Religious tourism: a bibliometric and network analysis

Anirban Das, Rama Koteswara Rao Kondasani and Rupam Deb

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to highlight the theoretical foundations and future research directions in religious tourism and related topics from 2003 to 2023.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 4,143 documents from Web of Science and Scopus databases related to religious tourism and pilgrimage were analysed using VOSviewer software.

Findings – The analysis illuminates a steady rise in religious tourism research. The most influential countries are the USA, the UK and Israel. Gendered studies, tourists’ perceptions and technology in religious tourism will be research hotspots, as predicted with keyword co-occurrence analysis.

Originality/value – This study thoroughly evaluates two decades of religious tourism literature through bibliometric and network analysis. It can help researchers comprehend religious tourism study more thoroughly and determine where to focus future research.

Keywords Religious tourism, Pilgrimage, Bibliometric analysis, VOSviewer, Visualisation

Turismo religioso: un análisis bibliométrico y de redes

Resumen


 Diseño/metodología/enfoque: Se analizó un total de 4,143 documentos de las bases de datos Web of Science y Scopus relacionados con el turismo religioso y la peregrinación utilizando el software VOSviewer.

 Hallazgos: El análisis ilumina un aumento constante en la investigación del turismo religioso. Los países más influyentes son Estados Unidos, Reino Unido e Israel. Los estudios de género, la percepción de los turistas y la tecnología en el turismo religioso en el turismo religioso serán puntos críticos de investigación como se predice con el análisis de co-ocurrencia de palabras clave.

Originalidad/valor: Este estudio evalúa minuciosamente dos décadas de literatura sobre turismo religioso a través de análisis bibliométrico y de redes. Puede ayudar a los investigadores a comprender el estudio del turismo religioso más a fondo y determinar dónde enfocarse en futuras investigaciones.

Palabras clave Turismo Religioso, Romería, Análisis bibliométrico, VOSviewer, Visualización

Tipo de papel Revisión general
1. Introduction

Religious travel has been common practice for centuries (Collins-Kreiner, 2019). Religious tourism is among the primal forms of tourism (Rinschede, 1992; Yoo et al., 2022). It refers to pilgrimage for secular or religious reasons (Vukonić, 1992; Iliev, 2020). Religious tourism entails going to spiritual destinations that meet both visitors’ spiritual expectations and economic objectives of such destinations (Iliev, 2020). Religiously motivated travellers have a marked propensity to make pilgrimages or visit holy sites (Wang et al., 2016). Millions visit religious places annually (Kim et al., 2019), and it is estimated that 600 million tourists go on religious and spiritual voyages globally (UNWTO, 2017). United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) promotes the potential and ability to foster understanding between many religions and civilisations (UNWTO, 2016) for repeatedly visit pilgrimage and religious sites (Terzidou et al., 2017; Romanelli et al., 2021; Ayorekire et al., 2020; Iliev, 2020; Melissa Tsai, 2021). Due to the economic influence on the residents, interest in religious tourism has grown among business people to develop several religious destinations (Campos et al., 2022; Durán-Sánchez et al., 2018). Evident from the growing publications in prominent tourism journals, religious tourism is also vital in the research community (Kim et al., 2019).

Scholars prefer bibliometric analysis for various purposes, notably to examine the intellectual foundations of an existing subject and to spot evolving trends, collaboration patterns and research constituents (Donthu et al., 2021a). The bibliometric study is deemed an appropriate way of reaching a consensus in assessing the relevance of any field of research. Similar studies on religious tourism have earlier been conducted, such as Durán-Sánchez et al. (2018), but rarely visualised such knowledge maps, leaving little known about such maps’ potential to show overall structure. Limitations in existing literature have given us the impetus to conduct this study.

The objectives of the paper are to analyse annual production, scientific production by authors, production by countries, production by source and citation analysis of authors and documents. Secondly, to analyse the knowledge structure of religious tourism by concept, social structure and intellectual structure.

The paper is organised as follows: the parts on Sections 1 and 2 go through the importance of conducting a bibliometric study and the evolution of the concept idea of pilgrimage and religious tourism. The “research methodology” is explained at length in Section 3, and the results are thoroughly discussed in Section 4. Section 5 outlines the discussions and conclusions. In Section 6, we discussed the future research scope, implications and limitations of this study.

2. Literature review

Early literature on the subject of “pilgrimage” was primarily concerned with religious experience, ritual practices and pilgrimage (Cohen, 1979). Pilgrimage was associated with liminality and was seen only from the lens of holy rituals. Visitors who travel to holy locations for vacation or religious purposes were conceptualised as being distinct from a pilgrimage (Nolan and Nolan, 1992). But Turner and Turner (2011) noticed that “a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist”. Thus, the purpose of a pilgrimage is like the purpose of a tour: both are searches for unique experiences. In the early 1990s, novel perspective on “Pilgrimage” started evolving; for example, Smith (1992) proposed a religious tourist path labelled “The Pilgrim – Tourist Path” to identify religious tourist typology. According to Smith (1992), pilgrims and tourists are at opposite ends of the spectrum, ranging from sacred to secular. Thus, religion is the most crucial factor for pilgrims deciding where to go, but at the other end of the spectrum, tourists are driven by non-religious factors (Iliev, 2020). In essence, religious tourism refers to a trip that is closely tied to the adherents of a specific religion, and those locations are sacred religious sites (Lin and Fu, 2019). Rinschede (1992) opines that “religious tourism is closely connected with holiday and cultural tourism”. Religious tourism has often been seasonal and coincides with other forms of tourism, such as holiday trips, social and cultural tours or travelling in groups. Tourists engage in religious festivals and events or their ancillary activities.
and experience local cultures, customs, rites, architecture or natural landscape patterns (Amaro et al., 2018; Kim and Kim, 2018; Melissa Tsai, 2021). Religious tourism research demonstrates that people who do not identify as religious will also travel to sacred places (Amaro et al., 2018; Olsen, 2013; Smith, 1992). In contemporary society, religious tourism profoundly connects travel predominated by religious motivations (Rinschede, 1992; Shinde, 2022) and non-religious factors as well (Rashid, 2018). Scholars have attempted to distinguish religious and pilgrimage tourism based on the features of the partakers (Albayrak et al., 2018). For example, unlike pilgrims who mandatorily engage in specific rituals at hallowed places, religious tourists might not indulge in such practice (Galzacorta et al., 2016; Kujawa, 2017).

There is considerable disagreement about the definition of religious tourism. According to Blackwell (2007), religious tourism is described as travel to certain tourist places to experience religious activities or sites or the associated attractions, such as art, culture, customs and architecture (Heydari Chianeh et al., 2018). Furthermore, Bideci and Albayrak (2016) opined that religious tourists might visit a location out of curiosity or fascination while taking advantage of some nearby supportive services. Though the terms “pilgrimage” and “spiritual tourism” are often used interchangeably, “religious tourism” is the best way to describe visits to religious sites (Melissa Tsai, 2021), and religious tourism has a wider definition and meaning (Shinde and Rizello, 2014).

3. Methodology

Bibliometric analysis has become popular in business research (Donthu et al., 2020a, 2020b; Khan et al., 2021) and tourism research (Pestana et al., 2020). The bibliometric analysis uses statistical methods to map the current status (Danvila-del-Valle et al., 2019; Estevão et al., 2017; Suban et al., 2021), effectiveness and scope (Haleem et al., 2020) of literature in various fields (Vishwakarma and Mukherjee, 2019) based on the citation histories of their published works. Scholars use data from multiple bibliographic databases for such analysis (Rodríguez-López et al., 2020).

This paper has outlined religious tourism’s performance analysis and science mapping. Performance analysis investigates the scholarly contributions to a particular field (Cobo et al., 2011; Donthu et al., 2021b), which are objective in nature (Donthu et al., 2021c). Science mapping links the study elements (Baker et al., 2021; Guan and Huang, 2022) and focuses on the intellectual framework between those research elements (Donthu et al., 2021a). For network visualisation, we have used VOSviewer, as it uses a unified structure for layout and structures (Van Eck and Waltman, 2022; Chen and Song, 2017). VOSviewer creates graphical visualisation and constructs a network of bibliographic data such as co-authorship, citation, co-occurrence and co-citation (Donthu et al., 2021a; Donthu et al., 2021b; Estevão et al., 2017; Leong et al., 2020). In VOSviewer, this relationship is referred to as links, and each link has a positive value; a higher value represents stronger link strength.

3.1 Identifying keywords

This study searched the Web of Science (WOS) Core Collection and Scopus database for religious tourism and pilgrimage-related articles. The earliest religious tourism-related paper in the Scopus database was published in 1992, while no paper appeared in the WOS core collection database until 2003. Therefore, we set the paper’s publication timespan from 2003 to March 2023. The search string “("religio" OR "tour") AND "pilgrim")” was searched for the paper related to keywords “Religious tourism” or “Pilgrimage” and extract bibliographic data in Scopus in “Title, Abstract and Keyword and in “Topic” from WOS core collection database (Durán-Sánchez et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2019), which is a popular search string used to extract data. Scopus and WOS are established abstract and citation database that contains significant publications from prestigious journals and researchers (Van Eck and Waltman, 2014; Srivastava and Sivaramakrishnan, 2021).
3.2 Extracting bibliographic data

The preliminary search results reveal a total of 12,764 and 1,430 documents in Scopus and WOS core collection. We included articles and review papers as these contain certified knowledge (Ramos-Rodrigue and Ruíz-Navarro, 2004) in English language, which is the most appropriate representation of international literary works (Iliev, 2020). Moreover, with the focus of this study being religious tourism from a business, marketing and social sciences perspective, we further limited the search to articles published in the arts and humanities social sciences business, management and accounting domains in Scopus database and hospitality, sports, leisure and tourism in WOS database. After applying these filters, 4,057 and 276 documents were selected from Scopus and WOS databases restricted to only “Journal articles”. We have manually removed 190 duplicates, and finally 4,143 documents were available for analysis.

In this research paper, we have used the following using VOSviewer:

- Co-citation analysis is used to establish the influence of research works by establishing a relationship between two items appearing in another research article’s reference list.
- The co-authorship network is the most prolific social structure because it shows how authors, institutions and countries are associated on a joint production and confirms the most significant authors, groups of authors or relevant scientific research institutes (Palacios et al., 2021; Donthu et al., 2021b; Cisneros et al., 2018).
- Co-occurrence of keywords creates a network of subjects and their connections in a scientific field (Merigó et al., 2020).

4. Results and findings

4.1 Performance analysis

4.1.1 Documents by year of publication. Figure 1 shows the annual production of documents between 2003 and 2023. Annual growth in religious tourism literature shows 2021 was the most productive year as 443 documents (10.69%) were added, followed by 2020 (425 documents), 2019 (387 documents) and 2022 (346 documents). A graphical
representation is given in Figure 1 of the year-on-year growth trajectory of religious tourism research.

4.1.2 Citation of documents by sources and countries. Table 1 shows the United States (USA) leads with 889 publications having 5,732 citations, followed by the United Kingdom (UK) with 454 and 3,688 citations and Israel with 155 and 2,231 citations. Notably, more citations indicate that the scholars from these countries receive more attention. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* (232 documents and 716 citations) leads in the research of religious tourism, and *Annals of Tourism Research* (58 documents) follows in terms of number of publications. However, *Annals of Tourism Research* is the most impactful journal with 4,112 citations in religious tourism research. Further, *Tourism Management*, with 39 documents, is the second-highest cited source with 2,445 citations, as shown in Table 1.

4.1.3 Citation of authors and documents. The top 10 cited authors and documents are shown in Table 2. The authors cited the most are Collins-Kriener N., Gibson H and Lepp A. Table 2 shows that “Tourist roles, perceived risk and international tourism” by Lepp and Gibson (2003) is the most cited article with 691 citations, followed by “This trip really changed me” by Noy (2004) with 464 citations. Seminal papers on religious tourism and pilgrimage, such as “Researching pilgrimage” by Collins-Kreiner (2010), give a postmodern perspective to distinguish between tourism and pilgrimage, expressed as two forms of pilgrimages – secular pilgrimage and religious pilgrimage. “The search for authenticity in the pilgrim experience” by Belhassen et al. (2008) asserted the relevance of authenticity by examining the experiences of pilgrims.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Most cited journals and countries with number of documents</th>
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<tr>
<td>Journals</td>
<td>Count</td>
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<tr>
<td>Annals of Tourism Research</td>
<td>58</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tourism Management</td>
<td>39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Current Issues in Tourism</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Journal of Heritage Tourism</td>
<td>41</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tourism Management Perspectives</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage</td>
<td>232</td>
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<tr>
<td>Journal of Travel Research</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tourism Geographies</td>
<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Journal of Islamic Marketing</td>
<td>27</td>
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Source: Authors’ own elaboration

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<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Most cited authors with total contribution and most cited documents</th>
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<tr>
<td>Author</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins-Kreiner N</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gibson H</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lepp A</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Noy C</td>
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<tr>
<td>El-Gohary H</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belhassen Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eid R</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reichel A</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poria Y</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Henderson JC</td>
<td>5</td>
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Source: Authors’ own elaboration
4.2 Structures of knowledge

In this bibliometric analysis, we looked at three different knowledge systems to cover the three study themes: intellectual, social and conceptual.

4.2.1 Intellectual structure of knowledge. VOSviewer created a network of co-cited authors with a minimum threshold of at least 10 citations. Figure 2 shows the nodes are linked to co-cited authors of 62 connected co-cited authors. Thicker lines represent more citations and closer connections. The co-cited authors are in three clusters. Cluster 1 and cluster 2 have 28 and 27 items, respectively, while cluster 3 has seven items. Red cluster in Figure 2 shows prolific author such as Noga Collins-Kriener of University of Haifa is the most co-cited author with maximum link strength 6,525. Eric Cohen and Dallen J. Timothy both have 59 linkages with other authors, respectively, highlighting their fundamental influence. In the green cluster, John Eade, S. Coleman, and Victor Turner have 59 links each, making them the most co-cited authors.

4.2.2 Social structure of knowledge. Figure 3 shows the co-authorship of documents by countries, where 47 countries have at least 10 citations and 5 documents out of 266. Ten clusters are formed based on the links with other countries. Cluster 1 has nine items, cluster 2 has eight countries and cluster 3 and 4 have five countries each, cluster 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 have four countries, respectively. Cluster 9 and 10 have two countries each. The USA, with link strength of 59, has the most number of links and has links with 28 countries. It is the most social country having strongest connections with the UK and Israel. It indicates authors from the USA most frequently collaborate with authors from the UK and Israel. The UK has a strong relationship with the European nations, having strongest linkage with Ireland and Germany in Europe after the USA. Australia is the third in social collaboration with total link strength of 1,481.

4.2.3 Conceptual structure of knowledge. The conceptual framework’s purpose is to understand the current themes and future roadmap of scientific research. It reflects the link between ideas and words in a collection of publications. (Palácos et al., 2021). Using VOSviewer, we have analysed 72 keywords, setting the threshold limit at five keywords in nine clusters. Certain keywords such as “analysis”, “interpretation” and “affect” were irrelevant and removed. Keyword analysis also shows two pairs of keywords that have the

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**Figure 2** Co-citation of authors

*Source: Authors’ own elaboration*
strongest connection: “pilgrimage-religious tourism” and “pilgrimage-tourism”, justifying the central theme of the study. In cluster 1 (red), keywords such as pilgrimage, sacred place, religion, healing, catholic church, heritage tourism and virtual tourism appear. The red cluster is indicative of similar studies in a group. Green cluster focuses on tourist experiences and authenticity at sacred places. Blue cluster represents religious heritage and identity-based studies. Yellow cluster focuses on secular pilgrimage and dark tourism. Purple cluster shows studies focused on religion-based pilgrimages. Cyan coloured cluster indicates studies focused on sacred journey-based studies, which is integral part of religious rituals and spiritual healing. Orange cluster focused on spiritual tourism, spirituality and satisfaction. The analysis reveals emerging keywords such as virtual tourism, experience, women, spiritual tourism and satisfaction.

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1 Discussion and conclusion

Since the concept of religious tourism evolved, there has been an increase in interest among practitioners and academics. This bibliometric study analysed 4,143 documents of the past two decades of religious tourism literature. The term “religious tourism” appeared for the first time in 1990. But research in the area has gradually gained prominence since the 2000s, both in the academic and professional worlds. The current study adds to the comprehensibility of religious tourism by scientifically grouping articles and looking for potential future research areas in the field. VOSviewer has been used to identify the domain’s most influential papers, authors, journals, organisations and countries.

The USA, the UK and Israel have taken specific interest in this form of tourism (see Table 1). Furthermore, the USA works closely with Israel, the UK and Turkey, as shown in Figure 3. Amongst the European nations, Germany exhibits significant prominence after the UK. Notably, Israel finds an exciting position in religious tourism research; for example, Collins-Kreiner N. is among the most prolific authors affiliated with the University of Haifa, Israel. Israel is of immense religious importance, just as Jerusalem is of religious significance to three global religious groups, which are Jews, Muslims and Christians (Albayrak et al., 2018).
Knowledge structure analysis reveals the most co-cited authors conceptualised religious tourism based on the characteristics of religious tourists (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Similarly, Smith (1992) attempted to differentiate religious tourists from pilgrims. However, the co-occurrence of author keyword analysis shows the thematic development in religious tourism literature is moving towards more perception-oriented studies such as satisfaction, experience, motivation and gendered studies (Figure 4). Finally, using keyword co-occurrence analysis, prospective research streams were found. It will benefit those researchers who wish to work in this field by following the research hotspots. It can be concluded that although there are more publications in the field of religious tourism, there are fewer in high-impact journals, and most of them are concentrated in a few journals. As a result, there is plenty of research space for collaboration with other stakeholders, and future research on this topic can be expanded.

6. Future research premises and implications

6.1 Future research premises

In the early 1990s, several research topics centred around the connection between tourism and pilgrimage (Nolan and Nolan, 1992; Rinschede, 1992). However, new theories and notions, such as continuum of travel from “pilgrim as a religious traveller” to “tourist” as a vacationer, were included in pilgrimage study in the 1990s (Smith, 1992). The terms pilgrimage, religious tourism and spiritual tourism were later combined in the 2000s, even though they had diverse meanings. Studies have concentrated on the variations and parallels among religious, pilgrimage and spiritual tourism. Although pilgrimage and spiritual tourism frequently complement religious tourism, religious tourism has a more comprehensive term to describe visits to religious sites (Shinde and Rizello, 2014).

Based on the findings of this research, we identified the following areas that attract more attention in the future:

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**Figure 4** Co-occurrence of author keyword

*Source: Authors’ own elaboration*
Religious tourism management-based projects. Religious travel has evolved to become a distinct category of travel; new market niches are being segmented and developed, including those for religious cruises, volunteer-driven religious tourism and spiritual retreats. Due to its socio-cultural effects, positive effects on the local community and commitment to sustainable development, religious tourism has grown into a significant and segmented business. It is important to realise how to cohesively manage and prioritise the interests of all parties to ensure the long-term viability of local religious tourism.

Multi-form tourism integrative research. The diverse interest areas evident from keyword analysis show religious tourism can guide future research where there are many similar forms of tourism, specifically heritage tourism, cultural tourism and spiritual tourism. Dark tourism is a growing sub-stream within religious tourism, and its conceptualisation and empirical studies should receive more focus. Gendered studies should collaborate with religious tourism to better understand gender issues from a religious tourism perspective. Though multiple forms of tourism happen simultaneously, little attention is paid to integrative research. Therefore, future research can be conducted in this direction.

Perception-based research. People seek spiritual rejuvenation, spiritual healing and transformation; researcher should use this as upcoming research area. Researchers can focus on various antecedents of motivation, satisfaction, visitor experience and spiritual rejuvenation in religious tourism studies. Particularly, in an era of augmented reality, artificial intelligence and virtual reality, perceptions are formed based on a variety of factors. Future research can examine how religious tourism can be seen through the lens of new technology.

6.2 Implications
Religious tourism industry is undoubtedly creating a niche as more participation in tourist-related activities is evident (Nisha and Cheung, 2022). This study has advantages for academicians involved in religious tourism and related fields of tourism. First, for knowledge development, one may refer to the most prolific authors and seminal research articles (Table 2.) in the domain or use them as a guide for choosing the right journals for publishing one’s works (Table 1). Researchers and academicians who seek collaborative works can refer to Figure 3, which shows countries with the most collaborations. The current study will benefit the research and academic community with readily available reckoning point for extending their idea of this field of research. Our work has ramifications for society and decision-makers as well. Equally important to both commercial and non-profit organisations is the religious tourism sector. The effectiveness of a government’s relationship with its citizens depends on how policymakers promote travel to a particular area. Due to the economic benefits for locals and destination marketers, this type of tourism is paramount. This expanding need necessitates substantial research to fulfil its potential and offer the best services to tourists. Scientific expertise in religious tourism is required to provide augmented services to visitors. The study suggests that religious tourism literature is moving towards more experience-oriented studies rather than focusing on the skirmishes of conceptualisation. Religious tourism has multiple elements, as revealed in red, green and orange clusters (Figure 4). Local communities and destination managers need to understand the tourist expectation to provide a better experience.

6.3 Limitations
This piece of bibliometric research has some constraints. First, Scopus and WOS core collection database was used for bibliometric data searches, other databases can have more impactful articles. Secondly, only articles and reviews published in English were used
for our study. Finally, researchers in the future may look for better techniques for data merging, as for this research we have relied on manual intervention to merge databases. This can lead to inconsistencies in the production of the organisations, affiliations or authors, which may cause some deviances from the current bibliographic study.

References


Further reading


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