market of disadvantaged individuals or target groups or to encourage local economic development, and thus, indirectly encourage the distribution of wealth among the local population in contexts where local economic conditions are unfavourable. This represents an element of coherence between this topic and the strategies of social innovations (Oosterlynck and Novy, 2019), social investment (Hemerijck, 2017) and workfare (Brodikin and Larsen, 2013) given that these initiatives present all three characteristic elements of the three strategies: they promote collective and entrepreneurial activation, such as SI and training aimed at participation in the labour market, such as social investment, and job placement, such as workfare.

However, this apparent overlap hides the profound differences between cases attributable to the logic of social investment and innovation (Phi and Clausen, 2021) and cases of workfare (Mahato *et al.*, 2021; Morales Yago *et al.*, 2018; Zebyrte and Jorquera, 2017). Workfare and social investment/innovation policies represent two distinct philosophies for addressing social and economic challenges, particularly in the context of labour and welfare policies. Workfare focuses on the idea that those receiving benefits should actively participate in some form of work or training as a condition for receiving assistance. The objective is to encourage self-sufficiency and reduce dependence on welfare, with an emphasis on obtaining immediate and short-term results.

On the contrary, social investment and innovation policies have adopted a broader and more proactive approach. They focus on investing in human capital through education, training and social services to enhance individuals' capabilities. They aim to provide people

with the resources needed to participate effectively in the labour market and society in the long term. While workfare often focuses on individuals and aims to address their immediate needs, social investment policies recognize the importance of systemic factors and seek to address the root causes of social and economic challenges. The approach is more inclusive and geared towards removing barriers to labour market participation by addressing underlying social issues. On the contrary, a common aspect of most studies is the importance attributed to the tourist experience (Belligiano *et al.*, 2021; Chiodo *et al.*, 2019a; Chiodo *et al.*, 2019b; Trunfio and Campana, 2019) as a tool for developing a win-win strategy for local inhabitants and tourists. Thus, the tourist experience becomes the tool to develop the chosen strategies, and a good tourist experience is considered capable of guaranteeing authentic experiences for visitors and good local development opportunities (Le Bel, 2017; Milwood, 2020; Presenza *et al.*, 2021).

The picture painted thus far is consistent with the near-total absence of conflict, understood as an intense form of social interaction, within the studied papers. Social innovation is rather described in vague and positive terms, obscuring the potential conflicts generated by changes to the status quo. This approach is entirely consistent with studies on social innovation (Borelli and Busacca, 2020), and therefore, the result is not surprising. However, in this context, where tourism innovations modify the relationships among the actors involved, it would be important to recover this dimension to better understand the effects of social innovations on the forms of relationship among local actors.

5.3 *Rhetoric of the sustainable local community and its dangers*

A further aspect that emerges from the research is that five cluster of SIs described in the review are different from each other but converge in considering the local community as the protagonist of SI initiatives, with the exception of only one cluster.

The rural tourism and ecotourism cluster challenges traditional tourism models through community-centric approaches by inspiring alternatives that prioritise community involvement. Community involvement and empowerment are at the core of rural tourism and ecotourism as they provide opportunities for rural and indigenous populations to participate in tourism activities, share their traditions and benefit economically.

Environmentally sustainable tourism models respect the values, customs and traditions of local communities, ensuring that tourism activities do not lead to the erosion of the local natural environment and its heritage. This model is community-centric; therefore, it encourages developing sustainable tourism products and services that showcase local cultures, biodiversity and natural landscapes (Batle *et al.*, 2018; Murcia Garcia *et al.*, 2017; Partanen, 2022; Trombadore, 2020).

CBT provides local communities with an opportunity to showcase their unique traditions, customs and ways of life to visitors. This boosts the community's sense of cultural pride, encourages the transmission of traditional knowledge to younger generations and helps safeguard cultural identity in the face of globalization (Batista *et al.*, 2021; Malek and Costa, 2015). This model leads to the creation of a skilled local workforce, thus enabling community members to assume various roles within the tourism industry and strengthening their overall resilience and self-reliance (Nurhasanah and Van den Broeck, 2022; Wirth *et al.*, 2023).

Clusters of cultural heritage also promote community-centric approaches to tourism. Local residents become ambassadors and stewards of their own culture, providing authentic experiences to and engaging with visitors (Splendiani *et al.*, 2023; Tresiana and Duadji, 2022). This involvement creates a sense of ownership and empowerment and strengthens social bonds within the community (Morales Yago *et al.*, 2018).

Social entrepreneurs insure immersive and meaningful interactions with tourists. These experiences often deviate from mass tourism and involve collaborations with local artisans, guides and cultural practitioners, fostering cultural exchanges and supporting local economies (Mahato *et al.*, 2021; Suriyankietkaew *et al.*, 2022; Zebryte and Jorquera, 2017). Moreover, social entrepreneurs in tourism often work directly with marginalized communities, empowering them by providing training, employment and economic opportunities (Alegre and Berbegal-Mirabent, 2016).

Community plays a central role in social innovation in tourism for the five clusters described above. The ICT- and technology-oriented cluster may be the only cluster in which the community's role is rather unclear. The SI initiatives of the other five clusters are based on local traditions, history, resources and culture and they promote community-centric tourism models; however, in the ICT cluster, the community as a whole is not directly the protagonist in designing and implementing tourism activities. Both the promoters and beneficiaries of ICT innovations are certain groups and parts of the community and not the community as a whole (Gomez and Frias, 2022; Lim and Park, 2016; Van *et al.*, 2020). In this cluster, the central role of innovation is mainly attributed to businesses. In the other five clusters, the authors' will to highlight that the community is the main promoter and beneficiary of the initiatives is evident; however, in the ICT-related papers, it is a rather unclear aspect.

Furthermore, as most beneficiaries are not vulnerable individuals, these initiatives risk exacerbating social inequalities (see *Matthew Effect*); however, none of the papers is concerned with this aspect, and they implicitly recognize that the benefits for the local community will also affect disadvantaged people.

While specifying the functioning and logic of the activation processes of the local community, as described above, for most clusters, a small sample of papers (Batle *et al.*, 2018; Chiodo *et al.*, 2019a; Nurhasanah and Van den Broeck, 2022; Sarkki *et al.*, 2022; Wirth *et al.*, 2023) delved into the relationships between community actors and governance processes and, more generally, the social production relationships of tourism. Thus, the articles produce a rhetoric of the community, where the latter is frequently mentioned without ever being explored in depth, leading to a weakening of the reflective and critical spaces, which could highlight the different impacts of tourism in relation to the position of the actors and groups targeted with respect to tourism production processes.

5.4 *The contribution to the theoretical and analytical debate on innovation, governance, and tourism ecosystems*

While our proposed three-tiered framework (micro, meso, macro) provides a structure for analysing SIT, its theoretical underpinnings and comparative positioning within the broader tourism literature can be further elaborated.

Connecting this to tourism-specific debates, the micro-level, focusing on social needs and beneficiaries, aligns with research emphasizing user-centric and community-oriented approaches in innovation.

The meso-level, concerning actor networks and ecosystem dynamics, can be theoretically enriched by drawing on tourism innovation ecosystem literature. This literature often highlights the importance of collaboration, knowledge sharing and network dynamics, moving beyond firm-centric views to understand innovation within territories and stakeholder networks (Beritelli *et al.*, 2007). Our framework complements existing models, such as Hjalager's widely recognized typology of tourism innovation (product/service, process, organizational, marketing, institutional) (Hjalager, 2010), by focusing specifically on the social dimension of innovation and its multi-level drivers and governance structures, rather than solely categorizing innovation

outputs. The emphasis on “institutional innovation” in Hjalager’s model, involving new collaborative structures, particularly resonates with our meso- and macro-level analyses.

The macro-level, addressing governance roles, connects directly with extensive research on tourism governance. Scholars have extensively explored different governance models, network approaches and the shift towards more collaborative, participatory and networked forms of governance involving public, private and voluntary sectors (Beaumont and Dredge, 2010). Our framework contributes by specifically examining how these governance structures enable or constrain SIT, moving beyond purely economic or administrative efficiency perspectives often found in traditional governance models (community-based vs corporate-based models described by Beritelli *et al.*, 2007). Comparing our findings with established tourism innovation frameworks, such as those developed by Hall and Williams, which adopt a multi-level approach considering the interplay between firms, networks and institutional contexts (Hall and Williams, 2008), highlights the unique contribution of our SIT-focused lens in foregrounding social needs, stakeholder engagement and community empowerment as central tenets of the innovation process within tourism ecosystems.

5.5 Strengths and study limitations

In conclusion, by systematizing scientific production on social innovation in tourism, this study contributes to strengthening this field of study in three ways. Theoretically, this topic integrates perspectives from social innovation, social investment and workfare policies, addressing social and economic inequalities through tourism-driven initiatives.

First, we show that it’s about an emerging field of study, characterized by exploratory research, and with limited capacity for modelling and theorizing. This gap favours the circulation of rhetoric, which tends to emphasize positive aspects and solutions, thus reducing the reflective space. While social innovation and investment focus on long-term systemic change, workfare emphasizes short-term labour market activation, shaping different policy outcomes.

Second, we affirm that employment and economic potential attributed to tourism tend to obscure the problems caused by tourism, reducing the ability to create conditions to prevent future problems in territories which undertake paths of intensification of tourist flows and social objectives.

Finally, we highlight the construction of a rhetoric of the local community, which frames it as a target beneficiary of the initiatives, and simultaneously, as a leading actor, without delving into the concept of community and the relationships between actors, as well as between actors and the local context, reducing the ability to observe the different possibilities of accessing the resources generated by tourism by the different local actors. In short, local communities are often framed as central actors, yet this perspective risks oversimplification, overlooking power imbalances and uneven benefit distribution.

Furthermore, by applying our methodology to the existing studies and conducting a systematic literature review, we have developed an analytical framework (see Figure 7) that may be useful for future research on this topic as well as for policymaking relevant to SI. In other words, the “a” and “b” level analyses, proposed as a methodology for conducting the above systematic literature review, could contribute to creating a cognitive tool for new fieldwork and case studies for tracing strengths or gaps in previous or ongoing research and for understanding the limits or strengths of SI initiatives.

Indeed, applying level “a” to a research or an initiative can help us understand if it refers to a local context that already holds a touristic value but needs more and diversified touristic flows or a local context with no touristic flows which desires to attract tourist flows, but simultaneously wants to create a sustainable touristic model. Furthermore, it helps us

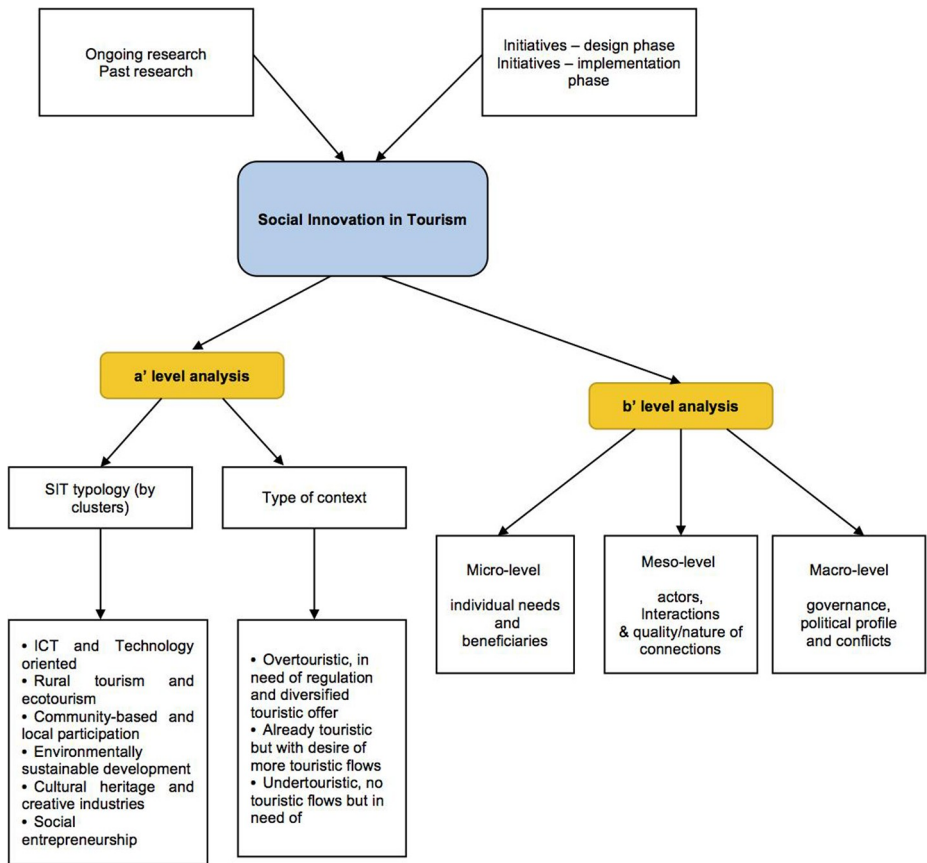


Figure 7. Proposal of analytical framework for future studies and policy-making problem-setting (PRISMA)
Source: Authors' own work

understand the type and sector of SI initiatives by inaugurating new clusters, thus ensuring the necessary flexibility.

In other words, applying the “b” level helps trace the following:

- the needs that SI initiatives fulfil at an individual level and the main beneficiaries of the analysed local context;
- the networks by helping to individuate all possible local actors and the quality of their connections; and
- the governance profile by understanding whether local institutions can facilitate or impede the SI process.

This “b” level can be applied to real initiatives in the design and implementation phase to ensure that all areas of action are covered. Alternatively, it can be applied to initiatives to be studied and analysed to identify any limitations or strengths or gaps in previous research.

It is important to highlight that while most innovation frameworks related to tourism are typically concentrated on developing a new product or service aimed at improving the tourist experience, our framework focuses specifically on the host communities and the local contexts in which tourism operates. This shift in focus enables a deeper understanding of how SIT can create value not only for tourists but also for local communities and their sustainable development. By examining how this framework contrasts with and builds upon existing models, we can better understand its contribution to advancing the field of tourism research.

Generally, this study provides valuable insights into SIT, but it leaves room for further development. Scholars and practitioners can build upon these insights by conducting empirical validation of the proposed framework in various tourism contexts, testing its applicability and impact. Additionally, exploring new theoretical perspectives, particularly those related to governance structures and the evolving role of local actors, could further enrich the SIT field. By addressing these areas, future research can offer deeper understanding and practical tools for developing more sustainable, inclusive, and locally driven tourism initiatives.

The future research agenda for SIT should focus on several key areas within each cluster to further develop the field. In the ICT and technology-oriented cluster, future studies could explore how emerging technologies like AI and big data can enhance social innovation and promote inclusive tourism, especially in underserved areas. Research in rural tourism and ecotourism could investigate the integration of sustainable development goals and the role of community-led initiatives in preserving both natural and cultural heritage. Environmentally sustainable development can be further explored through studies on circular economy models in tourism and strategies for greening urban tourism. In the cluster of local participation and CBT, research could focus on governance models that enable effective community-driven tourism, as well as the social inclusion and equity impacts of such initiatives. Studies on cultural heritage and creative industries can delve into the intersection of tourism and cultural preservation, examining how creative industries can stimulate local economies while maintaining cultural authenticity. Finally, in social entrepreneurship, future research could investigate the role of social enterprises as key actors in sustainable regeneration, focusing on tackling local problems—such as depopulation, unemployment, inequality, and degradation—through the valorisation of local cultural heritage.

However, this study has some limitations. For this review, we collected all papers registered in SCOPUS and WoS, in which a researcher may find the most relevant material from every research field. As a result, the analysis did not consider the papers which are not registered in those repositories for some reason. Moreover, the analysis based on these repositories used all papers which directly discuss both topics, “SI” and “tourism”. Nevertheless, it is possible that there might be papers discussing these topics which could include SI initiatives but never mention those innovations as SI. These studies could not be considered. Therefore, the diffusion of the concept of SI in the academic community which is conducting research on this topic is more than urgent. Finally, as the analysed papers focus on the supply side of tourism while neglecting the role of visitors, the analytical framework proposed in the conclusions is also partial and will need to be developed in the future, by taking in consideration both the benefits for the local communities and those offered to the visitors of the context.

Secondly, the prevalence of qualitative case studies in the literature, while offering rich, nuanced and in-depth insights into specific social innovation initiatives in tourism, presents significant challenges in terms of generalizability. These studies often focus on particular, context-specific cases, such as a specific community or tourism destination, and examine the

unique dynamics and outcomes within that context. While this approach allows for a deep understanding of the local conditions, actors and processes involved, it also limits the ability to apply the findings broadly across different settings. Because these case studies tend to explore phenomena that are tightly bound to their specific geographical, cultural or socio-economic contexts, drawing universal conclusions or developing standardized models for other regions or types of tourism can be difficult. Furthermore, the outcomes and lessons learned from a single case study may not be transferable to other tourism environments with different challenges, resources, or institutional frameworks. Finally, the overrepresentation of certain regions may restrict the applicability of the findings, leaving out critical insights from less-studied areas. This regional imbalance limits the broader understanding of SIT, as the unique contexts, challenges and opportunities faced by underrepresented regions are not sufficiently explored, which could affect the generalizability of the results.

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