

PARTICIPATORY DIGITAL BRANDING IN YOUTH-DRIVEN GEOTOURISM: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND SUSTAINABLE GEOSITE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: Youth-driven geotourism increasingly relies on digital branding to attract visitors, engage local communities, and support sustainable geosite development, yet existing research remains fragmented and rarely integrates these dimensions in a single framework. This study therefore aims to systematically map how digital branding has been used in youth-driven geotourism and to clarify its contribution to community participation and sustainable geosite development. A combined systematic literature review and bibliometric analysis was conducted on 133 Scopus indexed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025. The review followed PRISMA 2020 guidelines and employed Biblioshiny and VOSviewer to examine annual scientific production, leading sources, most cited documents, keyword co occurrence networks, thematic clusters, and country collaboration patterns. The results show a sharp increase in publications after 2020, with Spain, China, and Indonesia emerging as leading contributors and Sustainability (Switzerland) as the most influential outlet. Keyword and thematic analyses reveal four core clusters that link digital branding with sustainability, social media engagement, MSMEs, youth entrepreneurship, and regional geotourism contexts. These patterns indicate a shift from top down destination branding toward more participatory and community centred approaches. The findings further highlight persistent disparities between the Global North and the Global South, particularly related to digital readiness and stakeholder integration. The interpretation of these trends reinforces the Participatory Branding Paradigm, which reframes digital branding as a dynamic and participatory capability that empowers youth entrepreneurs, strengthens community engagement, and enhances the resilience and sustainability of geotourism destinations and geoheritage sites.

Keywords: digital branding, youth-driven geotourism, community engagement, geosite sustainability, participatory tourism, social media engagement, bibliometric analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Youth are increasingly recognised as transformative agents in geotourism development, contributing creativity, digital innovation, and participatory energy to the interpretation of geoheritage sites (Szymkowiak et al., 2021). Geotourism inherently depends on geoheritage interpretation, making digital branding critical to link youth creativity with conservation-driven destination positioning. Their involvement as entrepreneurs, student founders, and social media influencers demonstrates the growing intersection between digital culture and sustainable tourism.

In advanced economies, supportive infrastructure, innovation policies, and technology ecosystems have facilitated the emergence of youth-led tourism start-ups (Wasilczuk & Karry, 2022). In contrast, developing countries often rely on community-driven initiatives and local creativity that operate under limited financial and digital resources (Tleuberdinova et al., 2025). These conditions highlight the importance of youth-led digital branding strategies that can bridge global innovation with local sustainability and heritage protection priorities (Garanti et al., 2024; Tran & Rudolf, 2022).

Recent global disruptions, including the COVID-19 pandemic, economic instability, and climate change, have reshaped visitor behaviour, destination management, and governance structures within geotourism (Chakravarty et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2025). During the pandemic, digitalisation accelerated rapidly, but this also exposed persistent divides between the Global North and the Global South in terms of digital readiness, technical skills, and infrastructure (El Archi et al., 2023). Many community-based tourism enterprises continue to face challenges related to digital literacy, managerial competence, and market access (Issakov et al., 2023). Although digital branding has been identified as a resilience tool to enhance visibility and competitiveness, its contribution to geoheritage conservation, geosite branding, and sustainable destination governance remains insufficiently explored, particularly from a participatory perspective (Nematpour et al., 2024).

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Digital branding in geotourism functions not only as a marketing instrument but also as a mechanism for building trust, authenticity, and shared narratives among stakeholders (Tran & Rudolf, 2022; Zins & Abbas Adamu, 2024). Through heritage storytelling and social media co-creation, both visitors and local residents act as curators of geosite identity (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020; Zhao & Agyeiwaah, 2024). However, the literature reveals enduring tensions between official destination management organisations and community narratives, often resulting in fragmented or top-down branding approaches (Cruz-Ruiz et al., 2022; Orts-Cardador et al., 2025).

Developed regions benefit from institutionalised support systems and digital investment (Jebbouri et al., 2023; Luštický & Štumpf, 2021), while developing contexts depend on grassroots initiatives, youth entrepreneurship, and government facilitation (Kubickova & Campbell, 2018; Hay et al., 2022; Hanna et al., 2021). Recent systematic reviews have further intensified the discussion on digitalisation and branding in the tourism sector. A 2025 review on sustainable destination branding highlights how digital transformation technologies, including AI-enabled content systems, are reshaping destination identity and visitor engagement, yet geoheritage and geosite contexts remain largely absent from these frameworks (Alhaddar & Kummitha, 2025). Similarly, a 2025 systematic review of social media marketing strategies in tourism notes that digital engagement practices have become central to competitiveness, although participatory and community-driven branding approaches are still underexplored, particularly in developing regions (Pahor Zvanut & Zabukovec Baruca, 2025). These findings affirm that while digital branding research has expanded significantly in recent years, its application to youth-driven geotourism and geoheritage sustainability remains limited.

Recent research illustrates the growing complexity of digital branding in tourism and geotourism contexts. Rasoolimanesh et al. (2023) examined sustainability indicators within tourism management, while Garanti et al. (2024) analysed sustainable place branding from the perspective of visitor responses. Nematpour et al. (2024) and Chi & Pham (2024) investigated eco-destination image formation and competitiveness, and El Archi et al. (2023) mapped the convergence between digitalisation and sustainable destination management. Despite these contributions, most studies have focused on general tourism branding and have not integrated the geoheritage and geosite contexts where community participation, youth entrepreneurship, and sustainability intersect. This gap is particularly evident in the absence of conceptual frameworks linking digital branding with geotourism resilience and participatory heritage conservation.

A critical review of existing literature reveals several limitations. First, previous reviews have primarily concentrated on consumer behaviour or marketing outcomes rather than on the socio-institutional processes that support geotourism ecosystems. Second, few studies have addressed how youth-led or community-driven digital strategies contribute to the adaptive capacity of geosites in times of crisis. Third, the majority of studies remain biased toward cases from the Global North, leaving underexplored the perspectives of the Global South, where informal networks and digital entrepreneurship often sustain local tourism operations under resource constraints (Polukhina et al., 2021; Tleuberdinova et al., 2025).

For these reasons, a comprehensive and critical synthesis is needed to clarify how digital branding contributes to participatory geotourism and how research trends have evolved in this emerging field. In comparison with related studies conducted in the past five years, such as Rasoolimanesh et al. (2023) on sustainability indicators, Garanti et al. (2024) on sustainable place branding, Nematpour et al. (2024) on destination competitiveness, El Archi et al. (2023) on digitalisation and sustainability convergence, and O'Connor et al. (2025) on resilience in tourism enterprises, this study offers an integrative approach. It combines youth entrepreneurship, community participation, and digital branding within the geotourism and geoheritage context. By focusing on these intersections, the study responds to the growing call for a more inclusive and participatory approach to tourism research that reflects regional diversity and supports global sustainability goals. The aim of this study is to systematically review and map the global literature on digital branding in youth-driven geotourism and to examine its contribution to community participation and sustainable geosite development. Using a combined systematic literature review and bibliometric analysis of 133 Scopus-indexed publications from 2015 to 2025, the study identifies key research trends, conceptual structures, and regional disparities. Furthermore, it introduces the Participatory Branding Paradigm as a theoretical framework that redefines digital branding as a dynamic capability that empowers youth entrepreneurs, strengthens community engagement, and enhances the sustainability of geotourism destinations and geoheritage sites.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a combined Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and bibliometric analysis to examine research on digital branding strategies in youth-driven geotourism and geosite management. The review followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, ensuring transparency across the stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (Page et al. 2021).

Data were retrieved from the Scopus database, which was selected due to its multidisciplinary coverage and extensive use in bibliometric research on tourism and heritage (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). The search focused on four clusters of keywords: digital and place branding, youth-driven entrepreneurship, geotourism and community participation, and sustainability. Boolean operators were applied to capture cross-cutting research topics. The initial search produced 210 documents. After removing duplicates and screening titles and abstracts, 133 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025 were included in the final dataset. These articles explicitly addressed digital branding, youth-driven geotourism or geosites, community participation, and sustainability. Non-journal publications such as conference papers, book chapters, and editorials were excluded. The selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

Bibliometric analysis was conducted using Biblioshiny (RStudio) to examine annual scientific production, influential sources, authorship patterns, and citation performance. VOSviewer was used to visualise co-occurrence networks of keywords, thematic clusters, and international collaboration (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). As the study relied exclusively

on secondary data from published articles, ethical approval was not required. All sources were reviewed and cited in accordance with international academic standards. A limitation of this study is its reliance on a single database (Scopus), which may exclude relevant works indexed elsewhere. In addition, the bibliometric approach provides quantitative insights but does not capture the qualitative depth of community narratives in geotourism branding. Future research is encouraged to integrate multiple databases and complementary qualitative methods to provide a more holistic perspective.

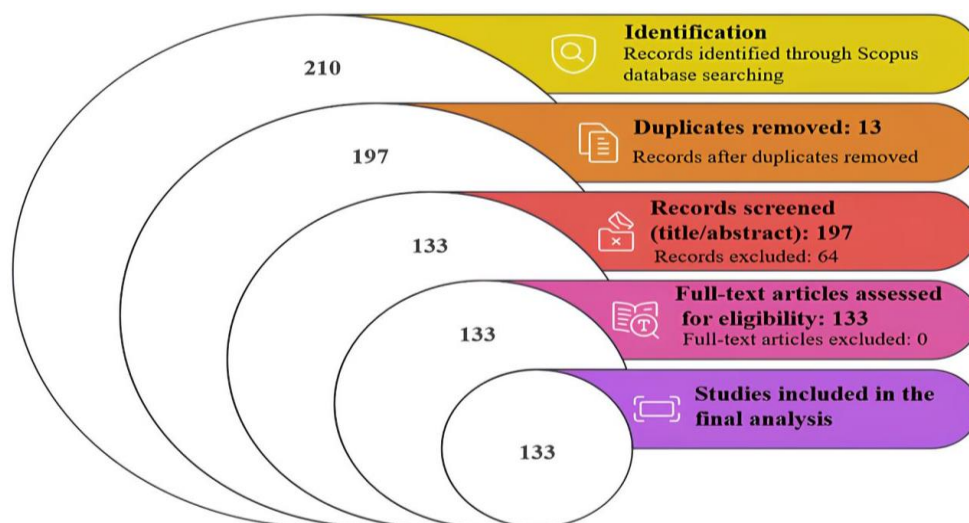


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of article selection (2015-2025)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dataset Overview and Annual Scientific Production

The final dataset comprises 133 Scopus-indexed articles published between 2015 and 2025. Although the review period covered the entire decade, the first relevant publication on digital branding in geotourism appeared in 2020. Research output involves 92 publication sources and 444 authors, averaging 3.5 authors per article, with international collaboration present in nearly 39 per cent of contributions. Each article received on average 13 citations, reflecting the rapid emergence of this field. To enhance the visibility of the dataset summarised in Table 1, Figure 2 presents a graphical representation of annual scientific production for the full publication period (2015-2025). This visualisation was included to provide a clearer understanding of research trends and to support readers in interpreting the temporal evolution of the field. Annual scientific production shows a clear turning point after 2020, with a rapid rise in 2023 and a peak in 2024, when more than 50 articles were published. The slight decline in 2025 is due to incomplete coverage, as data collection ended in September. This trajectory confirms the growing academic and practical importance of digital branding in geotourism, particularly as destinations sought to recover resilience and attract visitors during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The surge of publications also reflects youth and community participation becoming more visible in academic discourse, aligning with global calls for sustainability and inclusive heritage management.

Table 1. Summary of the bibliometric dataset (2015-2025)

Indicator	Value
Publication period	2015–2025
Number of documents	133
Number of publication sources	92
Annual growth rate (%)	2.38
Average document age (years)	1.98
Average citations per article	13.22
Number of authors	444
Average authors per article	3.49
Single-authored documents	10
International collaboration (%)	38.64

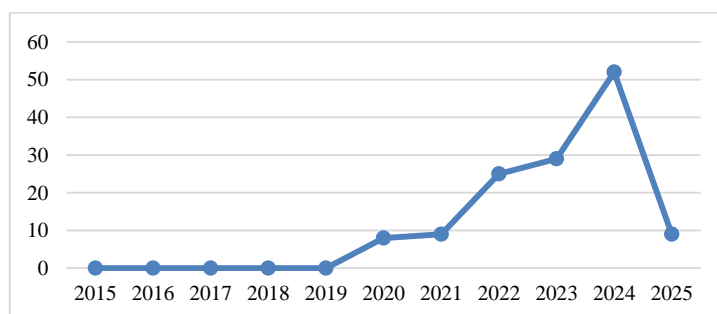


Figure 2. Annual scientific production on digital branding in youth-driven geotourism

Most Relevant Sources

Research on digital branding in youth-driven geotourism is distributed across multidisciplinary journals rather than concentrated in specialised tourism outlets. Sustainability (Switzerland) is the most influential source, contributing 14 articles and accumulating more than 280 citations. It is followed by the Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services (5 articles, 109 citations) and the African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure (4 articles, 37 citations).

Additional contributions from the British Food Journal and the European Journal of Innovation Management demonstrate the field’s cross-sectoral orientation, integrating perspectives from sustainability studies, consumer behaviour, digital innovation, and regional tourism practices.

Table 2. Leading publication sources (2015-2025)

Source	Articles	Total Citations	Key Relevance
Sustainability (Switzerland)	14	280	Sustainability and digital branding strategies
Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	5	109	Consumer behaviour and social media branding
African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure	4	37	Regional tourism and branding practices
British Food Journal	3	68	Branding, consumer perception, sustainability
European Journal of Innovation Management	3	101	Digitalisation and innovation in tourism

As shown in Table 2 and visualised in Figure 3, Sustainability (Switzerland) dominates the publication landscape, reflecting the strong thematic intersection between digital branding, geotourism development, and sustainability agendas. The Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services and the European Journal of Innovation Management highlight the significant roles of consumer behaviour, social media analytics, and digital innovation in shaping research trajectories within this domain. Meanwhile, contributions from the African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure and the British Food Journal underscore the importance of regional contexts, sector-specific insights, and applied perspectives. Collectively, these sources confirm that youth-driven geotourism branding is a multidisciplinary research area, positioned at the crossroads of tourism studies, sustainability research, and digital transformation.

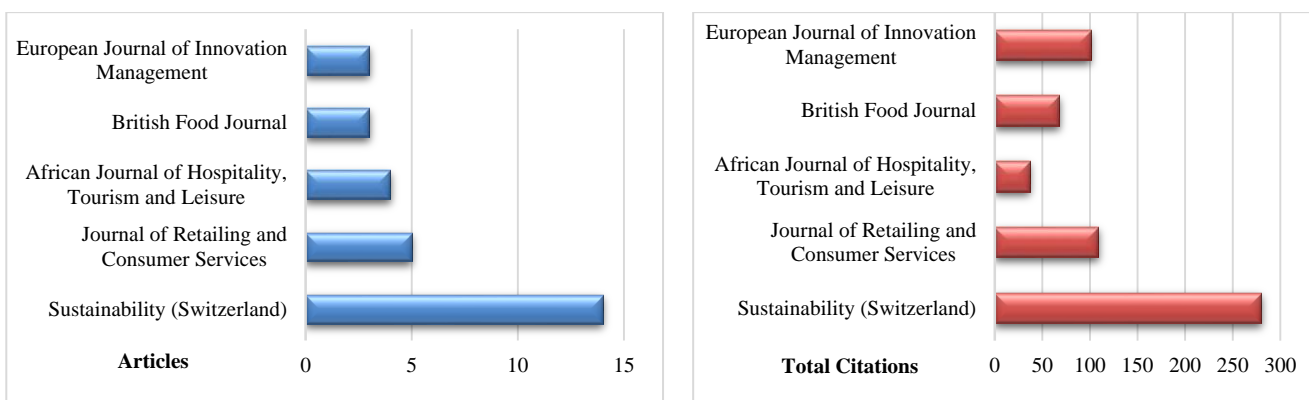


Figure 3. Leading publication sources by number of articles and by total citations

Most Cited Documents

The most influential contributions in this domain are by Ge et al. (2022, 128 citations), Malik et al. (2021, 122 citations), and Obermayer et al. (2022, 95 citations). Two further landmark works include Alford and Jones (2020, Tourism Management) and Calderon-Monge & Ribeiro-Soriano (2024, Review of Managerial Science). Collectively, these studies highlight the intersection of digitalisation, consumer psychology, and sustainability as key drivers of organisational performance.

The most cited documents presented in Table 3 show that foundational contributions to digital branding and youth-driven tourism originate from multidisciplinary outlets. Ge et al. (2022) and Malik et al. (2021) highlight the psychological and sustainability dimensions of digital technologies, while Obermayer et al. (2022) examine the social media dynamics of family-owned firms. Alford & Jones (2020) provide one of the earliest systematic reviews on digital entrepreneurship in tourism, and Calderon-Monge & Ribeiro-Soriano (2024) emphasise the accelerating impact of digitalisation in management research. These documents form the intellectual backbone of contemporary studies in digital branding and youth-driven geotourism.

Table 3. Most cited documents on digital branding in youth-driven geotourism (2015-2025)

Rank	Author(s)	Journal	Total Citations	Key Contribution
1	Ge et al. (2022)	Frontiers in Psychology	128	Women entrepreneurs, digital technologies
2	Malik et al. (2021)	Sustainability	122	CSR, green HRM, sustainability practices
3	Obermayer et al. (2022)	European Management Journal	95	Social media and family business
4	Alford & Jones, (2020)	Tourism Management	83	Digital entrepreneurship in tourism
5	Calderon-Monge & Ribeiro-Soriano, (2024)	Review of Managerial Science	72	Digitalisation in management research

Keyword Co-occurrence Network

The keyword co-occurrence analysis identifies four main clusters that define the structure of research on digital branding in youth-driven geotourism (Figure 4). The first cluster (red) links digital branding, sustainability, and destination development, highlighting the integration of branding strategies with geoheritage conservation.

The second cluster (blue) focuses on social media, consumer behaviour, and geosite image formation, showing how digital platforms influence visitor perceptions and community storytelling. The third cluster (green) reflects pandemic-related themes, particularly MSMEs, youth entrepreneurship, and digital performance, which illustrate how small-scale ventures adapted to crisis conditions through online engagement. The fourth cluster (purple) captures region-specific

and market-based studies, underscoring differences between Global North and Global South contexts. Four clusters are identified: sustainability, social media, MSMEs, and regional contexts. These clusters highlight the central role of social media and MSMEs as bridging nodes that connect sustainability, community participation, and entrepreneurial innovation. The analysis demonstrates that research has evolved beyond treating digital branding as a promotional tool, instead framing it as a strategic mechanism that mobilises youth and communities for resilience and sustainability.

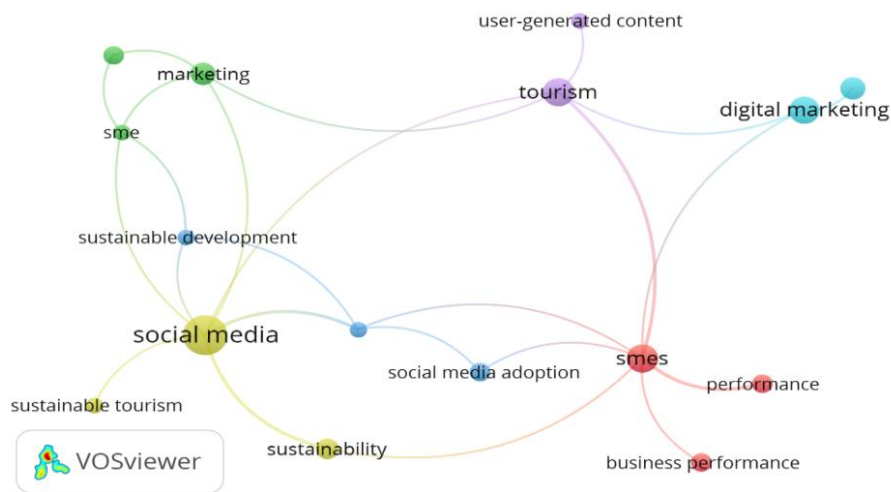


Figure 4. Keyword co-occurrence network in digital branding research on youth-driven geotourism (2015-2025)

This provides conceptual grounding for the Participatory Branding Paradigm, where co-creation, digital storytelling, and contextual sensitivity are increasingly recognised as essential for youth-driven geotourism branding strategies. To further clarify these findings, Table 4 summarises the dominant themes and conceptual focus of each identified research cluster.

Table 4. Research clusters based on keyword co-occurrence analysis (2015-2025)

Cluster	Research Focus
Red	Digital branding, sustainability, and geotourism destination development
Blue	Social media, consumer behaviour, and geosite image formation
Green	Pandemic impact, MSMEs, youth entrepreneurship, and digital performance
Purple	Regional context-based and market-specific studies

Thematic Map

The thematic map based on authors’ keywords identifies four clusters that illustrate the conceptual evolution of digital branding in youth-driven geotourism (Figure 5). Motor themes are centred on SMEs, business performance, and digitalisation, indicating a performance-oriented focus where community-based enterprises act as engines of innovation and participation. Basic themes include social media, sustainability, digital marketing, and sustainable tourism, which provide the conceptual foundation by linking branding with heritage storytelling and conservation goals. Emerging themes such as geotourism, marketing, and user-generated content (UGC) highlight growing interest in youth participation and participatory content creation, while niche themes focus on environmental sustainability, brand equity, and credibility, offering opportunities for specialised research in heritage conservation contexts.

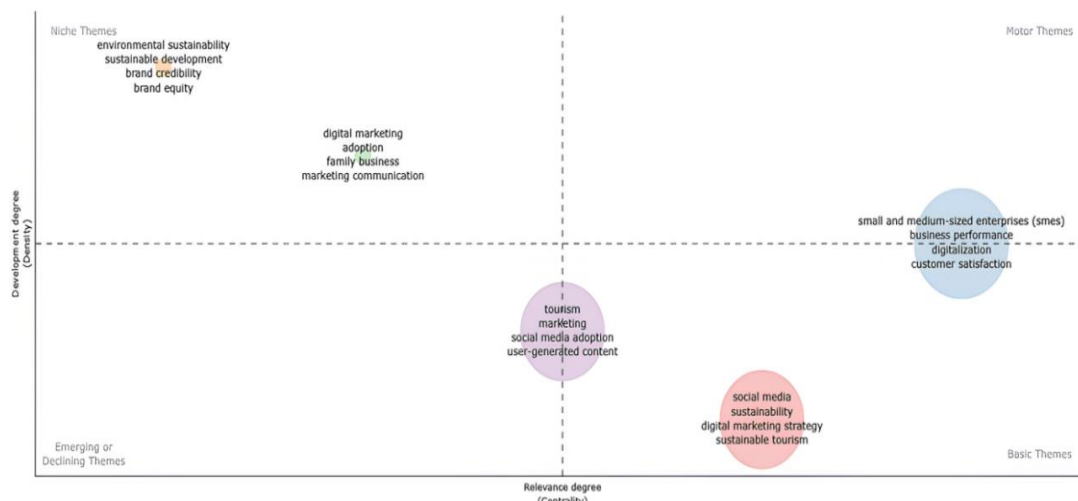


Figure 5. Thematic map of research on digital branding in youth-driven geotourism (2015-2025)

Overall, the thematic analysis demonstrates that digital branding in geotourism has evolved from being a promotional tool to a strategic capability. It enhances SME and community performance through digitalisation, links social engagement with sustainability agendas, and mobilises heritage storytelling and UGC to build trust and resilience. These insights directly support the Participatory Branding Paradigm as a novel framework, integrating youth, community, and sustainability into destination branding and advancing RQ2. To provide a clearer overview of these thematic developments, Table 5 summarises the key characteristics of each thematic cluster and their evolving research orientation.

Table 5. Thematic clusters in digital branding and youth-driven geotourism (2015-2025)

Theme Type	Core Focus
Motor	SMEs, business performance, digitalisation, customer satisfaction
Basic	Social media, sustainability, digital marketing, sustainable tourism
Emerging	Geotourism, marketing, social media adoption, user-generated content
Niche	Environmental sustainability, brand equity, brand credibility

Country Contributions and Collaboration Patterns

Spain, China, and Indonesia dominate research on digital branding in youth-driven geotourism, together accounting for more than one-third of all publications. Spain emphasises heritage and eco-geotourism, China focuses on smart destination management and digital innovation, while Indonesia highlights community-based and youth-led initiatives. Other contributors include Malaysia, the United Kingdom, Italy, India, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Vietnam, reflecting both Global North and Global South perspectives. Collaboration patterns reveal China as the central hub, with links to Pakistan, the United Kingdom, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia. Strong ties are also visible between Spain and Korea, as well as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. However, Latin America and Africa remain underrepresented despite their rich geoheritage resources, highlighting the importance of inclusive South–South collaboration to broaden perspectives and balance global contributions in geotourism branding research. To further illustrate these geographical patterns, Table 6 summarises country contributions and their dominant research focus in youth-driven geotourism branding.

Table 6. Country contributions and collaboration network in youth-driven geotourism research (2015-2025)

Country	Articles	Key Focus in Geotourism Branding
Spain	38	Heritage tourism, social media, eco-geotourism, sustainability
China	37	Digital tourism, smart destination management, technology adoption
Indonesia	31	Community-based geotourism, MSMEs, youth entrepreneurship
Malaysia	25	Destination branding, local community participation
United Kingdom	16	Sustainability frameworks, consumer behaviour, heritage branding
Italy	16	Tourism innovation, cultural promotion, sustainability integration
India	14	SME participation, geotourism development, digitalisation
Saudi Arabia	12	Digital transformation, smart geotourism, new geosite development
United States	11	Digital entrepreneurship, smart tourism, consumer behaviour
Vietnam	10	Sustainable geotourism, eco-tourism, youth engagement

DISCUSSION

This study provides new insights into the evolution and conceptual development of digital branding in youth-driven geotourism. By combining bibliometric and systematic analysis, it highlights publication trends, geographical contributions, and conceptual clusters, while reframing digital branding as a dynamic capability. The novelty lies in the Participatory Branding Paradigm, which integrates youth entrepreneurship, community participation, and sustainability through digital engagement. The surge of publications after 2020 confirms that crises accelerate digital adoption, consistent with Dynamic Capabilities Theory. Prior studies, such as Ge et al. (2022), showed how technology enabled women entrepreneurs during COVID-19, and Deb et al. (2024) demonstrated how digital marketing became a survival strategy for tourism SMEs. Our findings extend this evidence by framing digital branding not only as a survival tool but as a capability that enables resilience and long-term innovation, particularly for youth-led ventures in geosites.

Geographical patterns also illustrate the influence of institutional settings. Spain, China, and Indonesia dominate contributions, aligning with Institutional Theory. Earlier work (Calderon-Monge & Ribeiro-Soriano, 2024; Tran & Rudolf, 2022) demonstrated that contexts condition branding outcomes, but often with a Global North emphasis.

Our study goes further by comparing Global North (smart tourism, consumer behaviour) and Global South (community-driven branding, youth entrepreneurship), revealing gaps in South–South collaboration that remain underexplored in geoheritage research. The analysis of highly cited works indicates convergence on consumer trust, sustainability narratives, and digital innovation. Previous research highlighted the role of consumer perceptions in destination branding (López-Rodríguez et al., 2022; Obermayer et al., 2022). This finding is consistent with Miftahuddin et al. (2021), who demonstrated that city brand attractiveness and tourism experience significantly shape brand attitudes and city brand equity among tourism visitors in Indonesia. Building on this, our findings extend the Resource-Based View by showing how authentic storytelling and user-generated content (UGC) operate as intangible strategic assets that reinforce competitiveness and legitimacy in youth-driven geotourism branding.

The keyword and thematic clusters highlight the shift from top-down branding to participatory practices. Earlier studies often emphasised managerial or promotional strategies (Alford & Jones, 2020; Malik et al., 2021), while overlooking

community co-creation. This study contributes by proposing the Participatory Branding Paradigm, which integrates digital branding, youth entrepreneurship, and community participation via social media and narrative storytelling. The paradigm underscores branding as both a dynamic capability and a participatory practice, advancing the field theoretically and providing practical guidance for Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) and geoparks.

Finally, collaboration patterns reveal concentration in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, echoing concerns raised in prior bibliometric research (Hornig et al., 2022; Saura et al., 2023) about uneven global knowledge networks.

However, these earlier studies did not focus on geotourism. Our analysis adds to the literature by emphasising the absence of Latin American and African contributions, calling for more inclusive comparative studies and policy support to balance perspectives in geotourism branding.

In summary, the findings address RQ1 and RQ2 by showing that crises such as COVID-19 accelerate the adoption of digital branding as a resilience capability, particularly for youth-led geotourism ventures. Regional patterns highlight that strategies differ between Global North contexts, which prioritise smart tourism and consumer behaviour, and Global South contexts, which emphasise community participation and youth entrepreneurship. The convergence of consumer trust, sustainability narratives, and digital innovation extends the Resource-Based View by positioning them as strategic intangible assets, while the keyword and thematic analyses confirm the emergence of the Participatory Branding Paradigm as a novel framework. Finally, the concentration of collaborations in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, alongside the underrepresentation of Latin America and Africa, underscores the need for more inclusive South-South partnerships in geotourism branding research. This framework, as illustrated in Figure 6, synthesises these insights by showing how digital branding, youth-driven entrepreneurship, and community participation interact with social media engagement and narrative storytelling to generate sustainable impact through the Participatory Branding Paradigm.

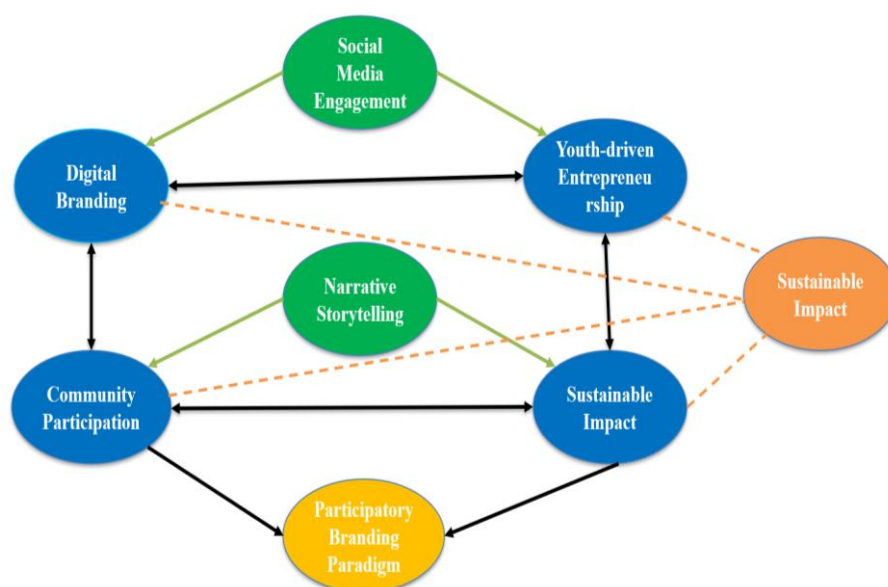


Figure 6. Conceptual framework of the Participatory Branding Paradigm in youth-driven geotourism

CONCLUSION

This study confirms the growing importance of digital branding strategies in youth-driven geotourism by systematically mapping publication trends, collaboration patterns, and dominant themes from 2015 to 2025. The bibliometric and systematic analyses show that social media, youth entrepreneurship, community participation, and sustainability are central drivers shaping the evolution of digital branding in geosites and geoheritage contexts.

The main contribution is the introduction of the Participatory Branding Paradigm, a conceptual framework that reconceptualises digital branding as both a dynamic capability and a participatory process. Unlike earlier approaches that positioned branding mainly as a promotional tool, this paradigm highlights its adaptive and community-centric role in fostering collaboration among youth entrepreneurs, local communities, and destination managers, thereby strengthening engagement and advancing sustainable geosite development.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The reliance on Scopus as the sole database may exclude relevant works indexed elsewhere, while the bibliometric orientation limits the qualitative depth of community narratives. The decadal timeframe (2015–2025) provides a snapshot rather than a long-term trajectory, and geographical imbalances persist, with Latin America and Africa underrepresented. Moreover, while the Participatory Branding Paradigm represents a novel conceptual contribution, it requires empirical validation in real-world geotourism contexts. Future research should therefore combine multiple databases, integrate qualitative and case study approaches to capture community voices, and conduct cross-cultural comparative studies to strengthen theoretical generalisation and empirical grounding.

The findings also carry implications for practice, theory, and policy. Practically, youth entrepreneurs should treat digital branding as a resilience capability that enables adaptation in times of disruption, while Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) and geoparks can strengthen competitiveness by leveraging user-generated content and narrative

storytelling that reflect authentic community perspectives. Theoretically, the study extends the Resource-Based View by positioning consumer trust and sustainability narratives as intangible strategic assets, reinforces Dynamic Capabilities Theory by reframing branding as an adaptive capability, and nuances Institutional Theory by demonstrating how Global North and South contexts shape geotourism strategies differently. For policy, governments should integrate sustainability indicators into national tourism branding programs, design training initiatives in digital storytelling and participatory branding for young entrepreneurs, and prioritise inclusive South–South collaborations, particularly by supporting projects from underrepresented regions such as Latin America and Africa.

In summary, this study positions digital branding in youth-driven geotourism as more than a promotional tool. By proposing the Participatory Branding Paradigm, it reframes branding as a participatory and community-centric process that enhances resilience, inclusivity, and sustainability in geosites and geoheritage landscapes, providing a conceptual pathway for both scholarly advancement and practical innovation.

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