WILLINGNESS TO PAY IN TOURIST ATTRACTIONS: A BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS OF TOURISM VALUATION RESEARCH

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Abstract

Purpose – The valuation of tourism resources through willingness to pay (WTP) has become an important tool for supporting sustainable management of tourist attractions. Despite the growing body of literature, the intellectual structure and thematic development of WTP research within tourism remain fragmented. This study aims to systematically map the research landscape of WTP studies related to tourism experiences, tourist attractions, and destination management.
Methodology/Design/Approach – A bibliometric analysis was conducted using publications retrieved from the Web of Science Core Collection. Following data cleaning and relevance screening, the dataset was analysed through science mapping techniques using Biblioshiny and VOSviewer. Keyword co-occurrence, thematic mapping, and thematic evolution analyses were employed to identify major thematic clusters, intellectual foundations, and the development of research topics over time.
Findings – The results reveal a structured yet fragmented research landscape centred on willingness to pay, with four dominant thematic clusters related to protected areas, economic valuation methods, sustainability, and emerging behavioural perspectives. The findings confirm that WTP research in tourism is strongly rooted in environmental and resource economics, with valuation approaches primarily applied in conservation contexts. Over time, the field has evolved from a methodological focus on contingent valuation and choice experiments toward a more interdisciplinary and behaviour-oriented perspective, with increasing attention to sustainability, ecotourism, visitor management, ecosystem services, and tourist preferences, although these emerging themes remain only partially integrated into the core.
Originality of the research – This study provides a comprehensive bibliometric overview of WTP research in tourist attractions and clarifies the conceptual and intellectual structure of the field, while identifying key research streams and emerging directions. The study contributes to advancing knowledge on economic valuation in tourism and supports evidence-based pricing, visitor management, and sustainable management strategies for tourist attractions.
Keywords willingness to pay, tourism valuation, tourist attractions, protected areas, contingent valuation

Review
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INTRODUCTION

Willingness to pay (WTP) represents a central concept in the economic valuation of tourism resources, enabling the assessment of the value that tourists assign to different aspects of the tourism experience, particularly in contexts where market prices are absent or insufficiently defined. Rooted in welfare economics, WTP reflects individuals' maximum monetary sacrifice for a given good or experience and is widely applied in non-market valuation through methods such as contingent valuation and choice experiments (Hanemann, 1984; Carson, 2012; Meleddu, 2014). Within tourism research, these approaches have become standard tools for estimating preferences and quantifying the economic value of environmental and experiential goods (Wertenbroch & Skiera, 2002; Breidert et al., 2006; Bateman et al., 2011). As emphasized in leading studies, WTP not only serves as a methodological instrument for valuation but also reflects tourists' perceived value and provides a robust basis for pricing decisions, destination management, and policy design (Champ et al., 2003; Dwyer et al., 2020; Phillips, 2021).

Within the broader tourism context, particular attention is given to tourist attractions, as they represent the core components of tourism supply and primary drivers of tourist demand. Empirical evidence shows that WTP applications in tourism are most frequently concentrated on the valuation of access to and experiences within tourist attractions, especially in relation to entrance fees and pricing mechanisms for natural and cultural sites. Studies published in leading journals demonstrate that tourist attractions—including national parks, protected areas, and cultural heritage sites—provide ideal empirical settings for WTP analysis due to their clearly defined use context and direct visitor interaction (e.g., Bigne et al., 2005; Reynisdottir et al., 2008; Qiu et al., 2020). Moreover, WTP-based pricing mechanisms play a critical role in managing visitor flows, addressing overtourism, and ensuring sustainable financing for conservation and maintenance (Scarpa, 2008). Therefore, focusing on tourist attractions allows for a more precise understanding of tourists' value perceptions and provides a robust basis for evidence-based pricing, visitor management, and sustainable tourism policy development.

Despite the growing number of scholarly publications, research on willingness to pay (WTP) in tourism is still characterized by a pronounced conceptual fragmentation. This situation primarily stems from the broad application of the WTP concept across various contexts that extend beyond tourism settings. Consequently, the existing literature covers a wide but heterogeneous research domain, making it difficult to clearly define the core conceptual and intellectual structure of this research area within tourism. To address these limitations, this study adopts a two-stage bibliometric approach. In the first stage, an extensive analysis is conducted to map the overall research landscape of WTP in tourism and related disciplines. In the second stage, a more focused and thematically refined dataset is developed, enabling a more detailed examination of the conceptual structure of WTP research, with particular emphasis on tourist attractions and visitor-oriented contexts. The bibliometric analysis in this study is based on publications retrieved from the Web of Science Core Collection, following data cleaning and relevance screening. The analysis is conducted using Biblioshiny and VOSviewer, examining key trends in scientific production, the most influential papers, leading authors, institutions, and journals, as well as patterns of international scientific collaboration.

Bibliometric analysis is increasingly used as a relevant approach for the systematic examination of scientific literature in the fields of tourism and business research (Hall, 2011; Donthu et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2021). Its importance lies in the ability to process large datasets while simultaneously identifying key research trends, themes, and the intellectual structure of a given field. The development of bibliometric tools and databases has further enhanced this methodology, enabling reliable analysis of complex and extensive scientific corpora (Makarius et al., 2020; Mustak et al., 2021). In the context of willingness to pay (WTP) research in tourism, particularly in the valuation of tourist attractions, bibliometric analysis enables the systematic mapping of methodological developments, as well as the identification of key thematic areas, including sustainability, ecotourism, and cultural heritage.

The specific aim of the study is to determine the conceptual and intellectual structure of research on willingness to pay (WTP) in the context of tourist attractions by applying science mapping techniques, keyword co-occurrence, thematic mapping, and thematic evolution of the research field. Particular emphasis is placed on identifying dominant thematic clusters as well as emerging research directions. In this way, the study aims to contribute to a more systematic understanding of the structure and dynamics of WTP research in tourist attractions and its clearer positioning within the interdisciplinary framework at the intersection of environmental economics and tourism.

The contribution of this study lies in providing a comprehensive bibliometric overview of the development and structure of WTP research in tourist attractions, along with the identification of key research streams, existing research gaps, and directions for future research. This enhances the understanding of the evolution of this research area and provides a foundation for further studies aimed at more integrated and interdisciplinary approaches. In addition to its theoretical contribution, the study also provides a basis for considering potential practical implications in the areas of pricing, visitor management, and sustainable tourism destination development.

1. METHODS

1.1. Data selection and filtering procedure

The research process begins with the definition of the research framework, which includes the formulation of research questions, the selection of a bibliographic database, the definition of keywords, and the construction of the search query. In line with the aim of the study, which is to systematically map the scientific literature on WTP in the context of tourist attractions, the following research questions are formulated (Table 1).

Table 1: **Research questions structured according to the two-stage bibliometric approach**

Stage	Research questions	Description
STAGE 1	RQ1. How has the scientific production and impact of research on willingness to pay (WTP) in tourism evolved?	To examine the dynamics of the field's development and identify trends in scientific output and citation impact.
	RQ2. Who are the key intellectual actors in WTP research in tourism, and how is the field structurally organized in terms of scientific collaboration?	To identify the most influential authors, journals, institutions, and countries, and to analyse the structure and intensity of scientific collaboration.
STAGE 2	RQ3. What is the underlying conceptual and intellectual structure of WTP research within tourist attractions?	To identify the main thematic areas and relationships among key concepts in order to understand the structure of the research field.
	RQ4. What are the dominant and emerging thematic streams in WTP research within tourist attractions?	To identify key research streams and to detect new and developing research directions.

Bibliographic data were retrieved from the Web of Science Core Collection, which is widely used in bibliometric studies due to its high-quality and reliable coverage of scholarly outputs. The search strategy was constructed using the following query:

TS = ("willingness to pay" OR WTP OR "willingness-to-pay" OR "willingness to accept" OR WTA)
AND
("touris" OR "visitor*" OR "destination*" OR "heritage" OR "cultural heritage" OR "natural heritage" OR "protected area*" OR "national park*" OR "tourist attraction*" OR "visitor attraction*")*

The initial search identified a total of 908 records. After an initial screening, two studies were removed due to incomplete information, resulting in 906 records. To ensure both a comprehensive overview of the field and a more focused conceptual analysis, the study was designed as a two-stage bibliometric investigation.

In the first stage, a broad bibliometric analysis was conducted on the full dataset of 906 publications retrieved from the Web of Science Core Collection. This initial dataset captured the wider research landscape of WTP in tourism and related fields, enabling the analysis of publication trends, key authors, sources, and the general intellectual structure of the domain. However, due to the widespread application of WTP across various non-tourism contexts, this dataset also included a substantial number of studies not directly related to tourist attractions or visitor-based valuation.

In the second stage, a refined dataset was developed in order to enable a more detailed and conceptually precise analysis using VOSviewer. To achieve this, a rigorous multi-stage filtering procedure was applied to the initial dataset. The records were manually screened based on titles, abstracts, and author keywords, following clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were retained only if they explicitly addressed WTP in the context of tourist attractions or visitor-related tourism experiences. More specifically, eligible studies had to include at least one attraction-related thematic context, such as heritage sites, cultural heritage, UNESCO sites, museums, archaeological sites, historic sites, monuments, national parks, protected areas, tourist attractions, entrance fees, or admission fees. In addition, all retained studies were required to include a clear visitor-related perspective, reflected through terms such as tourist, tourism, or visitor. This condition was introduced to distinguish tourism-specific valuation studies from broader environmental, economic, or policy-oriented WTP research lacking a direct tourism demand or visitor experience dimension. At the same time, studies were excluded if WTP was examined in non-tourism contexts, including electricity and energy pricing, health insurance and healthcare, pollution control, climate policy, agricultural policy, transport tolls and congestion charging, water supply, fisheries, hunting, food and beverages, restaurants, hotels, accommodation, and hospitality services. Studies focusing on ecosystem services, biodiversity, beach quality, and environmental conservation were also excluded when they did not explicitly involve tourists, visitors, tourism demand, or attraction-related experiences.

This filtering approach ensured a clear distinction between tourism-specific WTP research and the broader body of non-market valuation studies, which are often dominated by environmental and public policy applications without a direct visitor perspective. Rather than replacing the initial analysis, this second-stage refinement complements it by enabling a more fine-grained examination of the conceptual structure of WTP research within a clearly defined tourism context. The screening process was conducted manually following predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure conceptual consistency and relevance of the final dataset. Following this screening process, the final dataset consisted of 104 publications. This refined sample was considered sufficiently focused and conceptually coherent for advanced science mapping techniques, including keyword co-occurrence analysis, thematic mapping, and thematic evolution using VOSviewer. The resulting dataset was subsequently used for network and thematic analyses, the results of which are presented in the following section. The final sample thus represents a thematically delimited subset of the broader research field, specifically centred on visitor-oriented valuation of tourist attractions, providing a robust basis for in-depth conceptual analysis. This refined dataset does not replace the initial analysis but rather complements it, enabling a deeper conceptual exploration of the core research stream identified within the broader field.

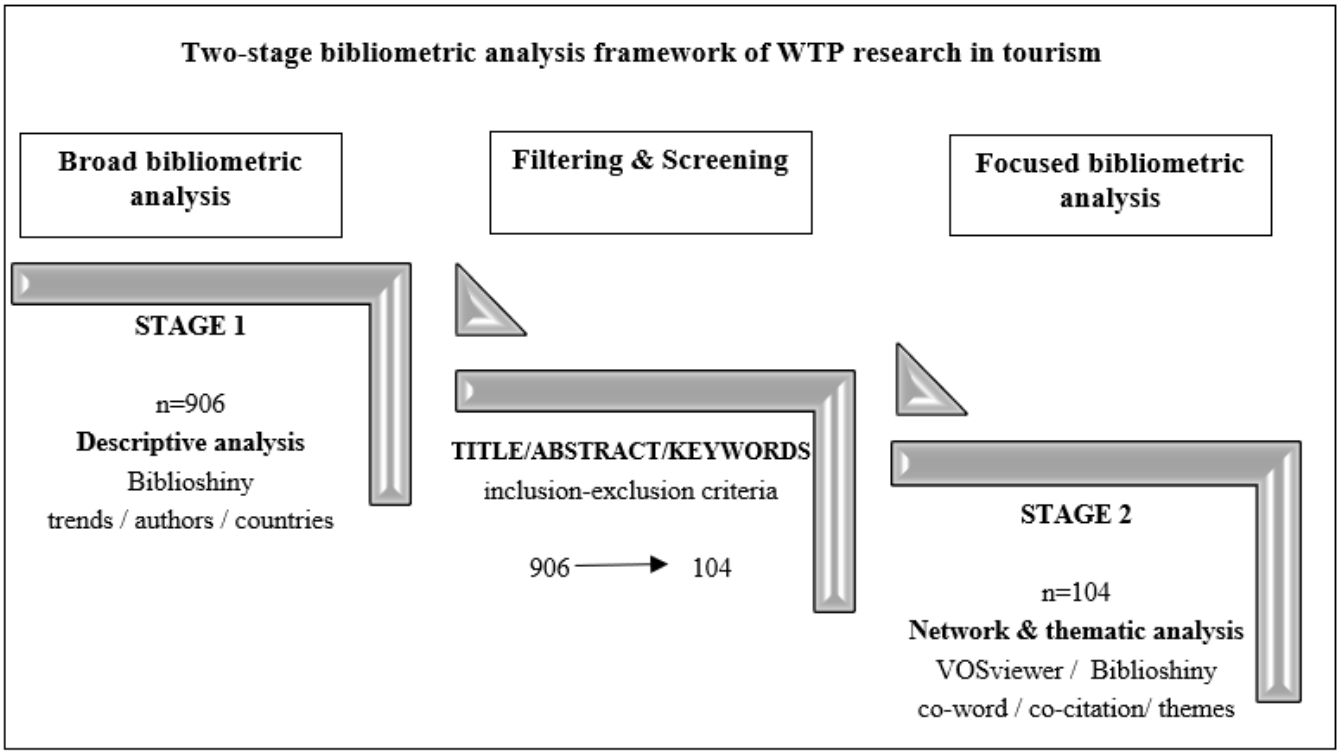
1.2. Research framework

In line with the research objectives, the study combines descriptive bibliometric analysis and science mapping techniques within a two-stage design to examine publication trends, citation impact, key contributors, and international collaboration, while analysing co-authorship and keyword co-occurrence networks alongside thematic mapping, thematic evolution, and overlay and density visualizations to identify the field's conceptual structure, key clusters, and emerging trends.

Bibliometric analysis is used to examine the structure, trends, and development of the research field, including publication output, influential contributions, and thematic patterns (Hall, 2011; Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015; Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). In the field of tourism, bibliometric methods are increasingly used to analyse the structure of the scientific domain, including research on author productivity, citation patterns, keywords, and thematic orientations (Koseoglu et al., 2016; De Bruyn et al., 2023). The bibliometric analysis was conducted using Biblioshiny, a web interface for the R package Bibliometrix, which enables the processing, analysis, and visualization of bibliographic data (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017).

Descriptive analysis was conducted to examine annual scientific production, leading sources, most cited documents, and the geographical distribution of research activity, thereby addressing RQ1 and RQ2.

Figure 1: **The research framework of the study**



VOSviewer is a bibliometric analysis and knowledge mapping tool that enables the analysis of networks of publications, authors, and other elements (Li et al., 2022). It presents results through coloured clusters of related items, where the size of nodes indicates their relative importance. In this study, it is used to identify thematic clusters, visualize relationships among key concepts, and enhance the understanding of the structure of the research field. To analyse the conceptual structure of the field, keyword co-occurrence analysis was applied, with results presented through word clouds and thematic maps, enabling the identification of thematic clusters and relationships between key concepts (RQ3). In addition, thematic evolution analysis was used to examine changes in research focus over time and to identify emerging topics, while thematic mapping enabled the classification of themes according to their importance and level of development (RQ4). Finally, country collaboration networks were analysed to explore patterns of international scientific cooperation. The results provide insights into the intellectual and collaborative structure of the research field, including leading countries, authors, institutions, key topics, and highly cited publications.

2. RESULTS

The results are presented in two complementary parts. The first part provides a broad overview of the research landscape based on the full dataset of 906 publications. The second part focuses on the refined sample of 104 publications and presents a more detailed analysis of the conceptual structure of WTP research using science mapping techniques.

2.1. Descriptive analysis

2.1.1. Bibliometric Performance Analysis

The research field of WTP in tourism has shown continuous growth over the period from 1992 to 2026, as confirmed by an analysis of 906 scientific papers published across 225 sources. An annual growth rate of 9.8% indicates a stable increase in interest in this topic, while an average document age of 8.24 years confirms the current relevance of the research. A high average number of citations per document (31.21), along with a total of 40,767 references, further indicates a significant scientific impact and a strong theoretical foundation of this field.

The authorship structure reveals a pronounced level of collaboration among researchers, with a total of 2,213 authors and an average of 3.1 co-authors per paper, while the share of international co-authorships amounts to 35.98%. The relatively small number of single-authored papers confirms the predominantly collaborative nature of the research. In addition, the large number of author keywords (2,877) points to thematic diversity and interdisciplinarity, with research developing at the intersection of economic valuation, sustainability, and tourist behavior.

The data presented in Tab.2 show that the research field of WTP in tourism is characterized as a dynamic, theoretically consolidated, and methodologically diverse area of study. A strong reliance on quantitative approaches and economic valuation models is evident, alongside a gradual integration of new research perspectives, particularly in the context of sustainable development and the digital transformation of tourism. At the same time, the high level of co-authorship and international collaboration indicates increasingly intensive networking within the scientific community, contributing to knowledge exchange, the standardization of methodological approaches, and the strengthening of comparative research. In this sense, WTP is increasingly established not only as a methodological tool for measuring preferences, but also as a key concept for understanding tourists' value perceptions (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Hanemann, 1984;), with important implications for the design of sustainable tourism policies, destination management, and the development of market-oriented strategies.

Table 2: **Dataset overview and key metrics**

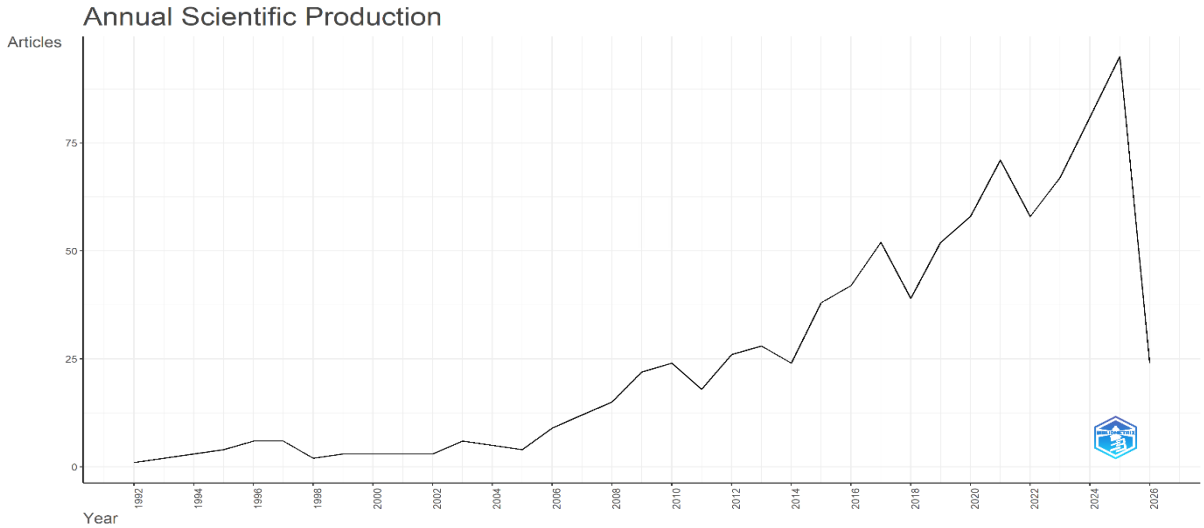
Description	**Results**
Timespan	1992–2026
Sources	225
Documents	906
Annual growth rate (%)	9.8
Authors	2,213
Authors of single-authored documents	68
International co-authorships (%)	35.98
Co-authors per document	3.1
Author's keywords (DE)	2,877
References	40,767
Document average age	8.24
Average citations per document	31.21

2.1.2. Publication Trends

Figure 2 shows the annual publication trends from 1992 to 2026, highlighting the growth in research output. Although research activity remained limited until the mid-2000s, a steady increase is observed after 2010, which develops into a pronounced expansion in the number of publications from 2015 onward. This growth reflects the increasing importance of WTP as a research topic in tourism, particularly in the context of sustainable development, environmental economics, and destination management.

WTP research has expanded from a relatively narrow economic approach toward a broader integrative framework that incorporates environmental, social, and behavioral dimensions. The observed trends indicate that the increase in publication output is accompanied by a qualitative shift in research focus, positioning WTP as an important tool for understanding the value of tourist experiences and decision-making processes.

Figure 2: **Annual Scientific Production**



2.1.3. Most Cited Documents

The analysis of the most cited publications provides insight into the intellectual structure and key contributions to WTP research in tourism. Table 3 presents 10 most cited studies, including authors, journals, and citation indicators. These works form the theoretical and methodological foundation of the field, highlighting its interdisciplinary nature at the intersection of environmental economics, tourism, and consumer behaviour.
The most influential studies reflect both conceptual and methodological developments. Research by Bigne et al. (2005) and Han et al. (2010) emphasises the role of tourist experience, value perception, and environmentally responsible behaviour, while Scarpa (2008) and Bateman et al. (2011) represent key contributions to valuation methods, particularly choice experiments and economic valuation approaches. The results also reveal temporal differences, with earlier studies demonstrating long-term influence and more recent contributions addressing emerging issues such as COVID-19 and its impact on travel behaviour (Qiu et al., 2020; Sánchez-Cañizares et al., 2021).

Recent research highlights the growing importance of technology and innovation (e.g., He et al., 2018), spatial pricing (Bimpikis et al., 2019), and customer loyalty (Kandampully, 2015). The findings indicate a high degree of methodological and thematic diversity, confirming that WTP research has evolved beyond traditional economic valuation frameworks to incorporate behavioural, technological, and sustainability-oriented perspectives.

Table 3: **The most cited paper**

Rank	Authors (Year)	Article Title	Journal	Total Citations	TC per Year	Normalized TC
1	Bigne et al. (2005)	*The Theme Park Experience: An Analysis of Pleasure, Arousal and Satisfaction*	Tourism Management	596	27.09	3.41
.2	Han et al. (2010)	*Empirical Investigation of the Roles of Attitudes toward Green Behaviors, Overall Image, Gender, and Age in Hotel Customers' Eco-Friendly Decision-Making Process*	International Journal of Hospitality Management	528	29.33	9.18
3	Scarpa (2008)	*Utility in Willingness to Pay Space: A Tool to Address Confounding Random Scale Effects in Destination Choice to the Alps*	American Journal of Agricultural Economics	433	22.79	5.10
4	Bateman et al. (2011)	*Economic Analysis for Ecosystem Service Assessments*	Environmental & Resource Economics	417	26.06	5.97
5	Qiu et al. (2020)	*Social Costs of Tourism during the COVID-19 Pandemic*	Annals of Tourism Research	375	53.57	9.42
6	Kandampully (2015)	*Customer Loyalty: A Review and Future Directions with a Special Focus on the Hospitality Industry*	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	353	29.42	7.89
7	Loomis (1996)	*Economic Benefits of Rare and Endangered Species: Summary and Meta-Analysis*	Ecological Economics	339	10.94	2.78
8	Bimpikis et al. (2019)	*Spatial Pricing in Ride-Sharing Networks*	Operations Research	311	38.88	10.72
9	He et al. (2018)	*When Art Meets Tech: The Role of Augmented Reality in Enhancing Museum Experiences and Purchase Intentions*	Tourism Management	287	33.00	7.45
10	Sánchez-Cañizares et al. (2021)	*Impact of the Perceived Risk from COVID-19 on Intention to Travel*	Current Issues in Tourism	278	46.33	8.17

2.1.4. Country production

The geographical distribution of scientific production shows a strong dominance of developed countries, particularly the United States, China, and UK. The results also highlight a global spread of research activity, indicating that WTP in tourism is a widely studied topic across different regions, especially in areas with significant natural and cultural tourism resources.

Table 4: **Country production over time**

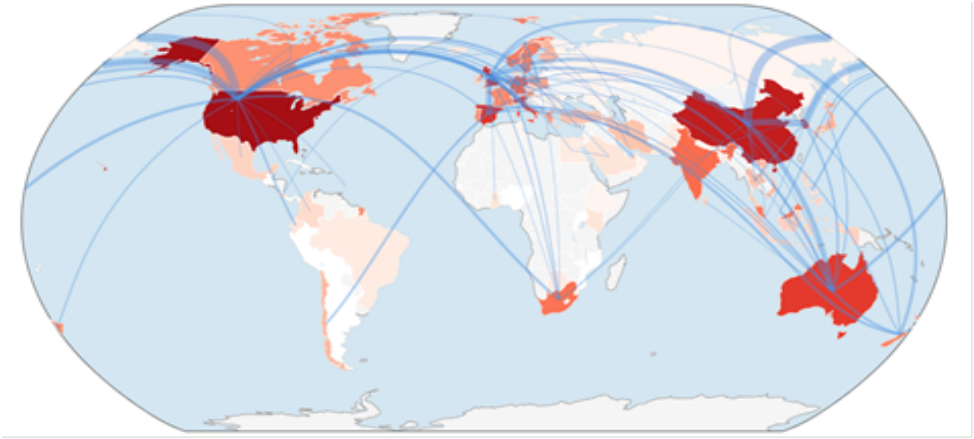
Country	**%**
USA	28 %
China	17 %
UK	11 %
South Korea	10 %
Spain	10 %
Australia	7 %
Italy	6 %
Portugal	4 %
Germany	4 %
India	3 %

Table 4 presents a global map of scientific collaboration between countries, revealing a densely connected and highly internationalized network of research activity. The United States dominates with a 28% share, followed by China with 17%, while the United Kingdom stands out with 11%. Their strong interconnectedness with different regions highlights their key role in shaping the global research landscape. European countries, particularly the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, and France, also demonstrate a high degree of mutual connectivity, forming a coherent cluster characterized by intensive collaboration. At the same time, Asian countries, including India and other Southeast Asian states, are gaining increasing importance, reflecting the growing contribution of this region to the observed research field. Strong transcontinental links between North America, Europe, Asia, and Oceania further confirm the global and interdisciplinary nature of contemporary scientific research.

In contrast, the visualization in Figure 3 reveals certain spatial imbalances. African countries and parts of South America are less represented and less integrated into the international collaboration network, which may indicate differences in research capacity, resource availability, or visibility in international databases. This uneven distribution may be partly a consequence of publication selection criteria, but also reflects the broader context of global scientific inequalities.

Alongside illustrating patterns and intensity of international collaboration, these findings reflect deeper structural disparities in the global scientific system, where a limited number of countries dominate knowledge production and dissemination, while others remain at the periphery of the research network. These results are consistent with previous bibliometric studies emphasizing the concentration of scientific output and international collaboration in developed countries (Leydesdorff & Wagner, 2008).

Figure 3: **Network visualization of international scientific collaboration across countries in the studied research field**



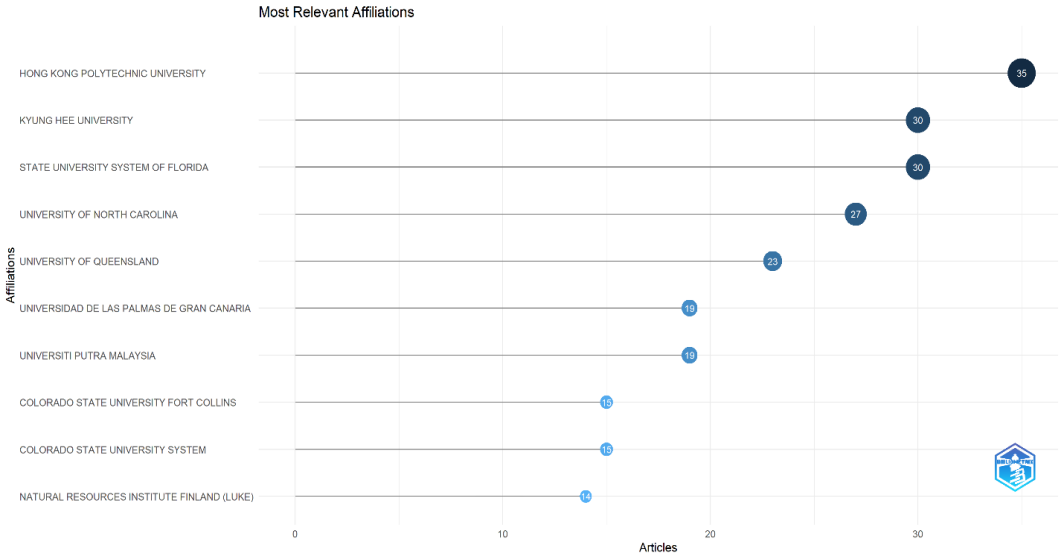
The thickness of each line represents the intensity of collaboration between two countries and the colors represent the dominant clusters of regional or thematic collaboration.

2.1.4.1. Most Productive Affiliations

Figure 4 presents the distribution of scientific output among different academic institutions in the field of WTP research in tourism. The results show that Hong Kong Polytechnic University stands out as the leading institution with 35 published papers, indicating its dominant role and strong research orientation in this field. It is followed by Kyung Hee University and the State University System of Florida, each with 30 publications, confirming their significant contribution and consistent presence in WTP research. Substantial research activity is also recorded at the University of North Carolina with 27 papers and the University of Queensland with 23 papers, highlighting their important role in the development of this research area. Other institutions, such as Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and Universiti Putra Malaysia (each with 19 papers), also contribute to the literature, although to a lesser extent. Institutions such as Colorado State University Fort Collins and the Colorado State University System (each with 15 papers), as well as the Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke) with 14 papers, represent additional relevant actors, albeit with a more moderate research output compared to the leading institutions.

Therefore, the results indicate a diverse distribution of research activity across institutions, with a clear dominance of a few leading universities but also broad participation of various academic organizations at the global level. This confirms the international character and growing interest in willingness-to-pay research in tourism.

Figure 4: **Top 10 most productive institutions**

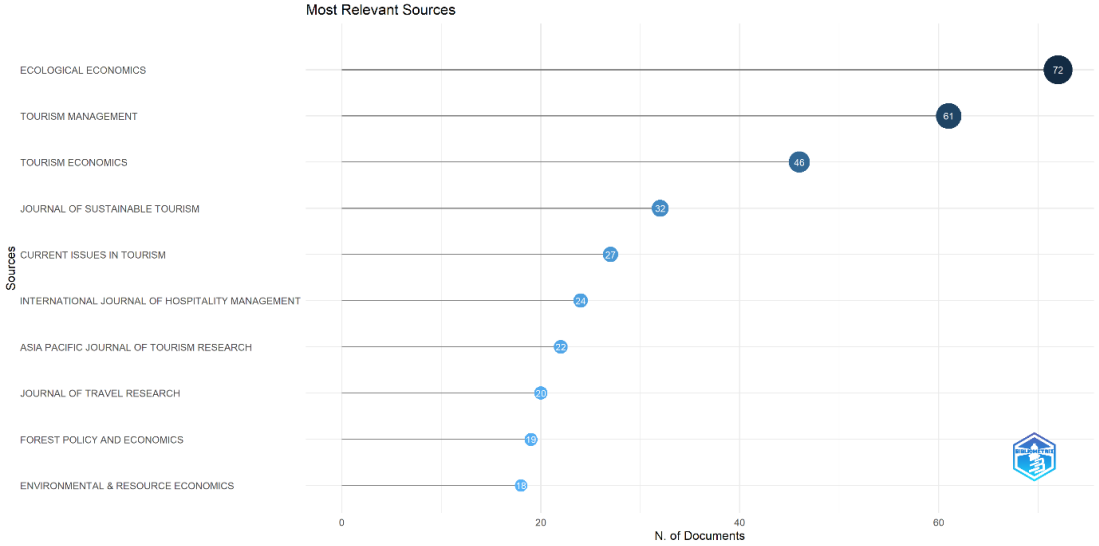


2.1.4.2. Most Productive Journals

Figure 5 presents the analysis of the most relevant sources in research on WTP in tourism. The analysis highlights the strong interdisciplinary nature of WTP research in tourism, situated at the intersection of environmental economics and tourism studies. The most productive journals, such as Ecological Economics (72 papers), Tourism Management (61 papers), and Tourism Economics (46 papers), reflect the consolidated role of WTP research in shaping the theoretical and methodological foundations of this field.

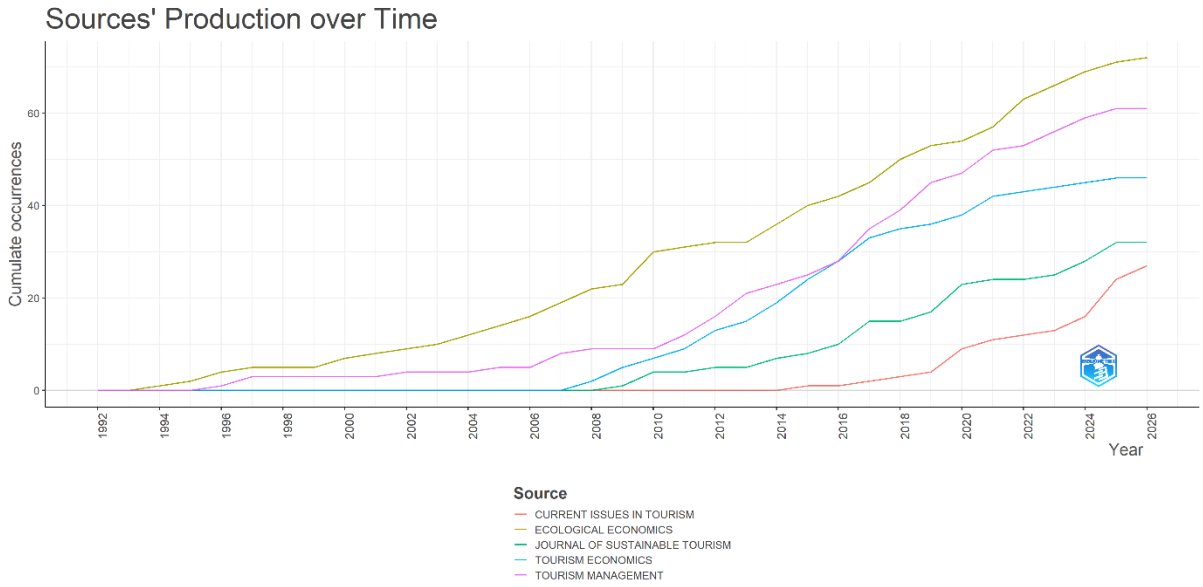
The importance of journals such as Environmental & Resource Economics and Forest Policy and Economics emphasizes the relevance of sustainability, environmental protection, and resource valuation, while leading tourism journals, including the Journal of Sustainable Tourism, Journal of Travel Research, and Current Issues in Tourism, confirm the connection between WTP and tourist behavior, destination management, and sustainable tourism development. The VOSviewer-based analysis further highlights key themes such as contingent valuation, ecotourism, and cultural heritage.

Figure 5: **Top 10 Most productive journals**



Leading journals such as Ecological Economics and Tourism Management consistently dominate the field, while newer contributions are emerging in journals dedicated to sustainability and tourism management, reflecting the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of WTP research (see Figure 6). These results indicate that WTP research in tourism is situated at the intersection of economic valuation and sustainable tourism studies, enabling the integration of quantitative methods with an understanding of complex socio-ecological and tourism dynamics.

Figure 6: **Sources production over time**



2.1.5. Thematic Development

2.1.5.1. Thematic Evolution

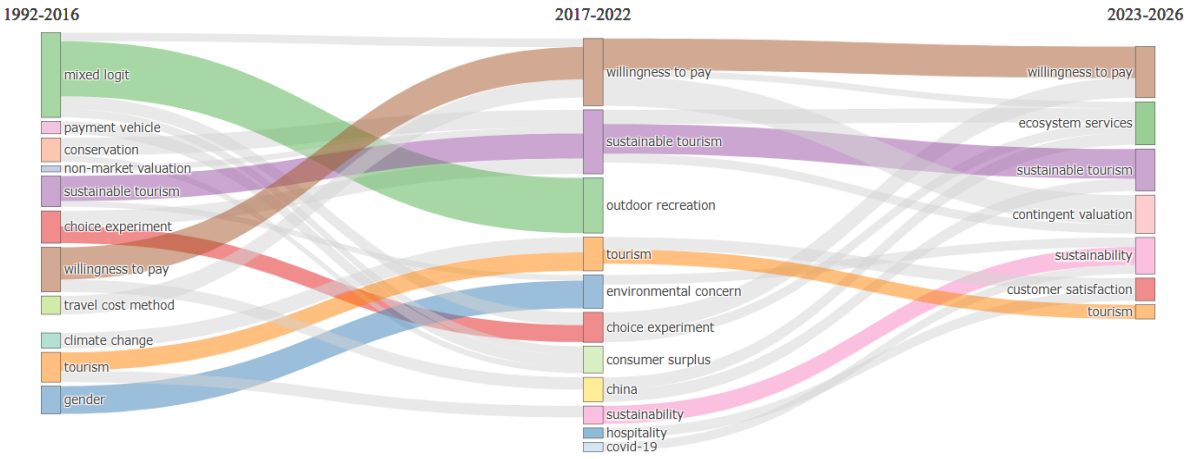
Thematic evolution within bibliometric analysis provides a systematic insight into changes and developments in research topics over time, as well as the identification of potential directions for future research (Cobo et al., 2011). In order to offer a more comprehensive overview of the development and current trends in the field of WTP, Figure 9 presents thematic evolution based on keyword analysis.

In the initial period (1992–2016), research is characterized by a strong methodological focus, with dominant concepts such as “contingent valuation,” “choice experiment,” “non-market valuation,” and “mixed logit.” These concepts indicate the intensive development and application of economic methods for valuing non-market goods. At the same time, thematic strands related to tourism (“tourism,” “sustainable tourism”), environmental challenges (“climate change”), and specific application contexts such as transport and user behavior also emerge.

In the middle period (2017–2022), a consolidation of the research field is observed, with "willingness to pay" becoming the central integrative concept. Methodological approaches, particularly "choice experiment," maintain continuity, while research increasingly focuses on topics related to sustainable development and recreation ("sustainable tourism," "outdoor recreation," "environmental concern"). This period also shows a growing interest in sustainability issues and consumer behavior, indicating a gradual interdisciplinary integration of economic, environmental, and social dimensions.

The most recent period (2023–2026) is characterized by further specialization and a stronger focus on sustainability and environmental management. Dominant concepts such as "ecosystem services," "sustainability," and "sustainable tourism" confirm the increasing role of willingness to pay as an analytical tool in the valuation of natural resources and in supporting decision-making. At the same time, there is continuity in core methodological approaches ("contingent valuation"), alongside a greater emphasis on market- and user-oriented dimensions ("customer satisfaction"). Overall, the results indicate an evolution of the research field from methodologically driven approaches toward applications focused on sustainable development, tourism, and environmental management. This development confirms the maturity of the field and its increasingly pronounced interdisciplinary and applied dimension, making it highly relevant for future theoretical and empirical research.

Figure 7: **Conceptual Structure**



2.1.5.2. Thematic Map

Figure 8 presents a thematic map obtained through bibliometric analysis, which groups key research topics according to their centrality (importance) and level of development (density). This type of visualization enables the distinction between basic, motor, niche, and emerging or declining research themes in the field of WTP.

Within the quadrant of basic themes, concepts such as "willingness to pay," "contingent valuation," and "cultural heritage" stand out, representing the conceptual and methodological foundation of the research field. Their high centrality combined with a lower level of development indicates that these topics are essential for the structure of the field, while still offering room for further theoretical and empirical advancement. These findings are consistent with the literature emphasizing the key role of valuation methods in analyzing economic preferences and non-market goods (Hanley et al., 1998; Carson, 2012; Champ et al., 2003). The same quadrant also includes topics related to sustainable tourism and the environment ("sustainable tourism," "ecosystem services," "conservation"), confirming their importance in contemporary research, particularly in the context of natural resource valuation.

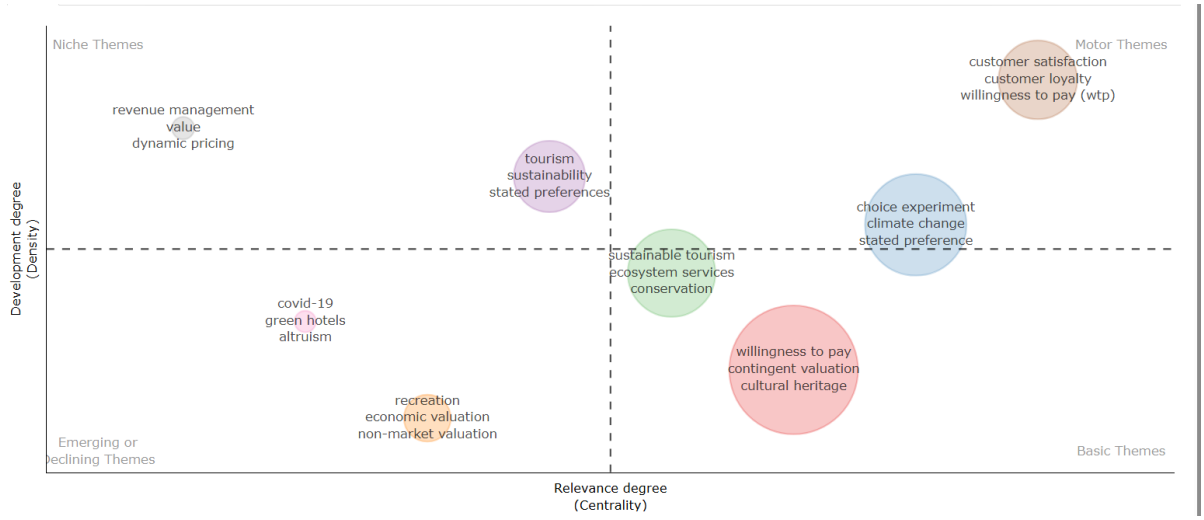
Motor themes, characterized by high centrality and high development (Niñerola et al., 2019), include concepts such as "customer satisfaction," "customer loyalty," and "willingness to pay (WTP)." These concepts indicate a strong connection between WTP research and the fields of marketing and consumer behavior, where the focus is on understanding user experience and decision-making processes. This quadrant also includes methodological approaches such as "choice experiment" and topics related to environmental challenges ("climate change," "stated preference"), confirming their important role in shaping current research trends.

In the niche themes quadrant, concepts such as "revenue management," "value," and "dynamic pricing" are identified, representing specialized research directions with a high level of development but limited connection to the broader research field. These topics highlight the application of WTP concepts in specific contexts of revenue management and pricing, particularly in tourism and service industries. Additionally, a cluster including "tourism," "sustainability," and "stated preferences" points to a relatively developed but thematically narrower specialization within the broader research framework.

The quadrant of emerging or declining themes includes concepts such as "COVID-19," "green hotels," and "altruism," suggesting newer research directions related to social and crisis contexts that are not yet fully integrated into the core of the field. At the same time, terms such as "recreation," "economic valuation," and "non-market valuation" reflect more traditional approaches

which, although still relevant, are gradually losing their central position compared to more contemporary interdisciplinary topics. Overall, the thematic map confirms the evolution of the research field toward the integration of economic, environmental, and behavioral aspects, with willingness to pay remaining a key analytical framework for understanding value and decision-making in the context of sustainable development (Carson, 2012; Costanza et al., 1997; United Nations, 2015; Gössling, 2002).

Figure 8: **Thematic Map**

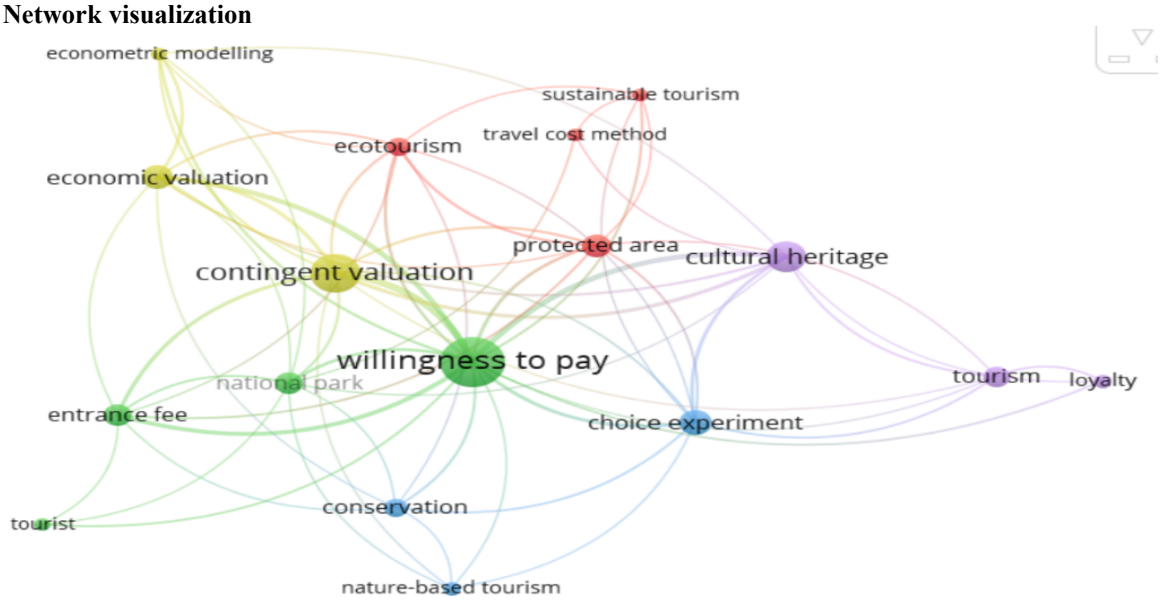


2.2. Network analysis

2.2.1. Keyword co-occurrence analysis

While the descriptive analysis provides a general overview of the field, it does not fully capture its internal conceptual structure. Therefore, a more focused analysis was conducted on the refined dataset (see 2.1.), enabling a deeper exploration of the relationships between key concepts and thematic clusters. To examine the conceptual structure of WTP research in tourism attractions, a keyword co-occurrence analysis was conducted using VOSviewer on the final dataset of 104 publications. This method enables the identification of the most frequently occurring keywords and their relationships, thereby revealing the main thematic clusters and the overall structure of the research field. The results are presented through three complementary visualizations: network, overlay, and density maps.

Figure 9: **Network visualization**



The network visualization (Figure 9) reveals a structured research field organized into several distinct thematic clusters, each represented by a different color. The clustering is based on the co-occurrence strength of keywords, indicating groups of concepts that frequently appear together in the same studies.

Importantly, WTP is positioned within the green cluster, where it represents the largest and most central node. This indicates that WTP is not only the most frequent keyword overall, but also the primary hub within its own cluster, meaning that its strongest and most defining relationships are with other green-cluster terms rather than with keywords in other clusters.

Green cluster – Core WTP application (national parks & fees)

The green cluster represents the core application domain of WTP research, centred around the valuation of tourist experiences in natural attractions. It includes keywords such as *willingness to pay*, *entrance fee*, *national park*, and *tourist*. The fact that WTP is both the largest node and part of this cluster indicates that the dominant research theme in the dataset is the estimation of visitors' willingness to pay for access to natural attractions, particularly through entrance fees in national parks. This finding suggests that WTP is most strongly embedded in practical, policy-relevant contexts, where it is used as a tool for pricing decisions, visitor management, and sustainable financing of protected areas. Although WTP is positioned close to other methodological terms, its cluster membership confirms that its strongest statistical association is with applied tourism contexts rather than purely methodological constructs.

Yellow cluster – Valuation methods and analytical framework

The yellow cluster captures the methodological and analytical foundation of the research field. It includes key terms such as *contingent valuation*, *economic valuation*, and *econometric modelling*. This cluster represents the theoretical and quantitative backbone of WTP research, reflecting its origins in environmental and resource economics. In particular, *contingent valuation* appears as a central concept within this cluster, indicating its dominant role as the primary method used to estimate willingness to pay. The strong connection between willingness to pay and contingent valuation, as indicated by a thick link between the nodes, further confirms that survey-based stated preference methods remain the most widely used approach in this field.

Red cluster – Ecotourism and sustainability context

The red cluster reflects the ecotourism and sustainability-oriented research domain, including keywords such as *ecotourism*, *sustainable tourism*, *protected area*, and *travel cost method*. This cluster highlights the application of WTP in evaluating environmentally sensitive tourism contexts, particularly those involving sustainability and nature-based tourism development. The inclusion of *travel cost method* within this cluster suggests that certain valuation methods are closely associated with specific empirical contexts, in this case nature-based and ecotourism settings. Overall, this cluster indicates that WTP research is strongly linked to contemporary debates on sustainability, conservation, and responsible tourism development.

Blue cluster – Choice experiment and advanced valuation approaches

The blue cluster is centred around *choice experiment*, which represents a more advanced and flexible valuation method compared to traditional approaches such as contingent valuation. The position of *choice experiment* between clusters indicates that it plays a linking role between methodological and application-oriented research streams, allowing for more detailed analysis of visitor preferences and trade-offs between different attributes of tourist experiences. This suggests a methodological evolution within the field, where researchers increasingly adopt more sophisticated techniques to capture the complexity of decision-making processes in tourism.

Purple cluster – Cultural heritage and behavioural perspective

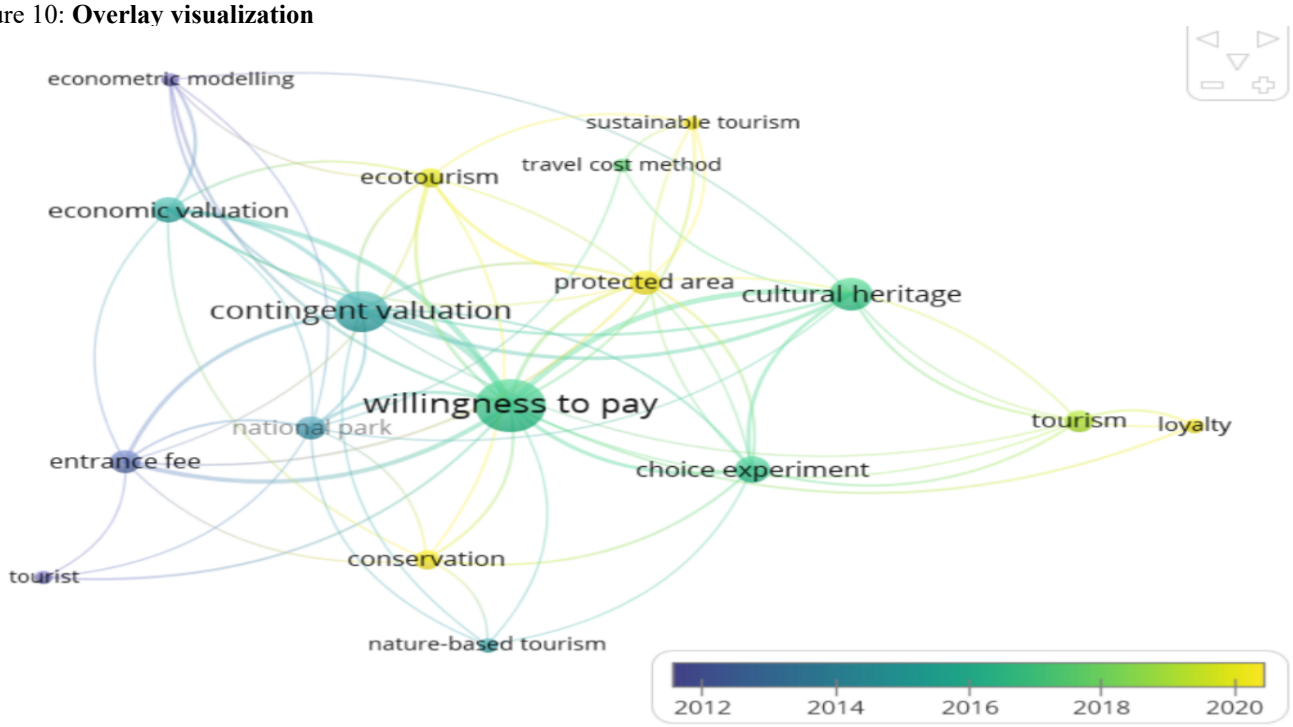
The purple cluster represents the cultural and behavioural dimension of WTP research, including keywords such as *cultural heritage*, *tourism*, and *loyalty*. This cluster highlights research focused on the valuation of cultural attractions and the role of visitor experience, satisfaction, and behavioural responses. The presence of *loyalty* suggests an emerging interest in the relationship between willingness to pay and post-visit behaviour, including repeat visitation and long-term engagement with destinations. Compared to the green cluster, which focuses on natural attractions and pricing mechanisms, this cluster reflects a shift toward experience-based and demand-driven perspectives in tourism research.

The spatial distribution of nodes provides additional insight into the structure of the field. Keywords located near the centre, such as protected area and cultural heritage, represent the most commonly studied empirical contexts. In contrast, more peripheral terms, such as econometric modelling and loyalty, indicate specialized research niches with more limited integration into the core of the field. This pattern suggests that WTP research in tourism is primarily concentrated on the valuation of natural and cultural attractions, while more advanced modelling approaches and behavioural extensions remain relatively less central.

3.2.2. Overlay visualization

The overlay visualization (Figure 10) provides insight into the temporal evolution of research themes by colouring keywords according to their average publication year. Earlier studies are represented by darker colours, while more recent topics appear in lighter tones.

Figure 10: **Overlay visualization**



The results indicate that earlier research in the field is primarily associated with terms such as economic valuation and econometric modelling, as well as entrance fee, all of which appear in darker shades. This suggests that the initial development of WTP research in tourism was strongly grounded in economic valuation frameworks and early applications related to pricing access to tourist attractions. In particular, the presence of entrance fee among the older constructs indicates that pricing of tourist sites has been a core research theme from the early stages of the field.

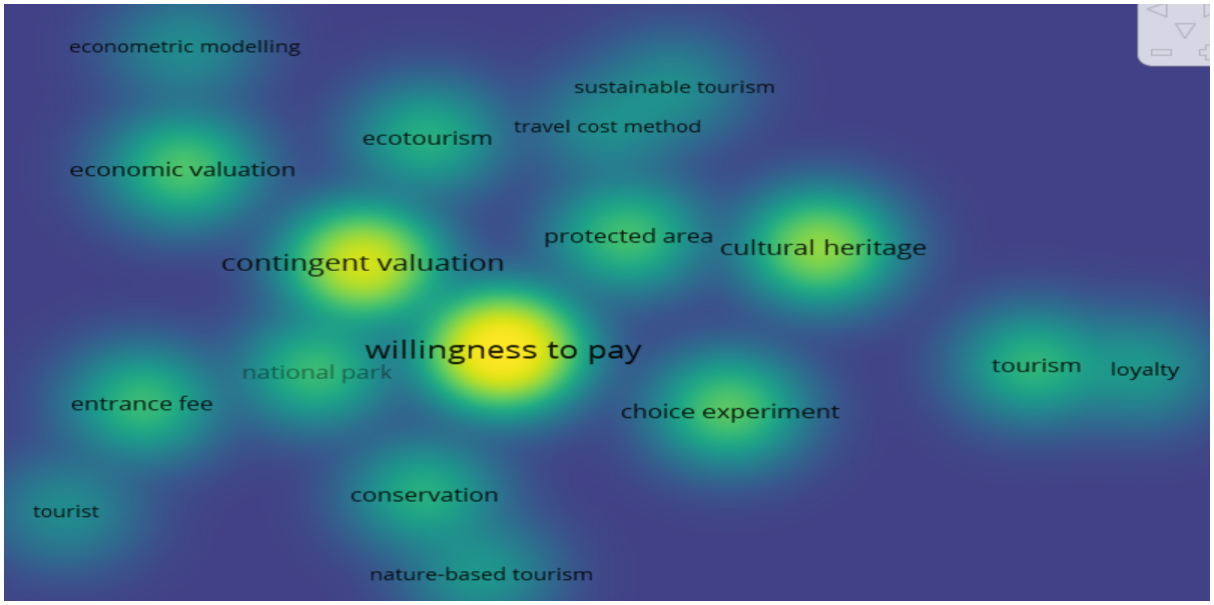
Over time, the research focus has expanded toward newer and more context-specific themes. Keywords such as ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and protected area, which appear in lighter colours, indicate a growing emphasis on environmental and sustainability-oriented applications of WTP. This shift reflects the increasing importance of sustainable tourism development and the valuation of natural resources within contemporary research. At the same time, more recent terms such as loyalty suggest the integration of behavioural and marketing perspectives into WTP research, indicating that recent studies increasingly examine not only the monetary valuation of tourism experiences but also their relationship with visitor satisfaction, repeat behaviour, and long-term engagement. In addition, the relatively recent positioning of choice experiment highlights an ongoing methodological evolution, suggesting a gradual shift from traditional valuation approaches, such as contingent valuation, toward more advanced and flexible techniques that allow for a more detailed analysis of visitor preferences.

Overall, the temporal patterns revealed by the overlay map do not indicate a shift away from pricing-related research, but rather an expansion of the field. While early studies focused on valuation methods and entrance fee pricing, more recent research incorporates sustainability, environmental management, and behavioural dimensions, resulting in a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary research framework.

2.2.3. Density visualization

The density visualization (Figure 11) highlights the concentration of research activity within the field by indicating areas with the highest frequency and co-occurrence of keywords. Warmer colours represent higher density and therefore greater research intensity, reflecting the most extensively studied and conceptually consolidated areas of the literature.

Figure 11: **Density visualization**



The highest density is observed around willingness to pay, confirming its role as the central concept within the field. This concentration is particularly evident within the green cluster, where WTP is closely associated with terms such as entrance fee, national park, and tourist. This pattern indicates that the core of the literature is strongly oriented toward the practical application of WTP in tourism contexts, especially in relation to pricing access to natural attractions and managing visitor demand. A similarly high level of density is observed within the methodological cluster, particularly around contingent valuation and economic valuation. This confirms that WTP research remains firmly grounded in established economic valuation approaches, which continue to provide the primary analytical framework for empirical studies. Beyond these core areas, moderate density is visible around terms such as cultural heritage, tourism, and ecotourism, indicating that WTP research has expanded into a range of application contexts, including both heritage-based and nature-based tourism. These areas represent important domains of application, although they are somewhat less central than the core methodological and pricing-related constructs.

In contrast, keywords such as loyalty and nature-based tourism appear in lower-density areas of the map, suggesting that these topics are more specialized and less frequently integrated into the core of the field. Rather than representing entirely new research directions, these constructs reflect more focused or emerging extensions of WTP research, particularly in relation to behavioural analysis and specific tourism segments. Importantly, while entrance fee appears in a less dense area compared to the central WTP node, this should not be interpreted as a marginal or emerging topic. Instead, it represents a well-established application of WTP within tourism research, but one that is more context-specific and therefore less broadly connected across the entire network. Taken together, the density map confirms a research field structured around a strong dual core: a central application-oriented domain focused on willingness to pay for tourist access and pricing, and a methodological foundation based on economic valuation techniques. Surrounding these core areas are a range of application-specific and behavioural themes, reflecting the gradual expansion and increasing diversification of WTP research in tourism.

The findings from the focused analysis complement the broader bibliometric results by revealing how the overall growth and diversification of the field are reflected in its internal conceptual organization.

3. DISCUSSION

This study set out to address the conceptual fragmentation of willingness to pay (WTP) research in tourism by combining a broad bibliometric overview with a focused conceptual analysis. The findings provide important insights into both the structure and evolution of the field, revealing a research domain that is simultaneously well-established and increasingly diversified. At the same time, the results should be interpreted in light of certain limitations. The analysis is based exclusively on the Web of Science Core Collection, which may introduce database-related biases in terms of journal coverage, language, and geographical representation. As a result, relevant studies indexed in other databases, such as Scopus or regional sources, may not be fully captured.

The results from the first stage of the analysis, based on the full dataset of 906 publications, confirm that WTP research in tourism has experienced sustained growth and has evolved into a highly interdisciplinary field. The increasing volume of publications, strong citation impact, and high level of international collaboration indicate that WTP has become a widely accepted analytical tool for understanding value perceptions in tourism. At the same time, the breadth of the dataset highlights a key challenge, as WTP is applied across a wide range of contexts, many of which extend beyond tourism-specific applications, thereby contributing to the conceptual fragmentation of the field.

While these findings confirm the global relevance of WTP research, they also point to potential structural biases in knowledge production. The dominance of developed countries may limit the diversity of empirical contexts and value perceptions represented in the literature, suggesting that current insights into willingness to pay may not fully capture tourism dynamics in underrepresented regions.

This challenge of conceptual fragmentation is directly addressed in the second stage of the analysis, where a refined dataset of 104 publications is used to examine the conceptual core of WTP research within tourist attractions and visitor-oriented contexts. The VOSviewer results reveal a structured yet multi-dimensional field organized into several thematic clusters, with willingness to pay emerging as the central hub within the application-oriented cluster. Its strong association with concepts such as entrance fee, national park, and tourist suggests that, despite its broad theoretical scope, WTP research is primarily anchored in practical valuation contexts, particularly those related to pricing access to natural and cultural attractions.

The coexistence of a strong application-oriented core and a well-defined methodological foundation represents a key structural characteristic of the field. On the one hand, the methodological cluster, dominated by concepts such as *contingent valuation*, *economic valuation*, and *econometric modelling*, confirms the continued importance of established economic approaches. On the other hand, the central positioning of application-related constructs indicates that WTP research is not merely theoretical, but deeply embedded in real-world tourism management and policy contexts.

The overlay and density analyses further reveal that the development of the field is best understood not as a shift from one paradigm to another, but as a process of progressive expansion. Early research was strongly focused on valuation methods and pricing mechanisms, including the estimation of entrance fees for tourist attractions. Over time, however, the field has incorporated additional thematic dimensions, particularly in relation to sustainability and visitor behaviour. The increasing prominence of terms such as *ecotourism*, *sustainable tourism*, and *protected area* reflects the growing importance of environmental considerations, while the emergence of *loyalty* and related constructs points to the integration of behavioural and experiential perspectives. Importantly, these newer themes do not replace the original focus of the field, but rather extend it. The persistence of core concepts such as WTP and valuation methods, combined with the emergence of new thematic areas, suggests that the field is evolving toward a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary framework. This interpretation is further supported by the role of *choice experiment* as a bridging concept between methodological and application-oriented clusters, indicating a methodological evolution toward more flexible and nuanced approaches to valuation.

This study advances the theoretical understanding of WTP in tourism by clarifying the conceptual structure of a previously fragmented field and introducing a dual-core framework that distinguishes between a methodological core rooted in economic valuation and an application-oriented core focused on tourist attractions. In doing so, the study moves beyond viewing WTP as a purely method-driven construct and instead positions it as fundamentally embedded in application contexts. This challenges the implicit assumption in prior literature that WTP research is primarily defined by valuation techniques, demonstrating instead that its structure is anchored in real-world tourism applications, particularly pricing and visitor management, while evolving through the integration of sustainability and behavioural perspectives without displacing its methodological foundation. This provides a basis for more integrated and interdisciplinary approaches to tourism valuation research.

From a practical perspective, the study highlights WTP as a strategic tool for evidence-based decision-making in tourism. Its strong association with pricing and tourist attractions confirms its relevance for designing sustainable pricing strategies and supporting visitor management, particularly in high-demand destinations such as national parks and heritage sites. In such contexts, WTP can inform differentiated pricing models, including dynamic pricing and visitor segmentation strategies, aimed at balancing demand with environmental and infrastructural capacity. Moreover, the findings indicate that WTP can inform not only pricing decisions but also visitor satisfaction, loyalty, and long-term engagement, while supporting policy development related to sustainable tourism and the financing of public and natural resources.

Building on the findings of this study, several important directions for future research can be identified.

First, there is a clear need for stronger integration between the methodological core of WTP research and emerging behavioural perspectives. While traditional valuation approaches remain dominant, future studies should more systematically incorporate insights from behavioural economics, psychology, and experience design in order to better capture the complexity of tourist decision-making and perceived value formation.

Second, future research should expand the empirical scope of WTP applications beyond the currently dominant contexts of protected areas and nature-based tourism. In particular, more attention should be given to urban tourism, cultural and creative industries, and overtourism-affected destinations, where pricing mechanisms and value perceptions play a critical role in managing demand and ensuring sustainability.

Third, the increasing availability of digital data opens new opportunities for methodological advancement. Future studies could combine stated preference methods with revealed preference data, big data analytics, and real-time behavioural tracking, enabling more dynamic and context-sensitive estimations of willingness to pay.

Fourth, there is a need for greater geographical diversification of research. The current dominance of developed countries suggests potential biases in knowledge production, highlighting the importance of extending WTP research to underrepresented regions in order to better capture global tourism dynamics and context-specific value perceptions.

Finally, future research should further explore the role of WTP as a strategic tool within integrated destination management frameworks. This includes its application in dynamic pricing, visitor flow regulation, and long-term sustainability planning, where WTP can support more adaptive and data-driven decision-making processes.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a systematic bibliometric overview of WTP research in tourism, with a particular focus on tourist attractions. By combining a broad analysis with a refined science-mapping approach, the study clarifies the conceptual and intellectual structure of a field previously characterized by fragmentation. The findings reveal a dual structure of WTP research, consisting of a strong methodological foundation rooted in economic valuation techniques and a dominant application-oriented core focused on pricing and managing tourist attractions, particularly in protected areas.

The results further show that the field has evolved from a primarily method-driven domain toward a more interdisciplinary and application-oriented framework, increasingly incorporating sustainability and behavioural perspectives. However, these emerging themes remain only partially integrated into its core. Overall, the study contributes to a clearer understanding of WTP research and highlights its relevance as a tool for evidence-based pricing, visitor management, and sustainable tourism policy. In this sense, WTP can be seen as a central analytical tool for bridging economic valuation and sustainable tourism management in increasingly complex and demand-sensitive destination contexts.

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