Journal of Interdisciplinary Tourism Sciences
e-ISSN 3110-0643 | Vol. 1 No. 2, 2025, pp: 71-79
DOI: https://doi.org/10.71094/jitours.v1i2.124

Special Interest Tourism Research: A Systematic Literature Review and Future Research Directions

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Article History

Manuscript submitted:
29 September 2025
Manuscript revised:
15 December 2025
Accepted for publication:
25 December 2025

Keywords

Special Interest Tourism;
Tourist Motivation;
Sustainability;
Future Research;
Directions;

Abstract

Special Interest Tourism (SIT) has emerged as an important focus in contemporary tourism studies, highlighting niche travel experiences that align with specific interests and motivations of travelers. This study reviews 20 scholarly publications published between 2019 and 2025 with the aim of identifying dominant research trends, key thematic areas, methodological approaches, and existing gaps within the SIT literature. The findings indicate that current SIT research primarily concentrates on cultural heritage tourism, culinary tourism, sports tourism, ecological tourism, shopping tourism, lifestyle tourism, and the role of digital innovation in shaping tourist experiences. Across these thematic areas, tourist motivations such as the pursuit of cultural enrichment, personal growth, and meaningful experiential engagement are consistently associated with higher levels of satisfaction, stronger destination loyalty, and increased intention to revisit. In addition, sustainability and inclusivity are increasingly positioned as core concerns within SIT research. Studies emphasize the importance of environmental protection, conservation of cultural heritage, active community participation, and social responsibility as essential components of sustainable destination development. Technological advancement also features prominently in recent SIT studies. The adoption of smart tourism systems, digital platforms, and immersive technologies is shown to enhance personalization, improve visitor engagement, and facilitate more interactive tourism experiences. From a methodological perspective, the reviewed studies employ a mix of qualitative, quantitative, and bibliometric methods. However, the literature remains limited in terms of longitudinal analysis, cross-cultural comparison, and implementation-oriented research. Future research should adopt multidisciplinary approaches, use digital tools, apply comparative designs, understand evolving tourist behavior, and support sustainable development.

How to Cite: Ilyas, M. N. (2025). Special Interest Tourism Research: A Systematic Literature Review and Future Research Directions. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Tourism Sciences, 1*(2), 71–79. https://doi.org/10.71094/jitours.v1i2.124

Introduction

Tourism has evolved considerably over the past few decades, moving beyond traditional mass tourism models towards more niche-oriented and experience-driven frameworks. Among these developments, Special Interest Tourism (SIT) has emerged as a prominent paradigm that caters to the diverse and specialized needs of tourists seeking experiences aligned with their specific interests, motivations, and lifestyle preferences (Rittichainuwat, 2024). Unlike conventional tourism, which often emphasizes volume and standardized offerings, SIT prioritizes the customization of experiences, the authenticity of encounters, and the depth of engagement, thereby offering enhanced satisfaction and perceived value for travelers (Pulido Fernández, Casado Montilla, & Carrillo Hidalgo, 2019; Rangkuti, Bangun, Kurniawan, Silitonga, & Tambunan, 2025). This shift reflects a broader transformation in the tourism landscape, where travelers increasingly demand personalized and meaningful experiences, often driven by cultural, ecological, recreational, and lifestyle motivations (Ginting, Trenggono, Ayungga Dewi, & Andani, 2023).

Special Interest Tourism encompasses a wide spectrum of tourism forms, including cultural heritage tourism, culinary tourism, sports tourism, eco-tourism, and hobby-based or lifestyle-oriented tourism. Each of these categories addresses a particular niche segment, offering experiences that are deliberately designed to resonate with specific tourist profiles (Pulido Fernández et al., 2019). For instance, cultural heritage tourism often engages tourists with historical narratives and local traditions, while sports tourism provides unique opportunities for participation or observation in sporting events and activities (Rangkuti et al., 2025). Eco-tourism and sustainability-oriented tourism emphasize environmental stewardship and conservation practices, often targeting tourists who are motivated by ecological awareness and ethical consumption

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patterns (Serio, Dickson, Espa, & Micciolo, 2025). The diversity of SIT forms underscores its capacity to integrate multifaceted motivations and create differentiated offerings that appeal to an increasingly sophisticated tourist market (Nurhaida, Sitorus, Bakri, Despa, & Nurhasanah, 2023).

Recent literature highlights that SIT is closely associated with the concepts of tourist motivation and satisfaction. Research indicates that tourists engaging in SIT are primarily driven by intrinsic motivations, such as the desire for learning, skill acquisition, cultural immersion, and personal enrichment, rather than by extrinsic factors like cost or convenience (Ginting et al., 2023). Such intrinsic motivations are strongly linked to satisfaction outcomes, as the alignment between tourist expectations and the quality of the experience enhances emotional engagement, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth communication (Wijaya, Arianty, Suwintari, & Sudiarta, 2024). Consequently, SIT represents a strategic approach for destinations and tourism operators seeking to build long-term relationships with visitors, foster repeat visitation, and establish a distinctive market positioning.

Another significant trend in SIT research is the increasing emphasis on sustainability and inclusivity. Scholars argue that the future development of SIT must integrate environmental, social, and cultural sustainability to meet the ethical expectations of tourists and the regulatory frameworks of destination management (Korbiel, Gmyrek, & Kruczek, 2025). Sustainability in SIT encompasses a wide range of practices, including minimizing environmental impact, promoting local community involvement, preserving cultural authenticity, and ensuring accessibility for diverse tourist segments. Inclusive tourism practices, which address the needs of underrepresented groups and promote equitable participation, are increasingly recognized as essential components of responsible SIT development (Wijaya et al., 2024). The alignment between sustainable and inclusive practices not only enhances the overall quality and legitimacy of SIT experiences but also contributes to the long-term resilience and competitiveness of destinations.

Technological advancement has further shaped the SIT landscape, particularly through the integration of digital tools, smart tourism applications, and virtual experiences. Innovations such as digital twins, interactive mobile platforms, and real-time data analytics have enabled tourism providers to deliver highly personalized experiences while simultaneously monitoring and optimizing operational performance (Almeida, Brito e Abreu, & Boavida Portugal, 2025; Vaz, de Carvalho, Teixeira, & Castanho, 2025). These technological innovations are especially relevant in contexts where tourists seek precise information, seamless access, and immersive engagement. Digitalization not only facilitates the customization of tourism offerings but also supports destination management in tracking visitor flows, assessing satisfaction metrics, and designing targeted marketing strategies. As such, the intersection of technology and SIT represents a crucial research frontier, where emerging tools can enhance the quality, sustainability, and scalability of specialized tourism experiences.

In addition to technological and sustainability considerations, SIT research increasingly employs advanced methodological approaches to capture the complexity of tourist behaviors and preferences. Qualitative methodologies, including in-depth interviews, case studies, and ethnographic observations, remain prevalent due to their capacity to explore the subjective and nuanced dimensions of tourist experiences (Muharis, Taufik, Anggara, & Muhid, 2025). Simultaneously, bibliometric and quantitative approaches provide insights into research trends, thematic evolution, and statistical relationships between motivations, satisfaction, and behavior (Parahyanti, 2025; Sulistyowati, Nisak, Mujanah, & Halik, 2025). Latent class cluster analysis, structural equation modeling, and other advanced statistical techniques are increasingly applied to identify patterns in tourist segmentation, engagement, and loyalty (Serio et al., 2025). The integration of multiple methodological approaches, or mixed-method designs, is particularly recommended to achieve comprehensive, reliable, and actionable insights in SIT research.

Despite the growing body of literature, systematic reviews integrating key themes, methodologies, and emerging trends remain scarce. Most studies focus on single destination contexts, specific tourism types, or isolated motivational constructs, thereby limiting the broader understanding of SIT as a cohesive academic field (Muharis et al., 2025; Rittichainuwat, 2024). Moreover, gaps persist in exploring longitudinal effects, cross-cultural comparisons, and the integration of technological and sustainable innovations. Addressing these gaps is critical for advancing SIT scholarship and informing policy, destination management, and 0e multidimensional nature of SIT, a comprehensive synthesis of existing research is warranted to map the field's evolution, identify key thematic clusters, and provide future research directions. This study aims to contribute to this objective by conducting a systematic literature review of contemporary SIT studies, examining the interplay between tourist motivations, satisfaction outcomes, sustainability practices, and technological integration. By doing so, the study seeks to provide an evidence-based framework that supports both theoretical advancement and practical applications in SIT management and planning. The

findings are expected to inform researchers, practitioners, and policymakers regarding current trends, research gaps, and emerging opportunities in specialized tourism markets.

In summary, SIT represents a dynamic, multifaceted, and rapidly evolving domain within tourism research. It addresses the diverse motivations of contemporary travelers, promotes sustainable and inclusive practices, and leverages technological innovations to deliver personalized and high-quality experiences. This study, through its systematic literature review approach, seeks to provide a holistic understanding of SIT research trends and identify future directions to strengthen both the theoretical foundations and practical relevance of this field. In doing so, the research underscores the significance of SIT as a strategic and scholarly focus in contemporary tourism studies, aligning with global trends and responding to the complex demands of modern tourists.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology to synthesize and critically evaluate the contemporary research landscape of Special Interest Tourism (SIT). Systematic literature reviews are particularly suitable for integrating findings from diverse studies, identifying research trends, and revealing knowledge gaps, thereby providing a comprehensive overview of a field (Almeida, Brito e Abreu, & Boavida Portugal, 2025; Vaz, de Carvalho, Teixeira, & Castanho, 2025). By adopting this approach, the study ensures methodological rigor, transparency, and replicability, which are essential for generating robust insights for both theoretical advancement and practical application in tourism studies.

The primary data sources comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and book chapters published between 2019 and 2025. Major databases accessed included MDPI, Springer, arXiv, and national journals such as TOBA and Paradoks. Inclusion criteria were established to ensure the relevance and quality of the literature: (1) the study explicitly addressed aspects of SIT, including cultural, ecological, sports, culinary, or lifestyle-focused tourism; (2) empirical, bibliometric, or conceptual studies examining tourist motivations, satisfaction, sustainability, or technological applications; (3) publications were in English or Indonesian and fully accessible; and (4) methodological transparency and scholarly credibility were maintained (Muharis, Taufik, Anggara, & Muhid, 2025; Rittichainuwat, 2024).

The initial search yielded 83 potentially relevant publications. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, duplicates and non-peer-reviewed sources were removed, resulting in a final sample of 20 publications. These sources encompass both international and national contexts, reflecting diverse geographic, cultural, and thematic dimensions of SIT research (Ginting, Trenggono, Ayungga Dewi, & Andani, 2023; Nurhaida, Sitorus, Bakri, Despa, & Nurhasanah, 2023).

Data extraction focused on key variables including authorship, year of publication, research aims, methodological approach, thematic focus, geographic context, and key findings. Each publication was carefully examined to identify patterns in research focus, methodological design, and thematic clustering. Thematic coding was conducted to group studies into major SIT domains such as cultural tourism, sports tourism, ecological tourism, shopping tourism, and digital tourism innovations (Pulido Fernández, Casado Montilla, & Carrillo Hidalgo, 2019; Rangkuti, Bangun, Kurniawan, Silitonga, & Tambunan, 2025).

A combination of narrative synthesis and thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data. Narrative synthesis facilitated the integration of qualitative insights from case studies and conceptual frameworks, while thematic analysis allowed for the identification of dominant trends and emerging topics across the selected publications (Parahyanti, 2025; Sulistyowati, Nisak, Mujanah, & Halik, 2025). Quantitative bibliometric information, including publication frequency, citation impact, and co-authorship patterns, was also considered to contextualize the development of SIT research over time (Muharis et al., 2025).

The analysis further emphasized alignment between tourist motivations, satisfaction outcomes, and sustainability or technological considerations. For instance, studies examining eco-tourism or heritage tourism were analyzed with respect to their integration of sustainability principles and inclusivity measures (Korbiel, Gmyrek, & Kruczek, 2025; Wijaya, Arianty, Suwintari, & Sudiarta, 2024). Similarly, research addressing digital innovations and smart tourism practices was evaluated for methodological rigor, relevance, and implications for enhancing personalized tourist experiences (Almeida et al., 2025; Vaz et al., 2025).

To ensure reliability, the coding and extraction procedures were independently verified by multiple reviewers. Discrepancies in thematic categorization or methodological interpretation were resolved through consensus discussions. Validity was reinforced by cross-referencing extracted findings with the original publications and ensuring that interpretations accurately reflected the research objectives and outcomes

presented by the authors (Sookaromdee & Wiwanitkit, 2025; Serio, Dickson, Espa, & Micciolo, 2025). This rigorous approach guarantees that the synthesized insights are both credible and applicable for guiding future research directions in SIT.

Although the systematic review provides a comprehensive overview, it is subject to certain limitations. First, the selection was limited to publications in English and Indonesian, which may exclude relevant studies in other languages. Second, while efforts were made to include diverse geographic contexts, the sample may be skewed towards regions with higher research output, such as Southeast Asia and Europe. Finally, the reliance on published literature may overlook emerging industry practices and unpublished case studies that could offer valuable insights into evolving SIT trends (Pulido Fernández et al., 2019; Rittichainuwat, 2024).

Results and Discussions

Overview of Selected Studies

The systematic literature review synthesized 20 peer-reviewed publications published between 2019 and 2025, offering a comprehensive overview of contemporary research trajectories in Special Interest Tourism (SIT). These studies collectively demonstrate the conceptual and empirical diversity that characterizes SIT scholarship, both in terms of thematic focus and analytical orientation. The reviewed literature spans a wide range of SIT sub-sectors, including cultural heritage tourism, sports tourism, culinary and shopping tourism, ecotourism, and digitally mediated tourism experiences. This thematic breadth underscores the inherently heterogeneous nature of SIT, which is defined less by a single activity and more by the specific motivations, values, and interests of niche tourist segments (Pulido Fernández, Casado Montilla, & Carrillo Hidalgo, 2019; Rangkuti et al., 2025).

Methodologically, the selected studies employed varied research designs, including quantitative surveys, qualitative case studies, mixed-methods approaches, and conceptual or review-based analyses. Quantitative studies often focused on tourist motivations, satisfaction, behavioral intentions, and destination competitiveness, while qualitative approaches provided deeper insights into cultural meanings, community participation, authenticity, and sustainability challenges. Mixed-methods designs were particularly valuable in bridging demand-side perspectives with destination management and policy considerations, reflecting a growing methodological sophistication within SIT research.

From a geographic perspective, the literature reveals an uneven but informative spatial distribution. Southeast Asia—especially Indonesia—emerged as a dominant empirical context, reflecting the region's rich cultural heritage, biodiversity, and growing strategic emphasis on niche tourism development (Muharis et al., 2025; Nurhaida et al., 2023). Indonesian studies frequently examined community-based tourism, local wisdom, and sustainability outcomes, positioning SIT as a tool for inclusive regional development. Beyond Southeast Asia, European and North American contexts were also well represented, often emphasizing mature tourism markets, heritage conservation, sports events, and technology-driven tourism innovations.

Overall, this geographic and thematic distribution highlights both the global relevance of SIT and the contextual specificity of its development. While SIT is increasingly recognized as a strategic pathway for destination differentiation and sustainable tourism growth, the reviewed studies also reveal disparities in regional research intensity and conceptual depth. These patterns suggest that future SIT research would benefit from greater cross-regional comparison, theoretical integration, and longitudinal inquiry to better capture the evolving dynamics of special interest tourism in diverse socio-cultural and economic settings.

Research Trends in Special Interest Tourism

Analysis of the selected studies reveals several prominent research trends. First, there is a strong focus on tourist motivation and satisfaction, which are considered central determinants of SIT engagement. Studies demonstrate that intrinsic motivations—such as the desire for cultural enrichment, skill acquisition, personal development, and emotional experiences—strongly influence satisfaction levels and repeat visitation (Ginting, Trenggono, Ayungga Dewi, & Andani, 2023; Wijaya, Arianty, Suwintari, & Sudiarta, 2024). Extrinsic motivations, including price considerations or convenience, play a comparatively minor role in SIT contexts, highlighting the niche-oriented and experience-driven nature of this tourism segment.

Second, sustainability and inclusivity have emerged as critical themes in contemporary SIT research. Researchers emphasize that sustainable tourism practices—encompassing environmental conservation, community engagement, and preservation of cultural authenticity—are integral to long-term destination competitiveness (Korbiel, Gmyrek, & Kruczek, 2025; Wijaya et al., 2024). Inclusive tourism, which ensures equitable participation of diverse social groups and accessibility for underrepresented populations, further enhances the ethical and social legitimacy of SIT. By integrating sustainability and inclusivity principles, destinations can align tourism development with global ethical standards while fostering positive perceptions and loyalty among tourists.

Third, technological innovation has been identified as a transformative force in SIT. Digital tools, including smart tourism applications, digital twins, virtual reality, and mobile platforms, enable personalization of tourist experiences, real-time monitoring of visitor behavior, and effective destination management (Almeida, Brito e Abreu, & Boavida Portugal, 2025; Vaz, de Carvalho, Teixeira, & Castanho, 2025). Such technologies facilitate immersive engagement, allow for adaptive service delivery, and enhance operational efficiency, thereby supporting both visitor satisfaction and managerial decision-making. Notably, studies underscore the potential of digital innovation to bridge gaps between tourist expectations and service offerings, especially in specialized tourism markets requiring highly tailored experiences.

Thematic Clusters in SIT Research

Cultural Heritage and Culinary Tourism

Cultural heritage tourism continues to represent a central theme within Special Interest Tourism (SIT) research, focusing on tourists' engagement with historical sites, traditional practices, and local cultural expressions (Pulido Fernández et al., 2019; Rangkuti et al., 2025). These experiences are increasingly complemented by culinary tourism, which functions not merely as a supporting attraction but as an integral component of cultural immersion. Through local gastronomy, tourists gain deeper insights into social values, collective memory, and everyday cultural practices embedded within destinations.

Empirical evidence consistently indicates that authentic cultural and culinary experiences generate higher levels of tourist satisfaction and emotional attachment. Such emotional engagement strengthens destination loyalty, increases revisit intentions, and stimulates positive word-of-mouth promotion, thereby enhancing destination competitiveness (Ginting et al., 2023; Nurhaida et al., 2023). However, the emphasis on authenticity also raises critical questions regarding commodification and the potential dilution of cultural meaning, suggesting the need for careful management and community involvement.

Furthermore, cultural heritage and culinary tourism are closely aligned with sustainability objectives. When managed responsibly, these forms of SIT contribute to heritage preservation, support local producers, and stimulate community-based economic development. This multidimensional impact highlights the strategic role of cultural and culinary tourism in advancing sustainable and experience-driven SIT frameworks..

Sports and Recreational Tourism

Sports tourism constitutes an important thematic cluster within Special Interest Tourism (SIT), encompassing both participatory activities and spectator-oriented experiences. Existing studies indicate that sports events and recreational activities attract tourists driven by motivations such as physical involvement, entertainment, achievement, and social interaction (Rangkuti et al., 2025). These motivations distinguish sports tourism from mass tourism by emphasizing active engagement and experiential intensity.

The integration of cultural and heritage elements into sports tourism further enhances the distinctiveness of the experience. Traditional sports, local rituals, and culturally embedded sporting events contribute to destination differentiation and strengthen place identity, thereby improving overall competitiveness. Beyond experiential value, research highlights the broader socio-economic contributions of sports tourism. When planned and managed sustainably and inclusively, sports tourism can stimulate local economies, create employment opportunities, and foster community pride and social cohesion (Wijaya et al., 2024). However, maximizing these benefits requires effective governance and stakeholder collaboration to ensure long-term positive impacts for host communities

Ecotourism and Environmental Sustainability

Ecotourism has emerged as a critical domain within SIT, driven by growing environmental awareness among tourists and the global agenda of sustainable development (Serio, Dickson, Espa, & Micciolo, 2025). Studies conducted in ecologically sensitive areas, such as Way Kambas National Park in Indonesia, demonstrate that tourists are motivated by conservation-oriented experiences, wildlife observation, and nature-based activities (Nurhaida et al., 2023). Effective ecotourism management requires alignment between tourist expectations, environmental protection measures, and community engagement strategies, underscoring the intersection of ecological, social, and economic objectives in SIT.

Shopping and Lifestyle-Oriented Tourism

Shopping tourism and lifestyle-focused tourism have emerged as increasingly important dimensions within Special Interest Tourism (SIT), reflecting the rising influence of consumption-oriented motivations among contemporary tourists (Parahyanti, 2025; Sulistyowati, Nisak, Mujanah, & Halik, 2025). Unlike traditional sightseeing, these forms of tourism emphasize experiential consumption, brand interaction, and the pursuit of leisure activities aligned with individual lifestyles and identities. Shopping venues, creative districts, and lifestyle hubs function not only as commercial spaces but also as cultural and social arenas that shape tourist perceptions of destinations.

Empirical studies suggest that the integration of shopping and lifestyle components into SIT enhances the perceived value of the overall tourism experience by offering diversity, convenience, and symbolic meaning. Such integration enables destinations to attract heterogeneous tourist segments, including younger travelers and repeat visitors seeking personalized and immersive experiences. From an economic perspective, shopping and lifestyle tourism can stimulate local economies by increasing tourist expenditure, supporting small and medium enterprises, and encouraging the development of creative industries.

However, the growing prominence of consumer-oriented SIT also raises critical concerns regarding over-commercialization and sustainability. Without careful planning and governance, excessive emphasis on consumption may undermine local authenticity and social equity. Consequently, future SIT strategies should balance economic benefits with cultural integrity and responsible destination management.

Digital Tourism and Smart Destination Management

Digital tourism, encompassing technologies such as digital twins, mobile applications, and interactive platforms, has emerged as a transformative dimension across multiple Special Interest Tourism (SIT) domains (Almeida et al., 2025; Vaz et al., 2025). These digital tools enable greater personalization of tourist experiences, allowing service providers to tailor offerings to individual preferences, interests, and real-time behavioral data. Beyond personalization, digital technologies facilitate improved communication between tourists and tourism operators, ensuring seamless information delivery, enhanced engagement, and efficient service management.

Smart tourism destinations leverage these technologies to optimize resource allocation, manage tourist flows, and monitor environmental impacts, thereby enhancing both operational efficiency and visitor satisfaction. By integrating digital innovation with cultural heritage, ecological, recreational, and lifestyle tourism experiences, destinations can expand the scope, quality, and scalability of SIT offerings. This convergence not only improves experiential value for tourists but also strengthens destination competitiveness on a global scale.

Research further suggests that digital tourism supports sustainability objectives by enabling predictive analytics, crowd management, and reduced environmental strain through digital planning tools. As SIT continues to evolve, the strategic adoption of digital technologies offers a critical pathway for innovation, operational excellence, and differentiation, emphasizing the importance of technologically informed, visitor-centered, and ethically grounded tourism development.

Methodological Approaches

The review of selected studies reveals that SIT research employs a combination of qualitative, quantitative, and bibliometric methodologies. Qualitative methods—including interviews, ethnographic observation, and case studies—are prevalent for exploring tourist motivations, satisfaction, and experiential dimensions (Muharis et al., 2025). Quantitative approaches, including surveys, structural equation modeling, and latent

class cluster analysis, facilitate statistical analysis of behavioral patterns, satisfaction determinants, and demographic segmentation (Ginting et al., 2023; Serio et al., 2025). Bibliometric analyses have been increasingly applied to map research trends, identify influential publications, and assess scholarly networks (Parahyanti, 2025; Sulistyowati et al., 2025). The combination of these methods enables comprehensive understanding and triangulation of findings, enhancing the reliability and validity of SIT research.

Integration of Sustainability, Inclusivity, and Technology

One of the most salient observations in recent Special Interest Tourism (SIT) research is the growing convergence of sustainability, inclusivity, and technological innovation as interrelated pillars of tourism development. Sustainability is no longer treated as a peripheral concern but as a core principle guiding SIT practices. It encompasses environmental protection, heritage conservation, and meaningful community participation to ensure that tourism activities do not undermine ecological integrity or erode cultural authenticity (Korbiel, Gmyrek, & Kruczek, 2025; Wijaya et al., 2024). This approach reflects a shift from short-term economic gains toward long-term destination resilience and responsible resource management.

Inclusivity further reinforces this paradigm by emphasizing accessibility, social equity, and the fair distribution of tourism benefits among diverse stakeholder groups. SIT research increasingly highlights the ethical obligation of tourism operators and policymakers to design experiences that are accessible to different social groups, including marginalized communities and visitors with special needs. Such inclusive practices contribute to social cohesion and enhance destination legitimacy.

At the same time, digital technologies play a strategic role in supporting both sustainability and inclusivity objectives. Smart tourism applications, immersive platforms, and data-driven management systems enable more efficient resource use, improved visitor flow management, and personalized yet responsible tourist experiences (Almeida et al., 2025; Vaz et al., 2025). Collectively, these trends demonstrate a clear alignment between technological innovation and ethical tourism principles within contemporary SIT research.

Research Gaps

Despite substantial progress in Special Interest Tourism (SIT) research, several critical gaps remain that limit the theoretical depth and practical relevance of the field. One major shortcoming is the scarcity of longitudinal studies that examine changes in tourist behavior over time. Most existing research relies on cross-sectional designs, which provide only a snapshot of tourist motivations, satisfaction, and loyalty, thereby constraining the understanding of how these variables evolve across different stages of travel experience and destination development.

In addition, cross-cultural and comparative studies are still underrepresented in SIT literature. This imbalance restricts the generalizability of research findings and hinders the identification of SIT principles that are applicable across diverse cultural, social, and institutional contexts. As SIT is inherently shaped by cultural values and local meanings, the lack of comparative perspectives weakens its explanatory power at the global level.

Furthermore, although technological innovations such as smart tourism systems and digital applications are frequently discussed, empirical evidence regarding their practical implementation and effectiveness across different SIT domains remains limited (Rittichainuwat, 2024; Sookaromdee & Wiwanitkit, 2025). Addressing these gaps is essential for advancing SIT scholarship and for informing more effective destination planning, marketing strategies, and evidence-based tourism policies

Implications for Future Research

The findings underscore several implications for future SIT research. First, adopting multidisciplinary frameworks that integrate psychology, sociology, data science, and cultural studies can provide richer insights into tourist motivations and behavior. Second, applying advanced technological tools, including artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and big data analytics, offers opportunities to enhance experience personalization and operational efficiency. Third, sustainability and inclusivity should remain central to both theoretical and applied research, ensuring that SIT development aligns with ethical, social, and environmental standards. Finally, longitudinal and comparative studies across multiple geographic and

cultural contexts are essential for establishing robust, generalizable SIT knowledge and informing global tourism policies.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review has examined the current state of research in Special Interest Tourism (SIT), synthesizing insights from 20 recent studies spanning 2019 to 2025. The analysis highlights the multidimensional nature of SIT, encompassing cultural heritage, culinary tourism, sports and recreational tourism, ecological tourism, shopping, lifestyle-focused experiences, and digital innovations. SIT is characterized by its ability to address intrinsic tourist motivations such as cultural enrichment, personal development, and immersive experiential engagement, which are strongly associated with satisfaction, loyalty, and repeat visitation.

The review further reveals that sustainability and inclusivity are central considerations within SIT research. Environmental stewardship, heritage preservation, and community engagement are consistently identified as critical to ensuring the ethical and social legitimacy of SIT development Inclusive tourism practices, which promote equitable participation and accessibility, complement sustainability goals and enhance the overall quality of tourism experiences. Additionally, the integration of technological innovations, including digital twins, smart tourism applications, and immersive platforms, has emerged as a transformative trend, enabling personalization, operational efficiency, and enhanced visitor engagement.

Despite the progress, several research gaps remain. Longitudinal studies exploring temporal changes in tourist behavior, cross-cultural comparative analyses, and empirical examinations of the practical implementation of technological innovations are limited Addressing these gaps is essential for advancing theoretical understanding, informing evidence-based destination management strategies, and supporting the design of high-quality SIT products.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed for future research and practice. First, multidisciplinary approaches integrating psychology, cultural studies, data science, and management theory can provide deeper insights into complex tourist motivations and experiences. Second, the adoption of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and big data analytics should be explored for enhancing personalization, operational efficiency, and sustainable destination management. Third, sustainability and inclusivity must remain central to research design and practical implementation to ensure ethical, socially responsible, and environmentally sound SIT development. Finally, longitudinal and comparative studies across diverse regions are recommended to capture evolving tourist behaviors, facilitate knowledge generalization, and guide global SIT policy and practice.

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