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*Review*

## **Place branding in rural areas: A literature review**

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**Abstract:** The paper examines the concept of place branding in rural areas, highlighting its significance in increasing reputation, attracting investment, improving competitiveness, and fostering a sense of pride and belonging among local populations. This article provides a literature review of rural branding, examining the trends of the main topics, analyses, and methodological approaches used in investigating place branding. The analysis is based on 45 articles from the Scopus and Web of Science databases, organized into seven main topics: tourism, rural identity, rural and regional development, sustainability, food and gastronomy, stakeholders' involvement, and landscape. Additionally, the study integrates a conceptual framework that outlines the interplay between these themes, emphasizing the theoretical grounding of rural place branding. The findings indicate a positive trend in the number of articles published on rural place branding, a predominance of qualitative research methods, and a strong focus on theoretical framework analysis. The study also highlights the role of sustainability in rural place branding, demonstrating how the synergy of cultural heritage preservation, stakeholder collaboration, and landscape branding significantly enhances the local economy, fosters community pride, and promotes regional agri-food products and gastronomy. These elements contribute to the sustainable growth of rural regions while reinforcing their unique identity within competitive global markets.

**Keywords:** rural place branding; tourism; rural and regional development; rural identity; sustainability

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of place branding involves strategically marketing and promoting a specific geographic area to various target audiences. This process involves establishing and upholding the area's brand identity to shape perceptions; attract investment, talent, and tourism; and foster a sense of pride and belonging among the local population. Place branding extends beyond conventional marketing approaches to highlight a location's unique attributes and offerings while differentiating it globally. In order to create a compelling and authentic narrative concerning the position, this approach entails including both internal and external stakeholders [1–3].

The history of place branding is intricate and multidimensional. According to San Eugenio Vela [4], Anholt contended that there was a connection between brands and territory back in the time of Alexander the Great, indicating that a place's ability to succeed or fail is usually accepted by its reputation and image [5]. Another perspective traces the origins of place branding to the mid-19th century, when the United States began using branding strategies to attract rural populations to urban centers for labor and tourism purposes [6] (p. 49–50). This historical evolution demonstrates the enduring relevance of place branding as a strategic tool for managing and promoting the identity of geographic areas.

Place branding as a comprehensive concept applies to both urban and rural regions; it includes the branding of cities, regions, and rural areas. Studies have shown how significant branding strategies are in rural-urban contexts and how essential it is to comprehend and develop effective branding approaches for both area types [7–9]. Urban branding has received substantial scholarly attention, since the cities, towns, or conurbations are focusing on densely populated areas characterized by a high concentration of human-built features and infrastructure [10–12]. Conversely, rural areas, characterized by lower population densities and greater distances to administrative centers [13], face particular challenges, such as depopulation, economic decline, and inadequate local services, often exacerbated by the urban-rural divide [14–16]. These distinctions underscore a significant research gap regarding rural place branding dynamics, challenges, and strategies, which suggests a need for a more comprehensive exploration of villages and hamlets and their implications for local development and regional identity [17–19]. This study has two primary objectives: (1) to investigate the differences between urban and rural place branding through a theoretical framework derived from the literature and (2) to develop a conceptual framework for rural place branding, addressing its distinct dimensions and motivations. By bridging these gaps, the study aims to provide a clearer understanding of why rural branding is essential and how it can effectively address the needs of rural regions.

Notably, only two studies have previously conducted literature reviews in fields similar to rural place branding. One literature review study focused on food and gastronomy (F&G) for sustainable territorial development, aiming to reduce research fragmentation and offer a comprehensive understanding of F&G across various fields of study. This approach facilitated the identification of common elements that could underpin F&G's potential for territorial development [20]. Another review paper focused on non-wood forest products (NWFPs) and their connection to sustainable tourism via place marketing. It delved into key research topics covered in the literature; territorial marketing models; development challenges; and various aspects of the field, including research methodologies [21].

Despite limited research on rural place branding [22], this article aims to outline the explored aspects and topics; researchers' contribution to marketing science; and geographical distribution, including case studies. It is the first review to focus only on articles related to rural place branding, categorizing and analyzing research studies from various countries worldwide, differentiating from the literature above by the analyses of the crucial branding components, not solely on one product. This study contributes to the evolving discourse on place branding by offering a distinct focus on rural contexts, which have been comparatively underexplored. Beyond addressing a gap in the literature, this research highlights the critical role that rural place branding can play in addressing pressing global challenges, such as urbanization and economic inequality. The findings emphasize rural place branding as a strategic tool not only for boosting local economies but also for fostering community resilience, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting sustainability, thereby contributing to broader sustainable development goals.

This paper investigates the rural place branding literature, offering insights for future research. The following research questions guide the review:

RQ1. What are the trends of the main topics of investigation on rural place branding?

RQ2. What analyses and methodological approaches have been employed in investigating rural place branding?

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: In Sections 2 and 3, we illustrate the theoretical framework and describe the methods used to conduct the literature review, respectively. The main findings from the reviewed literature and the conceptual frameworks are then summarized and presented in Sections 4 and 5. Finally, Section 6 provides discussions and concluding remarks.

## **2. Theoretical framework: contrasting rural and urban approaches to place branding**

Place branding strategies must consider the distinct characteristics of urban and rural areas, as these contexts differ significantly in demographic, geographic, and governance attributes [13]. These distinctions are essential because they influence the effectiveness of branding strategies [23] in achieving goals, such as sustainable development, local identity preservation, and economic growth, making a one-size-fits-all approach to place branding inadequate. This section explores the differences between urban and rural place branding across key aspects, including cultural identity and place narratives, governance and stakeholder involvement, community engagement and participation, and branding strategies and communication channels. By examining these differences, this framework establishes a theoretical foundation for understanding the specific needs of rural place branding while addressing the first objective of the studies and supporting the development of a conceptual framework suited to rural contexts.

Primarily, central to both urban and rural branding is the creation of a compelling identity and place narrative; however, the priorities differ significantly [7]. Urban branding often highlights modernity, global connectivity, and cultural diversity, leveraging iconic architecture and artistic districts to attract a wide audience [24]. While, rural branding is more focused on communal identity, food and drink, arts and crafts, music, and the beauty of the surrounding natural environment rather than on the building design [25]. This narrative is deeply tied to preserving of local traditions and historical identities, appealing to audiences seeking meaningful experiences.

A significant challenge for rural branding is maintaining authenticity while adapting to the expectations of external audiences, such as tourists. At the same time, unique opportunities

associated with rural place branding should also be highlighted. In these areas, landscapes frequently serve as a central focus for branding initiatives because they significantly enhance the area's identity and appeal. In contrast, urban landscape conservation and management are typically guided by the concept of limited protection, resulting in the landscape not being perceived as a unique branding asset for the location [26].

Next, governance and stakeholder participation in place branding differ markedly between urban and rural areas because of contrasting scales, resource availability, and community interactions. Urban branding often benefits from centralized governance structures that engage a wide range of well-resourced stakeholders, including multinational companies, governmental institutions, and cultural organizations [27]. These entities work together to implement extensive branding campaigns designed to present cities as globally competitive centers for innovation, commerce, and tourism [28]. Conversely, rural branding is largely dependent on decentralized governance and participatory approaches that involve local governments, community organizations, and small businesses [29]. Despite the advantages of community-driven strategies in fostering local ownership, additional challenges arise for rural places, including fewer stakeholders than in urban areas; potentially lower motivation; and limited resources, such as skills and finances [30,88], which requires a grassroots approach, emphasizing trust and collaboration among stakeholders as essential elements for successful branding.

The level of community engagement further distinguishes rural from urban place branding. Kavaratsiz et al. [31,32] mentioned that branding initiatives in urban environments typically feature extensive promotional efforts that prioritize external stakeholders, such as investors and tourists, while offering minimal direct involvement from local residents. This approach often overlooks the significance of resident participation in shaping the city's image and brand. On the other hand, rural branding heavily depends on active participation from the local community, where residents contribute to shaping and promoting the brand narrative. This participatory process not only enhances the authenticity of rural branding but also strengthens community pride and cohesion [33]. Nonetheless, due to potential conflicts among stakeholder interests [34] and the logistical difficulties [35] of reaching widely scattered populations, fostering genuine engagement in rural areas can be challenging. Therefore, the success of rural branding depends on its capacity to strike a balance between inclusivity and efficiency, ensuring that the voices of the community are at the forefront of the branding efforts.

Furthermore, the design and execution of branding strategies and communication channels differ between urban and rural areas. Urban branding campaigns leverage a range of advanced media channels, such as digital marketing, social media, and large international events, to engage with audiences worldwide [36]. Rural branding often relies on traditional communication methods, such as regional festivals, word-of-mouth promotion, and community-based events; although, there is a growing trend towards adopting digital tools to expand outreach. The disparity in access to technological infrastructure poses a challenge for rural branding, limiting its ability to attain the same visibility as urban campaigns. Nevertheless, rural branding's reliance on personal and authentic communication channels can cultivate stronger emotional ties with target audiences, especially those in search of distinctive and genuine experiences [37].

### 3. Materials and methods

A systematic literature review [38] has been conducted to summarize the main findings of research on rural place branding. Thus, for developing the present review, the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) [39] guidelines were followed [40]. The PRISMA method is an evidence-based minimum set consisting of a 27-item checklist and revised flow diagrams for original and updated reviews [41]. This methodology has been recognized as a powerful tool that contributes to the quality assurance of the process, its reproducibility, and reporting and provides a flow chart showing the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion processes for analyzing a given research topic [42].

The data were collected during six months, from November 2023 until April 2024. This review consists of four consecutive stages following the PRISMA reporting framework. At the initial step, two databases (i.e., Elsevier's Scopus and Clarivate's Web of Science [WoS]) were chosen to investigate the topics. These databases are widely recognized for their substantial corpus of high-quality, peer-reviewed scholarly publications and their ability to index the largest and most multidisciplinary collection of academic papers [43,44]. While this approach ensured a consistent and reliable dataset, the exclusion of other scientific databases, and the decision not to include books or book chapters, may have narrowed the scope of the reviewed literature. Future studies could address this limitation by incorporating additional databases and sources to capture a broader range of studies on rural place branding.

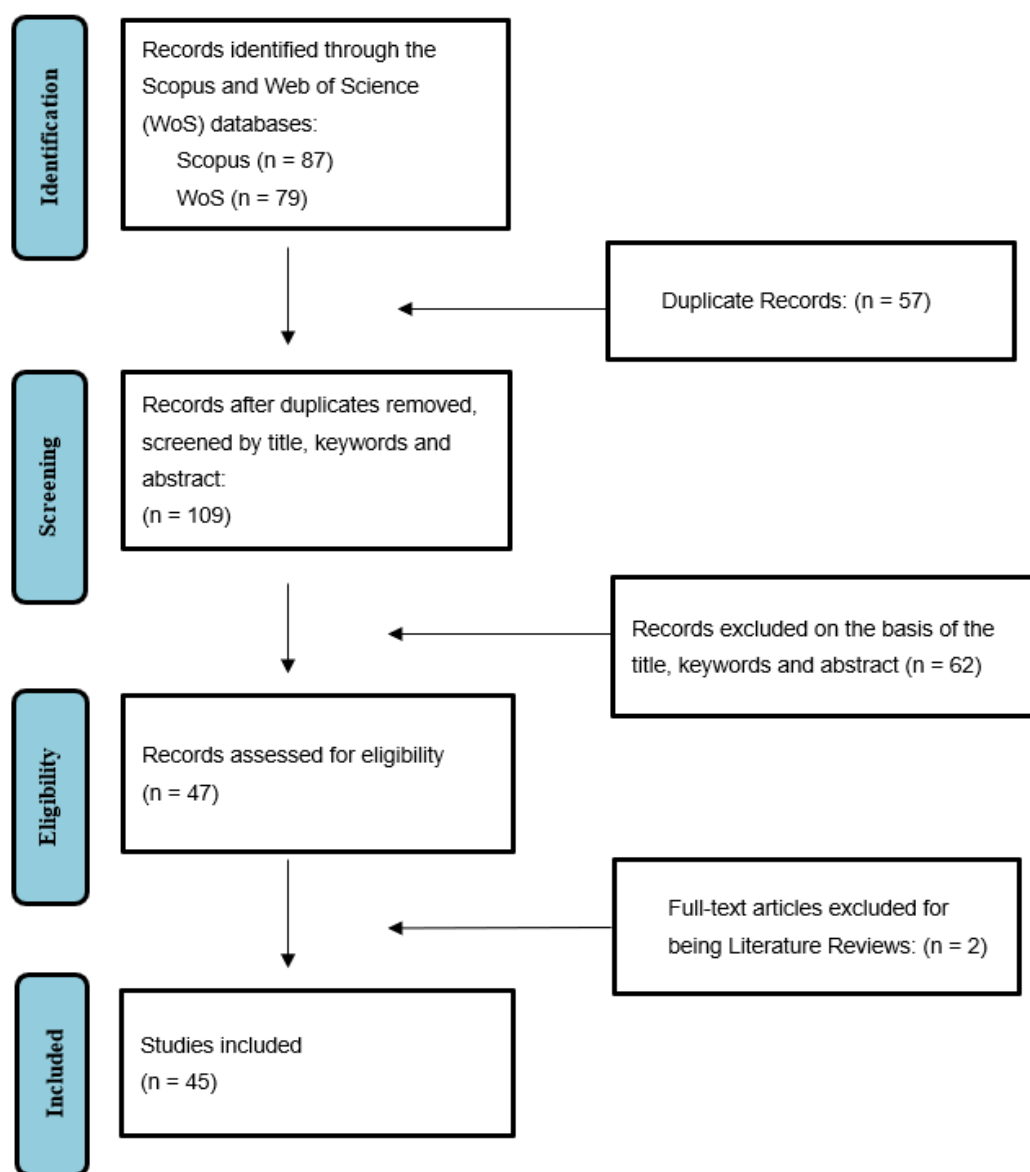
The keywords used for the search strings were "Place Bran\*" and "Rural" or "Agricultur\*" or "Rural Bran\*". Moreover, the search was restricted to only English-language documents. The final search strings were conducted before 18 April 2024, along with the number of results from the databases, are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Databases and terms used in this study and number of results obtained (Source: authors' elaboration).

Database	Search string	Articles	Unique articles
SCOPUS	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("PLACE BRAN*" AND ("RURAL" OR "AGRIC*")) OR "RURAL BRAN*") AND (LIMIT-TO(LANGUAGE, "English"))	87	109
WoS	TS = (("PLACE BRAN*" AND ("RURAL" OR "AGRIC*")) OR "RURAL BRAN*") AND English (Languages)	79	

The search conducted using Scopus and Web of Science identified 166 articles in total. After excluding 57 duplicates, 109 articles were left for screening. Reviewing the abstracts, 62 articles were deemed unsuitable due to being books, book chapters, conference papers, or having irrelevant content. The initial screening left 47 eligible academic articles. However, two were excluded from the final list as they were literature reviews, which were analyzed in the introduction and compared to the current paper in the discussion and conclusions sections. The final list of peer-reviewed research articles included in this study can be found in Appendix A. Figure 1 shows the four main

steps and both inclusion and exclusion criteria for literature records based on the PRISMA flow diagram.



**Figure 1.** PRISMA flow diagram (Source: authors' elaboration).

The selected research articles were organized into a spreadsheet containing all the necessary information to address the research questions. Data extracted from the articles and reported in the table are: (1) authors, (2) title, (3) journal, (4) year, (5) country/countries, (6) methodology, (7) main topics, (8) abstract and keywords, and (9) variables identified. The strategy simplified the analysis, and the dataset was managed more effectively thanks to the assembled table.

Based on the bibliographic data collected from the research databases, we studied the patterns and frequency of keywords that appear together in the literature, performing a bibliographic analysis of keywords co-occurrence. This technique is frequently applied in bibliometric research to map the structure of a research field and determine the linkages between various themes. It can reveal details

about the intellectual framework and thematic development of a field of research [45–47]. We used the open-source bibliometric analysis software VOSviewer (Visualizing Scientific Landscapes) to visualize the results [48–51]. After analyzing the input file and creating a network map, we used the functions offered by this software for exploring and visualizing the map (i.e., network visualization, overlay visualization, and density visualization) [52].

## 4. Results

Seven categories were identified based on the main topic of investigation. Table 2 displays information on the main focus topics in rural place branding, their frequency rates, and corresponding article ID numbers (refer to Table A1). Tourism emerged as the most frequently researched area, with a frequency rate of 14. Additionally, we found that the most salient categories were rural identity, rural and regional development, and sustainable development.

**Table 2.** Main topic investigated (Source: authors' elaboration).

Main topic	Frequency	ID number of the article
Tourism	14	(1, 7, 10, 15, 16, 19, 23, 24, 28, 32, 33, 38, 39, 45)
Rural identity	13	(1, 3, 7, 10, 13, 14, 16, 17, 20, 21, 24, 25, 40)
Rural & regional development	12	(4, 5, 6, 11, 14, 21, 22, 23, 36, 37, 38, 41)
Sustainability	8	(2, 3, 6, 22, 23, 25, 35, 36)
Food and gastronomy	8	(12, 15, 19, 22, 29, 34, 36, 44)
Stakeholders' involvement	7	(7, 11, 16, 19, 20, 41, 42)
Landscape	7	(5, 8, 9, 14, 20, 24, 40)

### 4.1. Tourism

The relationship between tourism and rural place branding is intricately connected [53–55], emphasizing the importance of aligning a destination's brand attributes with its target audience's preferences and emotional connections to establish a compelling identity [56]. In other words, rural areas strategically leverage their local resources to attract visitors, showcasing their cultural heritage and fostering economic opportunities through initiatives [37,57]. By creating a strong brand image [57], rural areas can differentiate themselves in a competitive market and foster a sense of place that resonates with residents and tourists [56,58]. At the same time, this connection is also crucial for sustaining rural communities and preserving the authenticity of traditions and landscapes [59].

Applying effective tourism strategies stimulates economic development and enhances the overall brand identity and appeal of rural destinations, contributing to their long-term sustainability and growth [18,37]. This strategic approach ultimately enhances the attractiveness and competitiveness of the tourism industry [60].

### 4.2. Rural identity

When aligning branding efforts with cultural identity, rural places can develop compelling and authentic brand images [61,62]. This approach strengthens the connection between the place and its residents and appeals to visitors. The involvement of key stakeholders, such as artists and artisans, in

rural branding further contributes to the authenticity and charm of rural destinations, making them more appealing to tourists [18].

Understanding and leveraging the socio-cultural meanings embedded in rural identity can attract new populations and ensure long-term survival [62,63]. Incorporating residents in the branding process is essential for maintaining authenticity, promoting democratic participation, and driving social change [64].

Authenticity is crucial in rural place branding, as it shapes the narrative of a place brand and builds relationships with target audiences [65], leading to increased tourism, economic growth, and community engagement [66,67].

#### *4.3. Rural and regional development*

Rural and regional development initiatives increasingly rely on cultural heritage preservation and place branding to revitalize rural areas [59]. Consequently, the synergy between the conservation of cultural heritage and place branding can lead to sustainable growth and increased social acceptability in rural regions [68]. Promoting sustainable regional development in rural areas involves identifying and leveraging the unique assets and characteristics of the region, such as history, cultural heritage, agri-food products, and tourism [69].

Moreover, place branding as an approach stimulates rural development [30]. Branding strategies highlighting territorial assets are based on distinctive identities and values [70,71], and it is also essential for shaping economic and social prospects, thereby playing a significant role in helping rural regions stand out, attract investments, and promote local products and tourism [72].

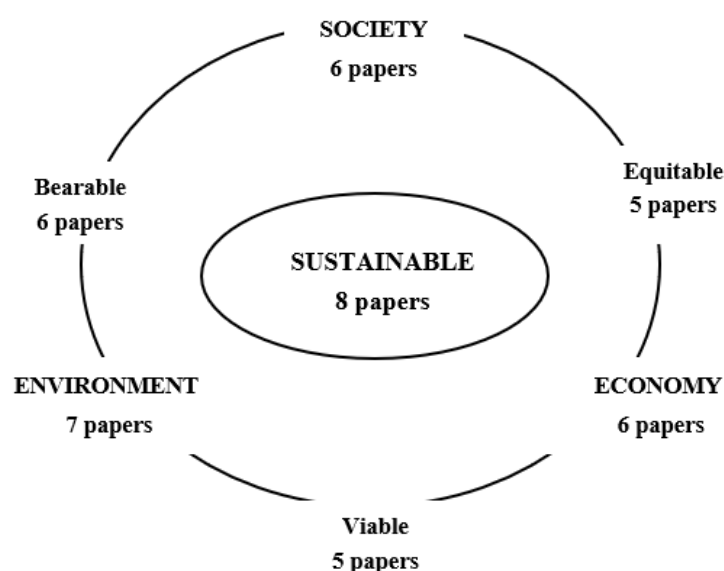
#### *4.4. Sustainability*

The ability to meet present requirements without sacrificing the potential of future generations to meet their own needs is known as sustainability. It is the capacity to maintain or improve favorable conditions over an extended period [73]. Rural place branding strategies aim to value-enhance local assets, use resources sustainably, and highlight unique qualities for sustainable development. This involves keeping benefits local, generating jobs, and promoting community cooperation and growth [70].

Three primary components are included in the concept of sustainability: environmental, economic, and social [74]. While social sustainability prioritizes equality and community well-being, environmental sustainability focuses on protecting ecosystems and natural resources, and economic sustainability entails using products and services that satisfy fundamental needs while consuming the fewest resources possible [75]. The convergence of the dimensions establishes the criteria for development that can be characterized as viable (i.e., environment and economic), equitable (i.e., social and economic), and bearable (i.e., environment and social). Although these dimensions may appear to be initial considerations, they are crucial and adequate for effectively implementing a widely accepted approach to sustainability [76]. The link between sustainability and place branding emphasizes preserving authenticity, identity, and cultural heritage for lasting environmental and economic viability [65]. Integrating sustainability into rural place branding not only boosts the local economy but also nurtures community pride, leading to positive social sustainability outcomes [77].



Among the literature reviewed, only a few articles touched on the dimensions of sustainability. Out of 45 papers reviewed, 17.7% (8 papers) addressed the environmental, economic, and social dimensions of sustainability to some extent [70,72,77,78]. Specifically, 11.1% (5 papers) touched on the socio-economic (equitable) and environment-economy (viable) sub-dimensions, while 13.3% (6 papers) focused on the socio-environmental (bearable) aspects. Additionally, 15.5% (7 papers) emphasized the environmental dimension alone, and 13.3% (6 papers) considered the economic and social dimensions separately (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** The coverage of the sustainability dimensions in the selected papers (Source: authors' elaboration).

#### 4.5. Food and gastronomy

The connection between regional agri-food products, gastronomy, and place branding is essential in forming a place's social and gastronomic particularities, making them key factors in the tourist experience and the overall tourism system [69]. Through place branding, rural communities can promote their culinary offerings and culturally embedded food products that reflect the essence of the area as a way to attract visitors and boost economic development [70,79,80].

The valorization of specific rural food products, such as traditional recipes and local specialties, contributes to creating a unique regional identity. Place branding strategies often focus on promoting the cultural and historical significance of local food, linking it to the story of the region [58,70,81,82].

#### 4.6. Stakeholders' involvement

Stakeholders play a crucial role in rural place branding by actively participating in the branding process [18,83]. Particularly, community organizations [84], local businesses, and government agencies are essential in shaping the identity and narrative of rural areas for competitive advantage. At the same time, collaboration between the public and private sectors leads to authentic brands that


reflect cultural and economic aspects, ultimately boosting tourism. This diverse participation, along with trust and reciprocity, brings a range of perspectives and expertise to branding efforts, enabling the creation of comprehensive and inclusive strategies [58,85]. Overall, stakeholder collaboration and alignment are fundamental in navigating the complexities of rural place branding and achieving sustainable development outcomes [86].

#### 4.7. Landscape

Successful place branding in rural areas requires collaboration between stakeholders to leverage the unique features of the landscape [17]. Landscape branding is a powerful tool for crafting brand messages that resonate with audiences [87]. This highlights people's emotional attachment to locations and how this influences destination image [85]. Agriculture plays a crucial role in shaping landscapes and creating authentic and sustainable identities [16,68]. Overall, the importance of leveraging landscapes in rural place branding to create distinctive and memorable visitor experiences ultimately strengthens the regional visitor economy [56].

We conducted a bibliometric analysis based on the co-occurrences of words in the title, abstract, and keywords from the articles included in the final selection. Frequently appearing words were collected in text document format, and the VOSviewer program was used to visualize the analysis results.

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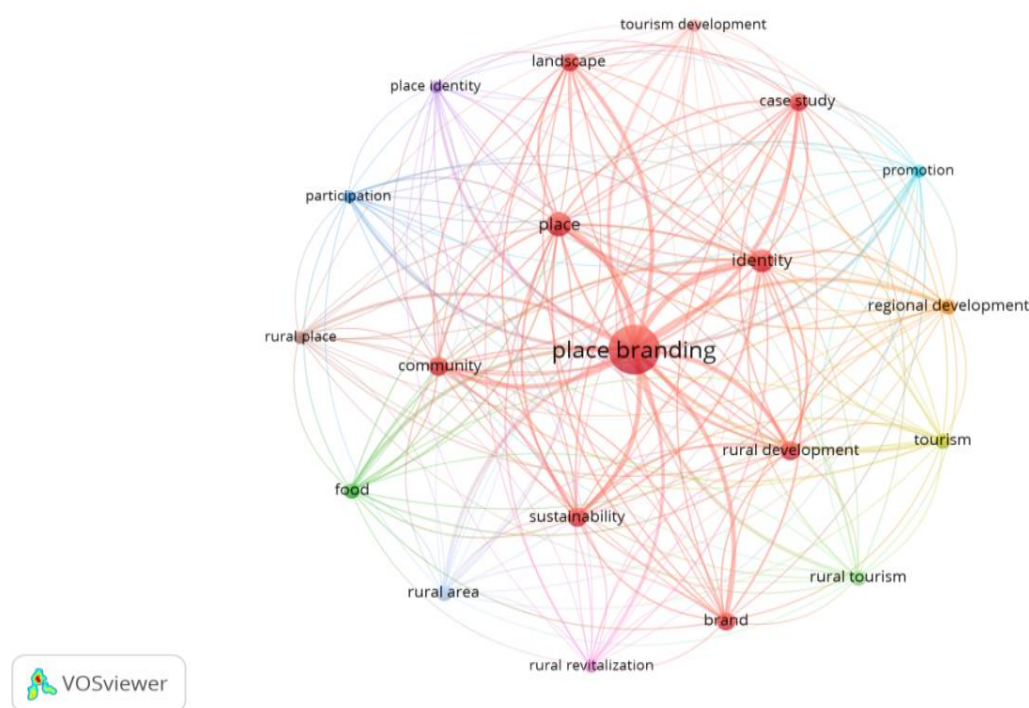
 **Verify selected terms**

Selected	Term	Occurrences	Relevance ▼
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	place branding	39	6.66
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	place	10	1.14
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	identity	9	1.03
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	community	6	0.77
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	rural development	6	0.77
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	sustainability	6	0.77
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	brand	5	0.70
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	case study	5	0.70
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	landscape	5	0.70
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	food	4	0.64
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	rural tourism	4	0.64
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	tourism	4	0.64
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	regional development	4	0.64
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	rural area	4	0.64
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	participation	3	0.59
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	tourism development	3	0.59
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	place identity	3	0.59
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	promotion	3	0.59
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	rural place	3	0.59
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	rural revitalization	3	0.59

**Figure 3.** The relevance score of the bibliometric analysis of the themes (Source: authors' elaboration).

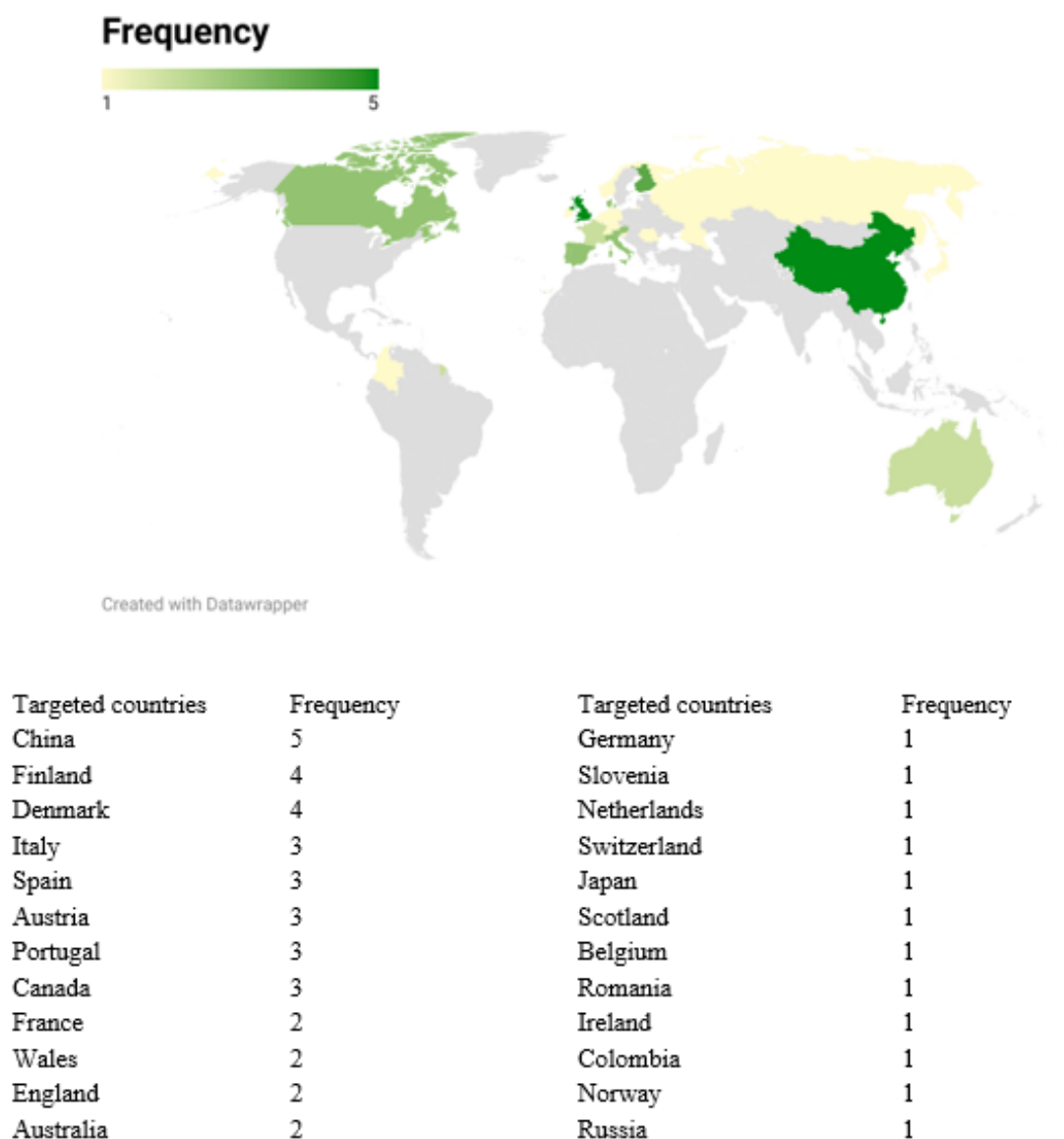
At the initial stage, "a map based on text data" was selected as the data type and "read data from VOSViewer files" as the data source. Then, the full counting methods, and the second level of the threshold were considered appropriate. Based on this, the relevance score was calculated. The most frequently occurring terms with high relevance were "place branding", "place", "identity", "community", and "rural development" (see Figure 3).

Figure 4 illustrates the bibliometric theme analysis in network visualization and frequently found words.



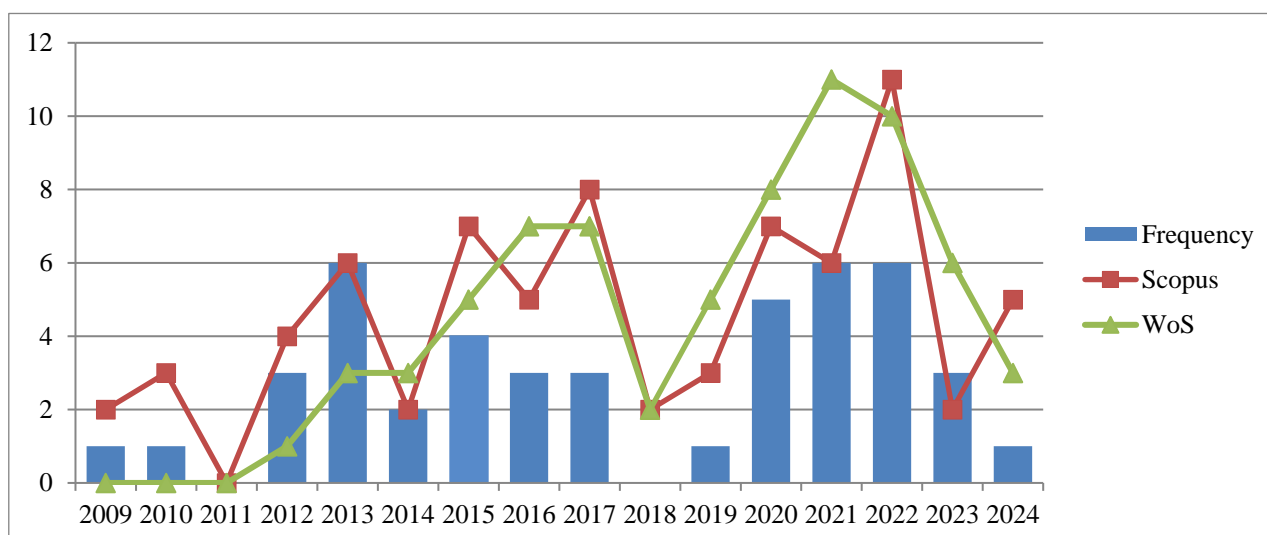
**Figure 4.** The co-occurrences map of bibliometric analysis of the themes (Source: authors' elaboration).

Figure 5 below represents the list of target countries where research on rural community branding initiatives was conducted. The color contrast on the map provides information about the intensity of research in these countries. Overall, the highest frequency of research in this area was observed in China and the UK (specifically, England, Wales, and Scotland). It should be noted that in most countries, issues related to rural place branding have not been considered. By addressing the shortcomings, there is an opportunity for further studying this topic elsewhere.



**Figure 5.** Worldwide distribution of the selected articles on rural place branding (Source: authors' elaboration).

Considering the issue of the number of studies conducted, it should be noted that, in general, there is a positive trend and the number of articles in scientific journals has increased. Figure 6 below displays a bar chart of the selected articles (see Table A1), representing the years of publishing on the horizontal line and the frequency level on the vertical axis, while the accompanying line graphs provide information on the changing dynamics of the general number of published papers in the Scopus and WoS databases during the same period. This dual representation allows for a comparative analysis of the focus on rural place branding in relation to the broader context of overall publication trends on this topic within these databases.



**Figure 6.** Number of selected articles on rural place branding by publication year (Source: authors' elaboration).

An extensive number of studies examined employed qualitative research methods (31 papers), with a smaller number relying on quantitative analysis methods (6 articles). Four articles utilized a mixed-methods approach, and four were case studies without a specific methodology. The frequently used research methods were case studies, interviews, documentary analysis, and focus groups. Various data collection techniques, such as observation and surveys, were repeatedly utilized, as depicted in Table 3.

**Table 3** Commonly used research and data collection methods in papers on rural place branding (Source: authors' elaboration).

Research methods	Frequency	Data collection	Frequency
Case studies	27		
Interviews	24	Observation	7
Documentary analysis	5	Survey	5
Focus group	5		

## 5. Conceptual framework for rural place branding

The conceptual framework explored in this research examines the key factors that shape the branding and development of rural areas. The identity and branding of rural places are influenced by regional characteristics, cultural heritage, and unique features that are deeply rooted in the social, structural, and geographic contexts of these communities. Governance structures and policies play a critical role in steering decision-making processes, enabling broader recognition and acceptance of the place brand. Additionally, the diversity of local food and gastronomy serves as an important element in strengthening the appeal of rural areas for both residents and visitors.

Marketing and communication strategies are vital tools for showcasing the distinctive attributes of rural regions. The use of digital platforms and geo-branding techniques, such as cultural events, infrastructure improvements, and collaborative initiatives, helps to amplify the visibility of local

products and natural attractions. A strong and compelling destination image emerges through the thoughtful integration of cultural, historical, and environmental elements. This image is further enhanced when local agro-food products are closely tied to the unique characteristics of their territories and the concept of local terroir. On the other hand, the stakeholder engagement is a cornerstone of this framework, emphasizing the importance of collaboration among various actors and maintaining clear and effective communication. Adopting a participatory approach allows local talents and communities to take an active role in branding and revitalization efforts, fostering leadership and driving community-led development.

This framework also integrates economic, social, and environmental dimensions to support sustainable and well-rounded growth. On the economic front, globalization and migration provide opportunities for entrepreneurship, job creation, and business growth. The export of agricultural products links local economies to international markets, promoting resilience and diversification. Social cohesion and inclusion are reinforced by preserving local culture, traditions, and heritage, which strengthen community pride and improve residents' overall well-being. These efforts also create opportunities for cultural exchange and mutual understanding. From an environmental perspective, sustainable resource use and the preservation of rural landscapes are prioritized. Eco-tourism and sustainable farming practices contribute to conservation efforts and help to raise environmental awareness, ensuring that development remains environmentally responsible.

Ultimately, tourism plays a multifaceted role, with improved infrastructure, such as railways, roads, and motorways, enhancing accessibility for visitors. By aligning place branding with the broader geographical scope of tourism branding, a cohesive and appealing destination image is created. The visitor experience is further enriched through the availability of services, traditional foods, cultural events, and welcoming communities. Together, these elements drive socio-economic development while preserving cultural heritage and promoting environmental sustainability.

Table 4 outlines a conceptual framework for analyzing rural place branding factors. For each dependent variable, the spreadsheet presents a robust set of independent variables aligned with the academic literature, which are presented in an additional column along with the article number supporting each variable (see Table A1 for details). This framework provides a structured approach to understanding and enhancing the branding and development of rural areas, ultimately contributing to sustainable growth and community empowerment.

**Table 4** Conceptual frameworks used in the previous literature (Source: authors' elaboration).

Dependent variables	Relationship with independent variables	ID number of the article
Place identity and branding	Shaped by regional characteristics and distinctive features	(4, 14)
	Embedded within social, structural, and geographic context	(22)
	Governance structures and policies guiding decision-making	(6, 22, 30)
	Level of broader recognition and acceptance of the place brand	(37)
	Quality, diversity, and uniqueness of local food and gastronomy	(44)
Destination Image	Sense of place, including cultural, historical, and environmental elements	(24, 40)
	Leveraging physical, symbolic, and emotional assets to create a distinct and appealing image for visitors and residents	(10, 27)
	Revaluation of local agro-foods linked to specific territories and their association with the local terroir	(44)

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Dependent variables	Relationship with Independent Variables	ID Number of the article
Economic development	Increased globalization and long-distance migration Economic growth indicators, such as entrepreneurship, job creation, and business development	(13, 23, 25) (26, 36, 40)
Social cohesion and inclusion	Agricultural product export in promoting rural development Preservation and promotion of local culture, traditions and heritage Increased community pride and social cohesion among residents Improved quality of life and well-being for rural residents	(43) (22, 23) (18, 26) (35)
Environmental outcomes	Increased opportunities for cultural exchange and understanding Sustainable use of natural resources and preservation of rural landscapes Promotion of eco-tourism and sustainable agriculture Increased awareness and support for environmental conservation efforts	(20) (20, 23, 25) (3, 28) (35, 36)
Stakeholder engagement	Engagement and collaboration of multiple actors Clarity and coherence of communication among stakeholders Community-based participatory process Leadership and participation of local talent contributing to branding and revitalization	(8, 31, 42, 44) (15, 16) (14, 41) (40)
Authenticity & brand loyalty	Improved coherence level between lived experiences and expectations Shaped by the cultural identity, values, and social interactions and the genuineness/uniqueness of the rural area's cultural heritage Intangible elements such as emotions, sensory satisfaction, and cultural experiences	(25) (20) (10)
Marketing and communication channels	Utilizing digital marketing channels and platforms to promote a rural area's unique features and attract visitors Implementing marketing and branding initiatives that enhance local produce offerings and promote natural attractions Geo-branding strategies, including cultural activities, events, infrastructure development, and cooperation measures	(20, 40) (28, 30) (16)
Tourism impacts	Construction of railways, roads, and motorway access Alignment and the impact of the place brand and the geographical scope of the tourist brand Assortment of services, access, information availability, traditional food, cultural activities, and community openness	(29) (6) (12, 16, 39)

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

The study aimed to provide an overview of the themes and aspects of rural branding. A systematic literature review approach was used to examine the various topics and issues related to rural place branding explored in existing research.

When formulating research questions, the research process identified seven key themes closely linked to rural place branding. Bibliographic analyses were conducted as part of this process. The study also focused on aspects such as distribution mapping, the frequency of articles published each year, the comprehensive framework for analyzing the key factors, and the prevalent research and data collection methods utilized.

The previous literature reviews on F&G for sustainable territorial development [20] and NWFPs in sustainable tourism via place marketing [21] have highlighted their potential for sustainability. The

reviews contribute to understanding sustainable development in the areas and guide future research and practice. Meanwhile, compared to the abovementioned literature reviews in the relevant field, this paper is one of the first systematic reviews focused solely on rural place branding, providing a valuable resource for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers interested in enhancing the competitiveness and attractiveness of rural areas.

The literature review revealed that only a limited number of articles addressed the dimensions of sustainability in rural place branding, with a focus on environmental, economic, and social aspects. Tourism emerged as the most researched direction in this topic, emphasizing the importance of aligning destination brand attributes with audience preferences. Stakeholders' involvement and leveraging landscapes were identified as crucial elements in successful rural place branding strategies [33,34]. A bibliometric analysis using the Scopus and Web of Science databases was conducted to further explore the relationships between these themes. This analysis identified co-occurrences of network analysis, highlighting the close relationships between place branding, identity, and rural development. Our analysis of selected articles revealed that most studies were based on research studies, with 24 countries represented. Although the number of publications was limited in the initial years, there has been a recent positive trend towards increased output. The most commonly used research methods were case studies and interviews, while observation was the most preferred method for data collection. Moreover, the differences between urban and rural place branding, as discussed in the theoretical framework section, underscore the need for strategies tailored to the distinct characteristics of each environment. By analyzing these distinctions, this study establishes a foundation for developing a conceptual framework that addresses the unique needs and opportunities of rural branding. This framework effectively combines various dependent and independent variables that influence rural branding development. By recognizing the interconnections among these factors, stakeholders can develop more impactful branding strategies that resonate with both local communities and external audiences.

The publications reviewed suggest that incorporating sustainability into rural place branding can boost the local economy and cultivate community pride along with social sustainability outcomes. The synergy between cultural heritage preservation, stakeholder collaboration, and landscape branding significantly creates authentic and memorable rural destinations. By promoting regional agri-food products and gastronomy, rural areas can attract visitors, boost economic development, and establish a unique regional identity, contributing to sustainable growth in rural regions.

Since this systematic review is based on peer-reviewed publications published in English and in indexed journals, the analyses refer only to the studies focused on a limited set of countries. Thus, there is significant potential for additional investigation in other countries, including the exploration of grey literature and materials published in different languages. Further research is needed to explore the intricate connection between tourism and rural branding, aiming to drive economic growth while preserving cultural heritage. For example, a study could explore how rural communities can leverage their unique cultural heritage to attract tourists while preserving their cultural identity. Additionally, exploring the dimensions of sustainability in rural areas is imperative to enhance environmental, economic, and social well-being. Understanding the pivotal role of stakeholders in shaping authentic rural identities and promoting community engagement is essential for achieving sustainable development outcomes. By building on the findings of this study, we hope to contribute to the ongoing conversation about rural place branding and its potential to drive sustainable development in rural areas.



## Author contributions

The authors, F.J. and M.C. contributed substantially to the conception, acquisition, analysis, data interpretation, paper writing and revision. In particular: Conceptualization: F.J. and M.C.; Validation: M.C.; Formal analysis: F.J.; Investigation: F.J.; Preparation of the original draft: F.J.; Revision and editing of the draft: F.J. and M.C.; Visualization, F.J.; Supervision: M.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

## Use of AI tools declaration

The authors declare that they have not used artificial intelligence tools in the creation of this article.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Articles included in the final selection.

ID No.	Authors	Research and Data Collection Methods	Countries
1	Jones <i>et al.</i> , 2009	Case Studies	Japan
2	Ryan and Mizerski, 2010	Case Studies; In-depth Interviews	Australia
3	Jansson, 2012	Interviews; Casual discussions; Review of Newspaper Articles	Finland
4	Horlings, 2012	Derived Data from Literature and Various Documents; Interviews	Netherlands
5	Mettepenningen <i>et al.</i> , 2012	Case Studies; Semi-structured Interviews	Belgium
6	Domínguez García <i>et al.</i> , 2013	Case Studies; Direct Observations; Analysis of Written Documents; Interviews	Portugal, Spain
7	Mittilä and Lepistö, 2013	Case Studies; Interviews; Secondary Data	Finland
8	Vuorinen and Vos, 2013	Focus Group; Interviews	Finland
9	Tobias and Wahl, 2013	Case Studies; Survey; Semi-structured Interviews	Switzerland

*Continued on the next page*

ID No.	Authors	Research and Data Collection Methods	Countries
10	Kavoura and Bitsani, 2013	Case Studies; Classical Thematic Analysis	Austria
11	Cavicchi, Rinaldi and Corsi, 2013	Case Studies	Italy
12	Blichfeldt and Halkier, 2014	Case Studies	Denmark
13	McManus and Connell, 2014	Survey; In-depth Interviews; Observation and Discussions	Australia
14	de San Eugenio-Vela and Barniol-Carcasona, 2015	Case Studies; Documentary Source Analysis; Focus Group	Spain
15	Lee, Wall and Kovacs, 2015	Case Studies; Interviews	Canada
16	Ilieş and Ilieş, 2015	Knowledge and Network Mapping; Observation and Cross-Analysis	Romania
17	Cleave and Arku, 2015	Case studies; Statistical Analysis	Canada
18	Wachter and Wyrzens, 2016	Document Analyses; Interviews; Survey	Austria
19	Lee <i>et al.</i> , 2016	Case Studies; Fieldwork; Interviews	Canada
20	Muñiz Martínez, 2016	Case Studies; Fieldwork	Colombia
21	Botschen, Promberger and Bernhart, 2017	Case Studies; Longitudinal research	Austria
22	Donner <i>et al.</i> , 2017	Collection of Secondary Data; Primary Data Collection (Semi-structured Interviews)	France, Ireland, Germany
23	Ducros, 2017	On-site Observations; Interviews	France
24	Jarratt <i>et al.</i> , 2019	Case Studies; Interviews	England, Wales
25	Basile and Cavallo, 2020	Conceptual Framework	Italy
26	Aasetre, Carlsson and Haugum, 2020	Case Studies; Snowball Method; Interviews	Norway
27	Clark and Rice, 2020	Ethnographic fieldwork	Scotland
28	Vegnuti, 2020	Case Studies	Italy
29	Bowen and Bennett, 2020	Focus Group; Reflective Video Diaries; Survey	Wales
30	Gulisova, Horbel and Noe, 2021b	Exploratory Research	Denmark
31	Gulisova, 2021	Case Studies; Meta-synthesis Exploratory Research	—
32	Sang, 2021	Case Studies; Multi-method Ethnographic Fieldwork; Field Observation; In-depth Interviews	China
33	Zhao <i>et al.</i> , 2021	Case Studies; Semantic Analysis; Frequency Statistics	China
34	Ruban and Ermolaev, 2021	Case Studies; Content analysis	Russia
35	Gulisova, Horbel and Noe, 2021a	Case Studies; Snowball Sampling; Semi-structured Interviews	Denmark

*Continued on the next page*

ID No.	Authors	Research and Data Collection Methods	Countries
36	Lopes, Leitão and Rengifo-Gallego, 2022	Survey; Discrete-choice Model (DCM) Specifications	Portugal
37	Logar, 2022	Case Studies; Analysis of Documents; Semi-structured Interviews; Focus Group	Slovenia
38	Moreno-Fernandez and Castelo-Branco, 2022	Interviews; Personal Communications	Portugal
39	Senyao and Ha, 2022	Case Studies; Preliminary Analysis; Online Data Collection; Face-to-face Interviews; Data Analysis	China
40	Shen and Chou, 2022	In-depth Interviews; Fieldwork; Participatory Observation; Thematic Analysis	China
41	Bisani, Daye and Mortimer, 2022	Case Studies; Semi-structured Interviews; Focus Group	England
42	Gulisova, Horbel and Bjørnshave Noe, 2023	Exploratory - Snowball Sampling; Semi-structured Interviews	Denmark
43	Zhang <i>et al.</i> , 2023	Statistical Analysis	China
44	Muñiz-Martinez and Florek, 2023	Case Studies; Observation; Mapping	Spain
45	Inkinen <i>et al.</i> , 2024	Statistical Analysis	Finland

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