

Place branding for sustainable mountain destinations: A scoping review

Marques territorials per a destinacions de muntanya sostenibles: una revisió sistemàtica exploratòria

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ABSTRACT:

Place branding is a communication and governance strategy for building and managing positive reputations of places. Mountain destinations are vulnerable to human impact and climate change, raising the need for their protection. This study examines the intersection of mountain destinations and sustainable development through a scoping review of articles published between 2013 and 2023 in Scopus and Web of Science. The results show that scientific production is concentrated in Europe. Mountain destinations are mainly conceptualised through physical attributes and sports-related activities, while sustainability is focused on environmental concerns. Strategies related to place branding highlight its potential to drive sustainable development in mountain destinations, emphasising the need for further investigation on these regions, which have traditionally been overshadowed by urban areas. This review makes a significant contribution by providing one of the first studies to explore the intersection of mountain destinations and sustainable development.

KEYWORDS:

place branding, sustainable development, mountain destinations, destination branding, mountain tourism, sustainability.



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RESUM:

La marca territorial (*place branding*) és una estratègia de comunicació i governança per crear i gestionar les reputacions dels territoris. Les destinacions de muntanya són vulnerables a l'impacte humà i el canvi climàtic, fet que genera la necessitat de protegir-les. Aquest estudi examina la intersecció entre les destinacions de muntanya i el desenvolupament sostenible mitjançant una revisió de la literatura d'articles publicats entre el 2013 i el 2023 i indexats a Scopus i Web of Science. Els resultats mostren que la producció científica està concentrada a Europa i les destinacions de muntanya es conceptualitzen a través d'atributs físics i activitats esportives, mentre que la sostenibilitat focalitza en preocupacions ambientals. Les estratègies relacionades amb la marca territorial subratllen el seu potencial per impulsar el desenvolupament sostenible i ressalten la necessitat d'una investigació més profunda d'aquestes regions, tradicionalment eclipsades per les zones urbanes. Aquesta revisió és una de les primeres contribucions en aquest àmbit.

PARAULES CLAU:

marca territorial, desenvolupament sostenible, destinacions de muntanya, marca de destinacions, turisme de muntanya, sostenibilitat.

1. Introduction

Communication plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of places through what is known as *place branding*. As a communication and governance tool, place branding draws on insights from different disciplines to build and manage positive reputations of places that contribute to local quality of life, wellbeing, humanity, and the planet (IPBA, 2023).

Although still evolving as a field, place branding research has predominantly focused on urban contexts. In parallel, mountain areas have gained growing attention in academia and in international policy agendas due to their ecological vulnerability and their strategic role in sustainable development, as they are particularly sensitive to the impacts of climate change and human activity. This study adopts a dual focus to analyse scholarly articles on mountain destinations and sustainable development.

Place branding finds its origins in the early 2000s with Anholt's seminal work *Places. Identity, image and reputation* (2010), and the creation of the *Journal of Place Branding* in 2004, which was renamed *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* in 2007 (Florek & Pamment, 2024). Initially based on marketing literature and applied to tourist destination marketing, place branding gradually broadened its scope and came to grow in popularity as a research domain (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013) across multiple disciplines and as a field of practice to create better environmental, social, and economic conditions (Ma *et al.*, 2019).

Place branding has been commonly referred to as:

[...] a network of associations in the consumers' mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioural expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place's stakeholders and the overall place design. (Zenker & Braun, 2010: 4)

This conceptualisation refers to both internal dimensions – characteristics that define a place – and external dimensions – how the place is perceived – as well as to a diverse group of stakeholders who take part in the process.

The concepts of *identity* (internal) and *image* (external) are thus central to this discipline. Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) propose an identity-based approach in which identity and image are “two sides of the same coin”, influencing each other and shaping the identity of a place. Linked to this, Boisen *et al.* (2018) characterise place branding as being identity-driven and taking an inside-out approach. This framing highlights the communicative nature of branding since it manages representations related to identity. In this context, place brands function as strategic communication tools that convey a place's identity, which in turn serves as the foundation for communication and as an entity that is continuously shaped through communicative processes (Fernández-Cavia, Kavaratzis & Morgan, 2018).

Research on place branding has traditionally focused on countries, cities, and tourism destinations in preference to rural areas (Gulisova, 2021). Likewise, a substantial portion of the literature focuses on the constructs of place and destination (Ma *et al.*, 2019). In essence, the difference between place and destination branding lies in their scope of application. While destination branding addresses only tourists, place branding encompasses all stakeholders (Hanna, Rowley & Keegan, 2021) since it influences both tourists and residents. Historically, destination branding has been focused on promoting places for tourism (Fernández-Cavia & Huertas, 2014). Nevertheless, contemporary approaches to place branding consider *destination branding* to be an inaccurate term since places should be conceived as comprehensive brands including aspects beyond tourism (Govers, 2013). Ultimately, destination branding can be seen as a form of place branding.

This research focuses on the particular case of mountain destinations for several reasons. First, mountains are fragile environments sensitive to anthropogenic pressures. Second, in recent years, mountains and mountain tourism have attracted increasing interest both as a research topic and in global agendas due to the specific challenges they face in terms of sustainable development. And third, research on place branding has traditionally been more closely linked to cities and the urban context. For this reason, this study seeks to advance the understanding of the intersection between mountain destinations and sustainable development from a place-branding perspective.

1.1. Mountain destinations and their link with sustainable development

Mountains cover 24% of the Earth's surface and are present in 139 countries across all continents (Richins, Johnsen & Hull, 2016). They are home to approximately 1.1 billion people (FAO & UNWTO, 2023) and are the second most popular destination in the world, behind coasts and islands (UNEP, 2007). Mountain destinations are places located at high-altitudes (Kuščer, 2014; Kuščer, Mihalič & Pechlaner, 2016), often in rural regions (Zeng *et al.*, 2022), which attract tourists largely due to the aesthetic appeal of their landscapes (Dornier & Mauri, 2018), as well as to the variety of sports and leisure possibilities they offer (Shekhar, 2022), making their topography a "major factor of consideration when developing and maintaining destinations" (WTO, 2018: 17).

In addition, mountain tourism is estimated to account for between 9% and 16% of all international tourist arrivals (FAO & UNWTO, 2023) and can play a key role in reducing poverty, driving economic development, and supporting environmental management (Cao *et al.*, 2022). At the same time, tourism can have negative impacts on mountain destinations, leading to cultural disruption, economic inequalities and environmental degradation if it is not managed sustainably (Zeng *et al.*, 2022). This represents a paradox in which tourism can integrate mountain destinations into the global economy but at the same time threaten their sustainability, possibly lead-

ing to decline and marginalisation (Chakraborty, 2019). Moreover, mountain destinations are highly dependent on their ecosystems, making them especially vulnerable to climate variations, which can significantly influence tourism demand (WTO, 2018). This is particularly relevant in the winter season, as rising temperatures can lead to the closure of lower-altitude ski resorts (Vukočić *et al.*, 2018).

Effects of global warming can be irreversible, resulting in the loss of unique landscapes. In turn, this may encourage the promotion of what has been coined as “last chance tourism”, whereby “some tourists visit these areas before they disappear” (Lemelin *et al.*, 2010: 478). This raises a new paradox, since last chance tourism can accelerate the decline of these vulnerable destinations, especially through long-haul air travel to visit them (Dawson *et al.*, 2011).

Moreover, mountain tourism is also an emerging field of research that has seen steady growth in the last few years, with several authors identifying common areas of interest, such as climate change, sustainable development, tourism development, and economic development (Río-Rama *et al.*, 2019; Zeng *et al.*, 2022; Ng, 2022; Chakraborty & Ghosal, 2022; Shekhar, 2022). While there is still no consensus on this form of tourism in the academic domain, scholars understand it as a broad concept that includes a variety of recreation and adventure activities (Río-Rama *et al.*, 2019).

In the absence of an internationally accepted definition of mountain tourism, the World Tourism Organization proposed the following conceptualisation:

Mountain tourism is a type of tourism activity which takes place in a defined and limited geographical space such as hills or mountains with distinctive characteristics and attributes that are inherent to a specific landscape, topography, climate, biodiversity (flora and fauna) and local community. It encompasses a broad range of outdoor leisure and sports activities. (WTO, 2019: 50)

Additionally, in the past two decades, sustainability has become an essential paradigm for the development of tourism (Wagenseil, Wyss & Huck, 2022). Although sustainable tourism can be defined in many ways, scholars tend to reference the conceptualisation provided by the World Tourism Organization and the United Nations Environment Programme (2005), which conceives it as a condition of tourism grounded in the principles of sustainable development rather than as a form of tourism. Therefore, sustainable tourism contributes to address present environmental, socio-cultural and economic needs while planning for the future (Dornier & Mauri, 2018). The importance of the sustainable approach in tourism has also translated into linking tourism with the achievement of several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), namely SDGs 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), 14 (Life Below Water), 15 (Life on Land), and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) (Romeo *et al.*, 2021).

Interest in mountains has also gained importance through international initiatives led by the United Nations, such as the Mountain Partnership, “an alliance of partners dedicated to improving the lives of mountain peoples and protecting mountain environments around the world” (Mountain Partnership, n.d.). Moreover, the UN declared 2002 the International Year of Mountains and 2022 the International Year of Sustainable Mountain Development, developing the Five Years of Action for the Development of Mountain Regions (2023-2027). These initiatives aim to raise awareness about the importance of sustainable mountain development as well as about the challenges faced by these destinations and their communities. Similarly, the UN has recently declared 2025 the International Year of Glaciers’ Preservation, and 21st March the World Day for Glaciers aiming to preserve these landscapes and raise awareness about the essential environmental functions of glaciers, snow, and ice.

1.2. Objectives

The main objective of this research is to explore scientific production on mountain destinations and sustainable development published between 2013 and 2023. The specific objectives (SO) are as follows:

- SO1: To describe the scientific production in terms of authors, sources, geographical areas covered, methodological approaches, and research themes.
- SO2: To analyse how mountain destinations are conceptualised, by identifying recurring definitions and keywords.
- SO3: To identify and synthesise sustainable development strategies relevant to place branding.

2. Methodology

A scoping review was conducted to analyse literature at the intersection between mountain destinations and sustainable development. Scoping reviews are a type of systematic evidence synthesis used to examine an area of science or a specialty (Codina, Lopezosa & Freixa, 2021). Typically, scoping reviews allow for an initial assessment of the characteristics of a specific body of knowledge, the methods used, or the identification of areas requiring further research.

This study follows the SALSA framework proposed by Grant and Booth (2009), which enables a structured and systematic evaluation of literature through four distinct phases, namely, Search, Appraisal, Synthesis and Analysis, which go to form the acronym of this approach.

In the Search phase, scholarly articles were identified in Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), since these databases provide extensive coverage and high-quality standards (Río-Rama *et al.*, 2019). To locate relevant literature on mountain desti-

nations and sustainable development, the following search equation was used: Title (“mountain destination” OR “mountain tourism” OR “alpine destination” OR “alpine tourism”) AND Title-Abs-Key (“sustainable development” OR sustainability OR SDG OR “sustainable tourism”). The eligibility criteria consisted of articles or review articles published between 2013 and 2023.

While the terms *mountain tourism* and *mountain destination* are not exact synonyms, they are closely related, with mountain destinations being inherently linked to the concept of mountain tourism. This interconnectedness ensures the retrieval of a substantial amount of relevant research. A similar relationship exists between the keywords *sustainable development* and related terms which, though not identical, convey similar meanings.

After completing the Search phase, an appraisal of the results obtained was carried out to screen them and remove duplicates, irrelevant research (false positives, viewpoints and research notes), and studies that were unavailable via interlibrary loan, as shown in Figure 1.

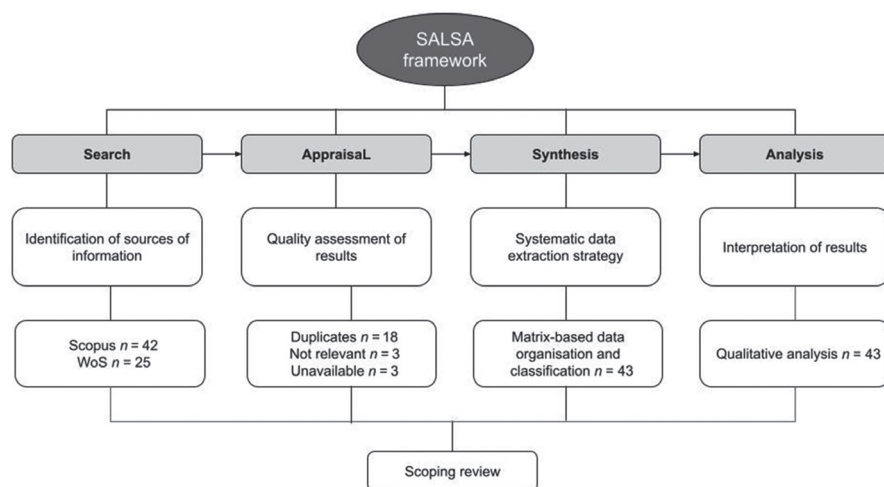


Figure 1. Overview of the scoping review process following the SALSA framework

Source: Prepared by the author based on Grant and Booth (2009).

Following this process, the 43 articles forming the evidence base were synthesised and analysed with the support of a matrix dataset to collect reference data, along with information from various sections of the research articles.

3. Results

This section is structured in three parts. The first is an overview of the characteristics of the evidence base. The second is a description of the conceptualisation of mountain destinations, and the third is a meta-synthesis of sustainable development strategies that can be linked to place branding.

3.1. Characteristics of scientific research on mountain destinations and sustainable development

There is a steady increase in the publication of research papers at the intersection between mountain destinations and sustainable development. Years 2020 and 2021 alone show a decrease in the number of publications (Appendix, Table 1). Many research articles have been written in a collaborative effort and appear in a range of journals, with *Sustainability* standing out as the most prominent ($n=8$), followed by *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* ($n=4$), and *Journal of Mountain Science* ($n=3$).

Most articles focus on specific mountain regions, especially Europe ($n=21$) and Asia ($n=12$). One of the research articles focuses on Nigeria (Africa), but no studies were identified for North and South America and Oceania. Popular countries include Italy ($n=7$), Austria ($n=5$), China ($n=5$), Romania ($n=4$), Serbia ($n=4$), Germany ($n=3$), India ($n=3$) and Switzerland ($n=3$), as shown in Table 2 (Appendix).

Moreover, a significant number of studies employ surveys as their primary methodology ($n=20$). Other commonly used methods include interviews ($n=8$), statistical analyses ($n=6$), literature reviews ($n=4$), bibliometric analyses ($n=4$), content analysis ($n=2$), observations ($n=2$), and expert decision making ($n=2$). Additional methods, each of them appearing in a single study, include comparative analysis, focus groups, netnography, and Q-methodology.

Regarding research themes, which will be addressed in detail in the next section, the studies are distributed as follows: Mountain Destination Development ($n=13$), Tourist Profile and Behaviour ($n=9$), Sustainability and Environmental Challenges ($n=8$), Local Stakeholders and Management ($n=8$), and Research Perspectives ($n=5$).

3.2. Research themes and conceptualisations

Building on the thematic distribution outlined above, this section delves further into the specific research themes identified in the studies. Subsequently, the conceptualisations of mountain destinations are examined to understand how these destinations are framed in the context of sustainable development.

3.2.1. Research themes

Research articles have been grouped according to their primary objective and central subject matter, as shown in Table 2. While the categories are not mutually ex-

clusive – and some studies may touch on multiple themes – each article has been assigned to the category that most accurately reflects its main focus and purpose.

The theme that includes the biggest number of scholarly articles is Mountain Destination Development. Studies in this category focus on development indicators (Kuščer, 2014; Rakytova & Tomcikova, 2017), innovativeness factors (Kuščer, 2013; Kuščer, Mihalič & Pechlaner, 2016), and tourism competitiveness (Cao *et al.*, 2022), as well as the impact of transport on mountain destinations (Scuttari, Orsi & Bassani, 2018; Liu *et al.*, 2022), the characteristics of family-owned businesses (Banki & Ismail, 2015), the recreational value associated with mountain tourism (Ali, 2023), the effects of Covid-19 on rural mountain tourism (Crețu *et al.*, 2023), and the alienation of nature caused by infrastructure and technology (Xu & Li, 2021).

Tourist Profile and Behaviour includes studies analysing tourists' imagery associated with their favourite mountain tourism destinations (Araújo *et al.*, 2019) as well as their travel motives (Strobl, Teichmann & Peters, 2015; Bausch & Unseld, 2017), studies identifying the profile of visitors to ecotourism destinations (Constantin *et al.*, 2021), studies examining the Millennials' perspective on sustainability and mountain tourism (Bonadonna, Giachino & Truant, 2017), or studies on how online reviews influence tourists' evaluations (Bigné, Zanfardini & Andreu, 2019), along with studies of place attachment and perceived authenticity of mountain tourism destinations (Xiao *et al.*, 2021) and of initiatives linked to responsible tourism practices (Dax & Tamme, 2023).

Research articles under Sustainability and Environmental Challenges reflect on environmental sustainability (Chakraborty, 2019), the impact of climate change on mountain tourism (Vukoičić *et al.*, 2018), the impact of tourism on the natural landscape (Chakraborty, 2020), the compliance of mountain tourism destinations with sustainable development indicators (Bošković, Vujičić & Ristić, 2019), the management of sustainable mobility (Scuttari, Volgger & Pechlaner, 2016) and of waste (Krishnan *et al.*, 2023), and the development and promotion of good environment conservation behaviour (Zhang *et al.*, 2017).

Moreover, Local Stakeholders and Management includes studies on sustainable development management strategies in hotels (Buffa *et al.*, 2018), the adoption of sustainable development practices by tourism and destination managers (Brătucu *et al.*, 2017; Paunović & Jovanović, 2019), residents' perceptions of tourism development (Oh, Lee & Oh, 2018) and its impacts (Demirović *et al.*, 2018), attitudes towards sustainable tourism (Jeelani *et al.*, 2022), as well as residents' participation in tourism development (Kantsperger, Thees & Eckert, 2019).

Lastly, literature reviews and bibliometric analyses were grouped under Research Perspectives. This theme includes one systematic literature review focused on the specific context of the Himalayas (Chakraborty & Ghosal, 2022) and four bibliometric analyses: two focusing on literature published in Scopus (Ng, 2022; Shekhar, 2022), one focusing on WoS (Zeng *et al.*, 2022), and one covering both Scopus and WoS (Río-Rama *et al.*, 2019).

3.2.2. *Conceptualisation of mountain destinations*

To analyse conceptualisations related to mountain destinations, introductory sections of the research articles were systematically examined to identify recurring terms (Figure 2). These sections are where authors typically express their understanding of various terms and phenomena. At the same time, the study of these conceptualisations is interesting in the field of place branding since the way places are conceptualised plays a crucial role in the communication process, shaping the images and identities of destinations.

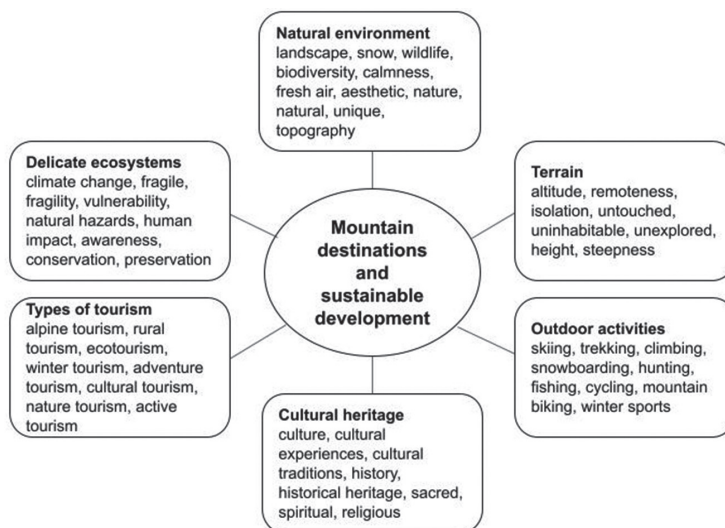


Figure 2. Conceptualisation of mountain destinations

Source: Prepared by the author.

Mountain destinations in the scholarly articles analysed often include references to Flagestad and Hope's (2001) definition of winter sports destinations and conceptualise them as geographic, economic, and social entities designed to satisfy tourist needs.

Authors highlight the "natural environment" and refer to its distinctive characteristics as the main travel motif or selling point of mountain destinations. As such, words like "landscapes", "snow", "wildlife" or "nature", along with adjectives like "unique", "high", "breathtaking" or "spectacular" are commonly used to describe them.

Authors also refer to mountain destinations by describing their "terrain", which can be difficult to access due to "altitude" and "remoteness" and can also hinder objectives related to sustainable development (Bausch & Unseld, 2017). Yet, "untouched" and "unexplored" areas enable a deeper connection with the

natural environment (Duglio & Letey, 2019; Zeng *et al.*, 2022), while their “hilly” characteristics provide a valuable setting for tourists seeking adventure experiences.

“Outdoor activities” are mentioned in several papers, either to define mountain tourism, to describe the variety of sports that can be practiced in mountain destinations, or to refer to the overdependence on winter activities, with several authors advocating year-round perspectives due to the effects of climate change (Kuščer, Mihalič & Pechlaner, 2016; Bošković, Vujičić & Ristić, 2019; Shekhar, 2022).

Another recurring topic to conceptualise mountain destinations, though less frequent, is “cultural heritage”. Some articles refer to the “spiritual appeal” or the “traditions” and “cultural experiences” they provide, as well as the importance of preserving these environments and their ways of life (Kuščer, Mihalič & Pechlaner, 2016; Duglio & Letey, 2019; Cozma, Coroş & Pop, 2021). However, there are a few critical voices concerned about identification and diversification of tourism since it can have negative impacts on culture and the local community (Demirović *et al.*, 2018; Chakraborty, 2019; Xu *et al.*, 2023).

As mentioned previously, mountain tourism is strongly conceptualised in relation to sports. In addition, these conceptualisations sometimes find links with other “types of tourism” such as “winter tourism”, “rural tourism”, or “ecotourism”. In some cases, mountain tourism is conceived as a broad category including other forms of tourism such as “winter-based tourism” (Kuščer, 2014), “adventure tourism”, or “cultural tourism”, or it is confused with “nature tourism” and “adventure tourism” (Río-Rama *et al.*, 2019).

Lastly, “delicate ecosystems” is another characteristic that defines mountain environments. In this sense, words like “fragility”, “vulnerability”, “natural hazards”, “human impact”, or “conservation” appeared in many articles, with “climate change” being the biggest challenge identified (Demirović *et al.*, 2018; Chakraborty, 2019; Ng, 2022). Fragility is often linked to sustainable development, with authors calling for strategies to protect these places (Kuščer, Mihalič & Pechlaner, 2016; Cozma, Coroş & Pop, 2021; Xu *et al.*, 2023; Ng, 2022).

Likewise, sustainable tourism is addressed from various perspectives: as a collaborative process involving multiple stakeholders (Scuttari, Volgger & Pechlaner, 2016), as a concept lacking a universally accepted definition (Bošković, Vujičić & Ristić, 2019; Cozma, Coroş & Pop, 2021), but not as a distinct form of tourism (Bošković, Vujičić, & Ristić, 2019; Wagenseil, Wyss & Huck, 2022). Interestingly, only a few articles mention the Sustainable Development Goals or directly link their research to this framework.

3.3. Sustainable development strategies relevant to place branding

This final section presents a meta-synthesis of sustainable development strategies that can be linked to place branding, organised into recurring themes. The

meta-synthesis is based on insights extracted from the concluding sections of the articles analysed, since they condense the main findings.

3.3.1. *Education and awareness*

There is a great need to educate both tourists and residents about the environmental impacts of tourism, as well as to promote eco-labels, sustainability accreditation programmes (Constantin *et al.*, 2021), and certifications standards (Krishnan *et al.*, 2023). Raising awareness on the positive impacts of tourism can increase local support for sustainable tourism policies (Demirović *et al.*, 2018) and encourage residents and tourists to adopt more eco-friendly behaviours (Zhang *et al.*, 2017; Constantin *et al.*, 2021).

3.3.2. *Sustainable development and environmental management*

Tourism managers should prioritise the protection of the original natural and cultural resources to prevent any negative effects on perceived authenticity and subsequent decrease in place attachment (Xiao *et al.*, 2021). Investing in environmentally friendly practices, managing natural resources, and adopting climate-resilient strategies are seen as competitive advantages for mountain destinations (Buffa *et al.*, 2018). It is recommended that mountain destinations offer a balanced range of activities throughout the year (Araújo *et al.*, 2019; Bošković, Vujičić & Ristić, 2019; Dax & Tamme, 2023). In affected areas, prioritising summer and health tourism may mitigate the effects of climate change on the sustainable development of mountain destinations (Vukoičić *et al.*, 2018).

3.3.3. *Stakeholder engagement and community involvement*

Involving local communities and stakeholders in planning processes can lead to more successful and supported tourism strategies (Demirović *et al.*, 2018), while incorporating residents' perspectives and encouraging collaboration with local players enhances the alignment between tourism development and community wellbeing (Scuttari, Orsi & Bassani, 2018; Kantsperger, Thees & Eckert, 2019).

3.3.4. *Cross-sector collaboration and partnerships*

Sustainable mountain tourism requires close cooperation between governments, industry professionals, local communities (Cao *et al.*, 2022; Zeng *et al.*, 2022), and researchers (Chakraborty & Ghosal, 2022). International coordination, interdisciplinary research, and the exchange of best practices (Paunović & Jovanović, 2019) are critical for developing effective policies and addressing the complex challenges posed by climate change (Shekhar, 2022). It is also suggested that policymakers should promote the adoption of environmental management practices and collaboration through public incentives and subsidies (Buffa *et al.*, 2018), and that collaboration between local and regional governments should be strengthened (Tampakis *et al.*, 2019; Scuttari, Volgger & Pechlaner, 2016).

3.3.5. *Critical perspectives and challenges*

Some authors call for limiting large-scale tourism to reduce environmental damage (Chakraborty, 2019) and recognise that since sustainable practices differ across societies they are subject to varying interpretations (Paunović & Jovanović, 2019). Conflicts may arise between experts and residents, who often hold differing views on the impact of tourism (Oh, Lee & Oh, 2018). Additionally, tourism can commodify nature, reducing meaningful connections with the environment (Xu & Li, 2021).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore research on mountain destinations and sustainable development. Through a scoping review of literature published in Scopus and WoS between 2013 and 2023, the three specific objectives set out in the introduction were addressed. These are reviewed below to assess the extent to which each one has been fulfilled.

In terms of the characteristics of scientific production, the results indicate a steady increase in the number of publications, signalling a growing interest in mountain destinations and sustainable development, a trend that aligns with that observed in the broader field of mountain tourism. Research is scattered across several journals (Río-Rama *et al.*, 2019; Chakraborty & Ghosal, 2022), with *Sustainability*, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, and *Journal of Mountain Science* being the sources with the highest number of studies in the sample. The results are in line with previous studies (Zeng *et al.*, 2022; Ng, 2022), who also identified *Sustainability* as the most prominent outlet, while the other two journals were also found to be among the most prolific, although not necessarily in the same order.

Most investigations focus on specific mountain destinations, with two-thirds being studies that consider a single specific mountain area. Europe has the highest number of mountain destinations in the sample, followed by Asia, while Africa has only one study. No research related to North or South America or Oceania was retrieved. The relevance of Europe can be explained by the large number of mountain ranges, a developed tourist infrastructure, and better accessibility (Río-Rama *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, there is a strong presence of alpine countries such as Italy, Austria, Germany, or Switzerland. The inclusion of China and Romania in several studies highlights the growing prominence of the former in the scientific production on mountain tourism and the emerging status of the latter as a sustainable mountain tourism destination (Zeng *et al.*, 2022).

Popular research methods include surveys, interviews, statistical and bibliometric analyses, and literature reviews. These results differ slightly from those found in a literature review focused on the Indian Himalayan Region (Chakraborty &

Ghosal, 2022), where observations were identified as the preferred data collection method, followed by interviews and surveys. Moreover, some of the research themes identified in this study can be connected to the ones proposed by Shekhar, 2022, namely Mountain Destination Development, Tourist Profile and Behaviour, and Environmental Challenges.

The second specific objective sought to analyse conceptualisations of mountain destinations. The outcomes highlight terms used to describe mountain destinations, generally describing their geographical attributes or the reference activities typically undertaken in these environments, consistent with the characteristics “diversity”, “marginality”, “difficult access”, “fragility”, “niche”, and “aesthetics” identified by Nepal and Chipeniuk (2005) in their conceptual framework of mountain tourism. Terms used to describe mountain destinations also align with the responses collected in a survey of European mountain travellers (Araújo *et al.*, 2019), who commonly used words like “nature”, “beauty”, “landscapes”, “skiing”, “snow” and “mountains”. In addition, outdoor activities, particularly winter activities, are related to climate change, which emerges as the biggest challenge in mountain destinations. However, the association with sporting activities often overshadows the cultural dimension, which tends to receive less attention. These results could point to difficulties in building a unique identity in different mountain destinations, since many of the physical attributes are common to many of them (Fernández-Cavia & Huertas, 2014).

The results show there is no clear definition of mountain tourism, a fact that contributes to its frequent overlap or confusion with other types of tourism (Río-Rama *et al.*, 2019). Notably, very few articles address the Sustainable Development Goals or adopt this framework, suggesting limited attention to the 2030 Agenda in the domain of mountain destinations, despite its global acceptance, in agreement with findings at the intersection with place branding and sustainable development (Aguilera-Cora, Fernández-Cavia & Codina, 2024; Aguilera-Cora & Fernández-Cavia, 2025).

The third specific objective was oriented at synthesising the sustainable development strategies relevant to place branding. The evidence suggests that place branding functions as a governance strategy dependent on multiple stakeholders to succeed (Stevens, Klijn & Warsen, 2020). Results across the recurring themes indicate a contemporary approach to place branding that should strive to promote stakeholder involvement (Ripoll González *et al.*, 2024) and inclusive co-creation practices (Ripoll González, *et al.*, 2025) in order to achieve collective engagement in the branding process (Björner & Aronsson, 2022). It also highlights the inherent conflicts arising from this diversity, as different stakeholders have varying interests, making place branding a space of constant negotiation and dynamic identity construction (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

Moreover, similar to how mountain destinations are conceptualised, sustainable development narratives linked to place branding predominantly focus on

environmental sustainability. This emphasis is also reflected in the emerging academic field connecting place branding and sustainability, where environmental aspects are often prioritised (Therkelsen, James & Halkier, 2021).

Lastly, several studies in this scoping review advocate awareness and conservation measures to protect the natural environment in mountain destinations. These findings, along with the prominence of the integral features of mountain destinations with respect to how they are conceptualised, highlight a connection with landscape branding. This theoretical approach emphasises landscapes as a key symbolic and tangible component in how territories are represented and evoked (San Eugenio Vela, Nogué & Govers, 2017). From this perspective, governmental and public acknowledgement of the symbolic value of landscapes can encourage their preservation, thus contributing to sustainability and improving quality of life.

5. Limitations and future research

This study has certain limitations. One limitation is the reliance on specific academic databases which may only capture a portion of the existing scientific production. Another limitation lies in the selected time frame, which, although justified by the emerging nature of mountain tourism research, may have excluded relevant earlier contributions. Additionally, given that place branding is still a developing discipline – particularly in non-urban contexts and in relation to sustainable development – the connections between these fields may not always be explicitly addressed in the literature, which can make it challenging to establish clear relationships.

This scoping review offers a preliminary contribution to place branding and mountain tourism research by exploring how mountain destinations intersect with sustainable development. The results highlight several implications. Firstly, they indicate a geographical bias towards European destinations. Extending the research to mountain destinations in other regions could provide a deeper understanding of different realities. Secondly, the conceptualisation of mountain destinations largely revolves around physical features, sports-related activities, and environmental sustainability. This reflects a narrow interpretation of sustainability that prioritises ecological concerns and demonstrates the need to move towards more holistic approaches that further explore economic and, above all, social dimensions. Moreover, the few references to the SDGs indicate a weak integration of this framework in the studied domain, which opens new avenues for research to align with this framework or to study how it is being incorporated into mountain destinations. Lastly, the place branding narratives identified in the sample highlight its significance in fragile environments such as mountain regions, which are often overlooked in favour of urban contexts. This underscores the need to further explore

mountain destinations and the potential of modern place branding approaches for achieving sustainability goals in these areas.

Considering the evidence reviewed, it is recommended that place branding experts and policymakers develop communication strategies that reflect on the multifaceted values of mountain destinations. Evidence-based governance approaches that integrate participative processes engage a diversity of actors and recognise the importance of local communities as essential tools to support sustainable development in these territories.

6. Funding

This study is supported by the 2022 FI-SDUR grant of the Agency for Management of University and Research Grants (AGAUR) of the Generalitat de Catalunya (Government of Catalonia).

7. Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

8. Sustainable development goals

This article contributes to the following Sustainable Development Goals:



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Appendix

ID	Author	Year	Source
1	Kuščer	2013	<i>Journal of Vacation Marketing</i>
2	Kuščer	2014	<i>Tourism Analysis</i>
3	Banki & Ismail	2015	<i>Tourism Management Perspectives</i>
4	Strobl, Teichmann & Peters	2015	<i>Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal</i>
5	Scuttari, Volgger & Pechlaner	2016	<i>Journal of Sustainable Tourism</i>
6	Kuščer, Mihalič & Pechlaner	2016	<i>Journal of Sustainable Tourism</i>
7	Bratucu <i>et al.</i>	2017	<i>Sustainability</i>
8	Bonadonna, Giachino & Truant	2017	<i>Sustainability</i>
9	Zhang <i>et al.</i>	2017	<i>Journal of Mountain Science</i>
10	Rakyatova & Tomcikova	2017	<i>European Journal of Geography</i>
11	Bausch & Unseld	2017	<i>Journal of Vacation Marketing</i>
12	Vukoičić <i>et al.</i>	2018	<i>Időjárás</i>
13	Demirović <i>et al.</i>	2018	<i>Sustainability</i>
14	Oh, Lee & Oh	2018	<i>Journal of Engineering and Applied Sciences</i>
15	Buffa <i>et al.</i>	2018	<i>Sustainability</i>
16	Scuttari, Orsi & Bassani	2018	<i>Journal of Sustainable Tourism</i>
17	Chakraborty	2019	<i>GeoJournal</i>
18	Duglio & Letey	2019	<i>Journal of Mountain Science</i>
19	Paunović & Jovanović	2019	<i>Acta Geographica Slovenica</i>
20	Tampakis <i>et al.</i>	2019	<i>Forests</i>
21	Río-Rama <i>et al.</i>	2019	<i>European Journal of Tourism Research</i>
22	Araújo <i>et al.</i>	2019	<i>European Journal of Tourism Research</i>
23	Kantsperger, Thees & Eckert	2019	<i>Sustainability</i>
24	Bošković, Vujičić & Ristić	2019	<i>Current Issues in Tourism</i>
25	Bigné, Zanfardini & Andreu	2019	<i>Journal of Sustainable Tourism</i>
26	Chakraborty	2020	<i>Land</i>
27	Constantin <i>et al.</i>	2021	<i>Environmental Engineering and Management Journal</i>
28	Xiao <i>et al.</i>	2021	<i>Journal of Mountain Science</i>
29	Cozma, Coroș, & Pop	2021	<i>Sustainability</i>
30	Xu & Li	2021	<i>Tourism Geographies</i>
31	Zeng <i>et al.</i>	2022	<i>Sustainability</i>
32	Ng	2022	<i>Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism</i>
33	Liu <i>et al.</i>	2022	<i>Sustainability</i>

Table 1. Overview of research articles included in the scoping review

ID	Author	Year	Source
35	Jeelani <i>et al.</i>	2022	<i>Environment, Development and Sustainability</i>
36	Chakraborty & Ghosal	2022	<i>Asia-Pacific Journal of Regional Science</i>
37	Shekhar	2022	<i>Advances in Hospitality and Tourism Research (AHTR)</i>
38	Wagenseil, Wyss & Huck	2022	<i>Tourism Planning and Development</i>
39	Krishnan <i>et al.</i>	2023	<i>Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal</i>
40	Xu <i>et al.</i>	2023	<i>Sustainability</i>
41	Cretu <i>et al.</i>	2023	<i>Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture and Rural Development</i>
42	Ali	2023	<i>Journal of Cleaner Production</i>
43	Dax & Tamme	2023	<i>Tourism and Hospitality</i>

Table 1. Overview of research articles included in the scoping review (*continued*)

Source: Prepared by the author.

ID	Mountain region	Method	Research theme
1	-	Survey	Mountain Destination Development
2	-	Literature review, survey	Mountain Destination Development
3	Obudu (Nigeria)	Interviews	Mountain Destination Development
4	Stubaital (Austria)	Survey	Tourist Profile and Behaviour
5	Pustertal/Pusteria Valley, Vinschgau/Venosta Valley, and Seiser Alm/Alpe di Siusi plateau (Italy)	Interviews	Sustainability and Environment Challenges
6	Austria, Slovenia, and Switzerland	Survey	Mountain Destination Development
7	Romanian Carpathians (Romania)	Interviews	Local Stakeholders and Management
8	Piedmont (Italy)	Survey	Tourist Profile and Behaviour
9	Jiuzhaigou Forest Park and Mount Qingcheng (China)	Survey	Sustainability and Environment Challenges
10	Demanovska Valley (Slovakia)	Statistical analysis	Mountain Destination Development
11	-	Focus groups	Tourist Profile and Behaviour
12	Starovlaška and Kopaonik (Serbia)	Statistical analysis	Sustainability and Environment Challenges
13	Kopaonik (Serbia)	Q-methodology	Local Stakeholders and Management
14	Taebaek (South Korea)	Survey	Local Stakeholders and Management
15	Trentino (Italy)	Survey	Local Stakeholders and Management
16	Dolomites (Italy)	Survey	Mountain Destination Development
17	Shiromadake District (Japan)	Interviews, content analysis	Sustainability and Environment Challenges
18	Torino and Aosta Valley (Italy)	Statistical analysis	Mountain destination development
19	France, Liechtenstein, Italy, Germany, Slovenia, Austria, Switzerland, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, Macedonia, and Serbia	Survey	Local Stakeholders and Management
20	Metsovo (Greece)	Survey	Mountain Destination Development
21	-	Bibliometric analysis	Research Perspectives

Table 2. Mountain regions, research methods, and themes in articles reviewed

ID	Mountain region	Method	Research theme
22	-	Survey	Tourist Profile and Behaviour
23	Bad Reichenhall (Germany)	Interviews, content analysis	Local Stakeholders and Management
24	Kopaonik, Zlatibor, Stara Planina, Tara, and Divčibare (Serbia)	Comparative analysis	Sustainability and Environment Challenges
25	-	Statistical analysis	Tourist Profile and Behaviour
26	Kamikochi (Japan)	Interviews, observations, survey	Sustainability and Environment Challenges
27	Poiana Brasov (Romania)	Survey	Tourist Profile and Behaviour
28	Jiuzhai Valley National Park (China)	Survey	Tourist Profile and Behaviour
29	Rodna Mountains National Park (Romania)	Survey	Tourist Profile and Behaviour
30	Tianmen Mountain National Forest Park (China)	Observations, interviews, netnography	Mountain Destination Development
31	-	Bibliometric analysis	Research Perspectives
32	-	Bibliometric analysis	Research Perspectives
33	Guizhou, Guangxi, and Yunnan (China)	Statistical analysis	Mountain Destination Development
34	Enshi (China)	Statistical analysis	Mountain Destination Development
35	Pahalgam (India)	Survey	Local Stakeholders and Management
36	Himalayas (India)	Literature review	Research Perspectives
37	-	Bibliometric analysis	Research Perspectives
38	Switzerland, Austria, Germany, and Italy	Survey	Local Stakeholders and Management
39	India	Literature review, expert decision making	Sustainability and Environment Challenges
40	Mountain lodges: Jedinci, Nedim Pilav Jogi, Igman - Malo polje, Lopata, Ibrahim Fejzić, and Zabrana (Bosnia and Herzegovina)	Expert decision making	Sustainability and Environment Challenges
41	Alba, Argeş, Braşov, Covasna, Maramureş, Neamţ, Prahova, Sibiu, Suceava, and Vâlcea (Romania)	Survey	Mountain Destination Development
42	Gilgit-Baltistan (Pakistan)	Survey	Mountain Destination Development
43	Austria	Literature review, interviews	Tourist Profile and Behaviour

Table 2. Mountain regions, research methods, and themes in articles reviewed (continued)*Source: Prepared by the author.*