

Tourism Routes Characterisation and Concepts: A Scoping Review

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Abstract: The concept of routes in tourism has a broad understanding that goes from a journey between two or more points to a formal network of stakeholders. This scoping review provides an overview of the literature on tourism routes by analysing their characterisation and conceptualization. The review includes documents from four databases, written in English, published until May 2020, and focusing on tourism routes as organizations of stakeholders. Based on 194 documents, regional scale routes under the food and drink thematic group are identified as the commonest, followed by the pilgrimage and history thematic groups on a transnational scale. There are neither universally accepted concepts nor terms to define routes in the tourism field.

Keywords: scoping literature review; tourism routes; stakeholders networks

1. Introduction

The concept of tourism routes goes from a narrow perception based on a journey between two or more points to a broad understanding of a network where a group of stakeholders works together under a common theme to achieve mutual goals (Moulin and Boniface, 2001; Rogerson, 2007; Timothy, 2014; World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and European Travel Commission (ETC), 2017). A report published by UNWTO and ETC (2017) mentions that although the initial purpose of routes was to link a theme together by creating a linear or circular itinerary to guide travellers, this purpose has been enlarged since many routes are now created with no fixed or recommended itinerary and understood as networks of similar themed products or destinations. Nevertheless, according to Moulin and Boniface (2001), routes and networks are different concepts; routes are an actual itinerary of travel whilst networks are a background entity to support them.

Besides, routes are addressed by a broad spectrum of terms in accordance with their touristic product, for instance, tourism routes (Rogerson, 2007), cultural heritage routes (Snowball and Courtney, 2010), wine routes (Telfer, 2001), gastronomic routes (Millán-Vazquez de la Torre, Arjona-Fuentes and Amador-Hidalgo, 2017), or pilgrimage routes (Lois González, Castro Fernández and Lopez, 2016), among others.

International organizations have been developing studies in this field and approaching these initiatives in distinct terms too. For instance, the UNWTO (2015) suggested five criteria to group cultural routes, i.e., design and structure, theme, territory, historic origin or current reconfiguration, and visitor infrastructure. On the other hand, the UNWTO and ETC (2017) proposed a thematic grouping of routes based on the underlying aspirations of travellers, e.g., history, pilgrimage, roots, landscape, food and drink, among others. Furthermore, it is possible to classify transnational tourism routes into distinctive categories as shown by UNWTO and ETC (2017), namely localized cross-border initiatives, itineraries and travel corridors initiatives, thematic or cultural networking initiatives, sustainable environmental management initiatives, theme and experience initiatives, and strategic regional cooperation initiatives.

Considering the diversity of concepts and typologies to define tourism routes as well as the absence of a review on this topic, this literature review has the main goals of distinguishing between the different typologies of routes and analysing the tourism routes conceptualization. Note that this analysis was carried out within the scope of a PhD research and was designed to provide the author, as well as other researchers, with an overall view of this concept. Accordingly, a literature review method known as scoping review is applied to answer that question. A scoping review is an assessment with the aim of mapping the potential extent, range, and nature of a research theme, and it may be applied to clarify key concepts or factors related to a concept (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005; Peters *et al.*, 2015; Munn *et al.*, 2018; Tricco *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, this research may contribute to the application of new methodologies for literature reviews in tourism, namely the scoping review.

2. Materials and methods

The scoping review method was proposed by Arksey & O’Malley (2005) and its usage has been increasing ever since (Tricco *et al.*, 2016). A scoping review has a much broader scope than a conventional systematic literature review which addresses clearly defined questions (Arksey and O’Malley, 2005; Peters *et al.*, 2015; Munn *et al.*, 2018; Tricco *et al.*, 2018). There are examples of scoping reviews applied to tourism literature (Welling, Árnason and Ólafsdóttir, 2015; Gaudette, Roullet and Lefebvre, 2017; Seyfi and Hall, 2020). Those studies have applied the framework developed by Arksey & O’Malley (2005), except that by Seyfi & Hall (2020). This research applies the protocol of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) developed by Joanna Briggs Institute (Tricco *et al.*, 2018). The review intends to include all literature on tourism routes, published until May 2020, written in the English language (Table 1). Ultimately, this review tried to address the organizations identified by UNWTO & ETC (2017) as the thematic or cultural networking initiatives, which are partnerships between destinations, local authorities, cultural sites, academic institutions, or other bodies, and are led by groups or associations, bringing together public and private partners. Although the UNWTO & ETC (2017) only considered transnational initiatives, this review also includes initiatives at other scales, i.e. local, regional and national. The search terms, “tourism” and “route”, tried to include a vast majority of studies on this research topic. Subsequently, the document references from all database results were exported to an Excel file and duplicated articles were deleted.

Table 1: Electronic search strategy applied

Database	Terms	Searched fields	Language	Other filters	Date
SCOPUS	Touris* Route*	Title, Abstract and Keywords	English	-	May 7th, 2020
Web of Science	Touris* Route*	Topic		-	
EBSCO -Academic Search Complete	Touris* Route*	Author keywords, Title and Abstract		Document type = “Article” and “Journal article”	
Google Scholar	Tourism Route	(Not applicable)		Patents and Citations not included	

Next step, a screening process was planned by all reviewers and conducted by the first author. Considering the high number of returned documents, a filter was used to reduce the number of publications based on author keywords. Thus, VOSviewer software (van Eck and Waltman, 2010) was applied to map and cluster the author keywords from searched documents from SCOPUS database to identify the most suitable keywords for this study (Figure 1). A similar approach for keyword clustering has been applied by Garrigos-Simon, Narangajavana-Kaosiri and Narangajavana (2019) or Duarte, Braga, Marques, & Sá (2020). Based on this analysis, it was decided to include all the publications with one of the following terms in their title, keywords, or abstract, if available: “Wine*”, “Cultur*”, “Heritage”, “Pilgrim*” or “Gastronom*”. Note that the documents retrieved from Google Scholar were filtered based only on their title, which was the data available before the full-text paper assessment. Nevertheless, it was possible to reduce the number of papers and ensure a close focus on our research topic.

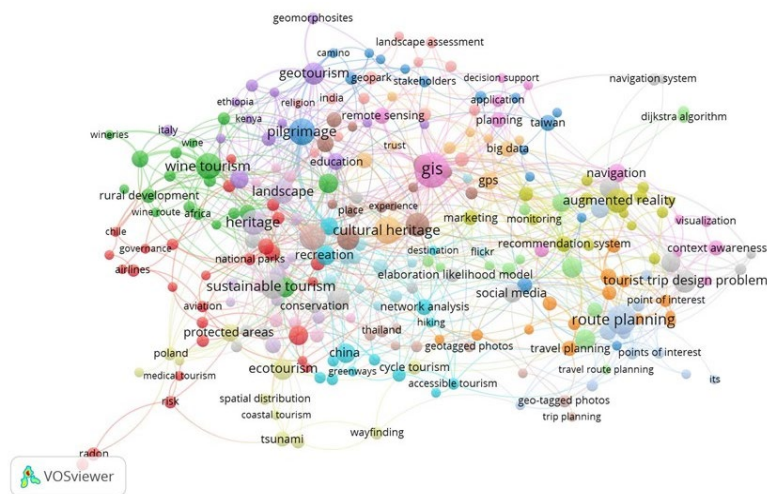


Figure 1: Map of clusters based on author keywords

The screening process then continued with the analysis of the titles and the abstracts of the remaining publications. This procedure resulted in the exclusion of publications not related to tourism routes but mostly related to issues of tourism destinations and tourism attractions development, the relationship between cultural heritage and tourism, or the tourists' travel patterns.

The full-text assessment for eligibility started with the exclusion of publications that were inaccessible, not in the English language, or not in a document type required by this research, e.g., complete books or academic thesis. Moreover, the full-text assessment led to the exclusion of documents not related to tourism routes as groups or associations of stakeholders. The excluded studies were mostly focused on routes merely as itineraries to travel, for instance, pilgrimage, cultural or heritage routes, and hiking trails, greenways, or scenic routes, as well as cultural heritage sites and wine tourism destinations.

After the selection of the source of evidence, all reviewers agreed on the data required to answer the mentioned research goals. First, it was necessary to collect data to characterize the routes under analysis, which was based on their location, the aforementioned criteria of the territory of implementation by UNWTO (2015), i.e. local, regional, national or transnational, and the thematic grouping of routes by UNWTO and ETC (2017). Simultaneously, the conceptualization of tourism routes was considered. Thus, the following data were extracted and analysed from each publication: location, territory, thematic group, and conceptualization.

Finally, a content analysis of the selected publications was conducted, and the results were presented in a narrative format, including visual representations, such as maps and charts.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 The selection of sources of evidence

From the electronic search, a total of 6058 documents were returned: 2547 publications from SCOPUS, 1740 from WOS, 826 from EBSCO, and 945 from SCHOLAR. After the exclusion of duplicates, 4107 were identified for the screening process. The application of the author keywords to filter the results led to the exclusion of 2920 publications and reduced the number to 1187. Additionally, by reading the titles and abstract, another 670 publications were excluded, and therefore a full assessment was made of 517 documents. The unavailability of documents, the use of other languages than English, and the fact that the paper did not correspond to the determined document formats led to the exclusion of 114 documents. In addition, 207 were deleted because they did not suit the research topic. Finally, the review includes a total of 194 documents, as shown by the flow diagram in Figure 2.

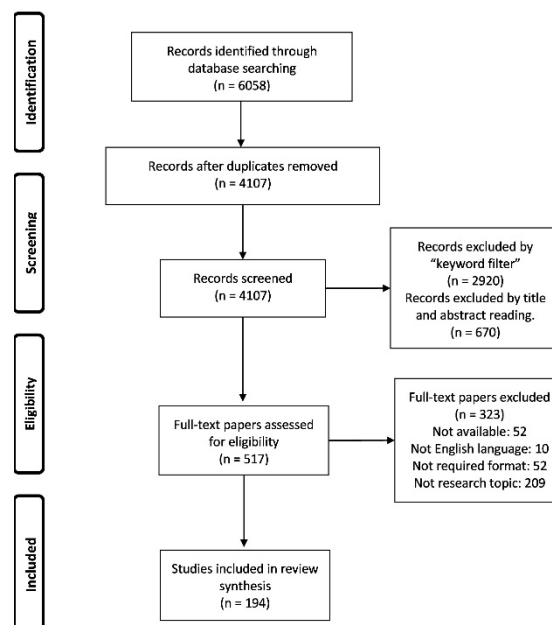


Figure 2: Flow diagram of the selection of sources of evidence (adapted from Tricco et al., 2018)

3.2 The characterization of tourism routes

Considering that the main goal of this research is to clarify the concept of tourism routes, it is of foremost importance to identify the diverse types of routes addressed in the literature as well as their location. The tourism routes are mostly located in Europe (70%), followed by America (17%), particularly in the United States of America and Canada; and Africa (10%), particularly in South Africa. Only 3% of the total studies are in Asia, while there are no studies in Oceania (Figure 3). It is possible that the selected searching keywords, “tourism” and “route”, may have limited those results to European/Western research and it may also justify the lack of results, particularly, from Asia and Oceania.

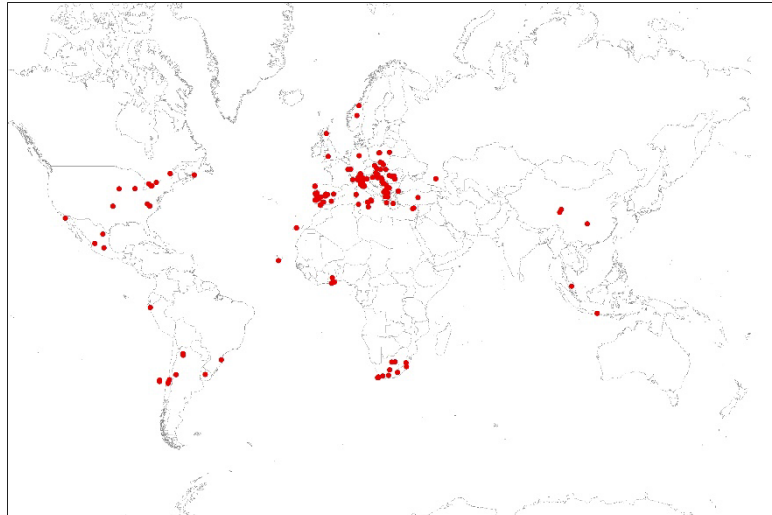


Figure 3: Route’s location

For a thorough understanding of the most studied type of routes, two variables are crossed, namely the route’s thematic group and territory (Figure 4). The analysis shows that the most common studied routes come under the food and drink thematic group on a regional scale (48%), and are based predominantly on wine routes, but also on other gastronomic products, such as olive routes. Additionally, a substantial number of routes have been registered on a transnational scale under the pilgrimage (16%) and history (8%) thematic groups. For instance, the studies on the cultural routes of the Council of Europe (COE), such as the Cultural Route of Roman Emperors or the pilgrimage routes of the Way of Saint James, and the studies on the UNESCO Slave Route project or the Silk Road project.

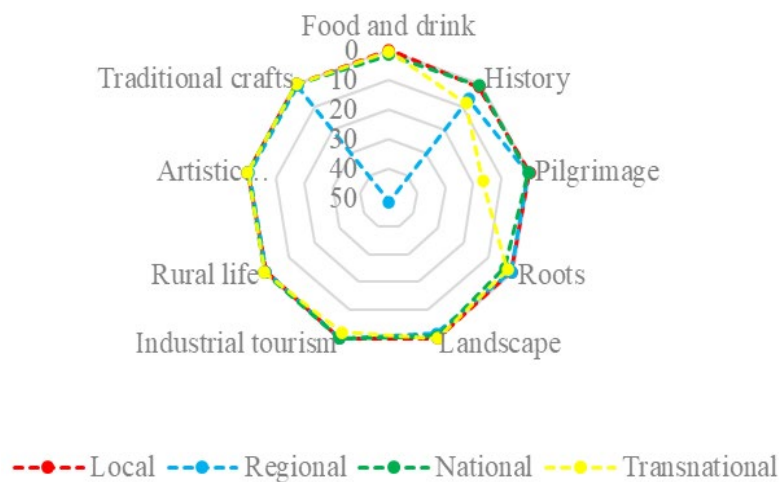


Figure 4: Route thematic groups by territory (%)

3.3 The conceptualization of tourism routes

Analysis of the conceptualization of tourism routes makes use of the most common types of routes discussed above, i.e., the food and drinks thematic group on a regional scale and the history and pilgrimage thematic groups on an international scale.

3.3.1 The food and drinks thematic group on a regional scale

The research under this category corresponds predominantly to wine routes, although the literature also presents studies on similar organizations around distinct products, such as an ale trail (Plummer, Telfer and Hashimoto, 2006) or an olive route (Folgado-Fernández, Campón-Cerro and Hernández-Mogollón, 2019).

Regarding wine routes, they could be just a location map of the wineries within a limited area and a signposted road to connect those wineries. In fact, wine routes were created in France and Germany during the first half of the 20th century, consisting of wineries location maps, which were often associated with an official demarcated wine region or geographical indication, e.g., Champagne, France (Bruwer, 2003; López-Guzmán, Cañizares and García, 2009; Coros, Pop and Popa, 2019; Trišić *et al.*, 2020). Accordingly, Gatti, Incerti and Ravagli (2002) presented the concept of a wine route suggested by the *Centre national des ressources du tourisme en espace rural* (1996), which defines a wine route as “a sign-posted itinerary, through a limited area (region, province, designed area) whose aim is to discover regional wine(s) product(s) and associated activities” (p. 99). Similarly, according to Bruwer (2003), a wine route connects wine estates and wineries in a given area, but includes other elements, for instance, vineyards, roads, and natural attractions, and should be marked with signposts to direct visitors along the route. Ramos, Cuamea and Galván-León (2019) mentioned that a wine route “... consists of the definition of one or several itineraries through one geographical area, perfectly signposted... Also, it is necessary to provide information about cultural or historic places... [and] must highlight the benefits of acquiring knowledge about the vineyard cultivation and wine process, as well as wine tasting and target the appreciation of the rural area” (p. 25).

Nevertheless, wine routes have been developed by the establishment of vertical alliances to incorporate other types of members and perform other tasks. Telfer (2001) mentioned the collaboration between wineries on advertising, the partnerships with tourism operators, and the organisation of events together with local restaurants and chefs as a way to promote the wine tourism destination. Correia, Passos Ascenção and Charters (2004) referred to a wine route that incorporates the wineries and the local and regional authorities, which was not only created to signpost the route and to produce promotional documentation but also to improve and develop member’s amenities and infrastructures, for example, interpretation centres and a museum. Brás, Costa and Buhalis (2010) considered a wine route as “a network of agents in a wine region, whose purpose is to promote regional development by employing strategies that lead to the development of an inclusive regional network which encompasses public and private agents from both sectors of activity (wine and tourism) ...” (p. 1621). Thus, the role of the wine route could eventually be connected to the role of a Destination Management Organisation (Brás, Costa and Buhalis, 2010). Besides, a wine route may be a formal network that unites and coordinates businesses, involving wine producers, public authorities, academia or private stakeholders from the hospitality industry and complementary services, among others. They are based on a common effort, promote community bonding and sharing of knowledge and expertise, and aim to promote wine tourism destinations (Correia, Passos Ascenção and Charters, 2004; Bregoli *et al.*, 2016; Lavandoski *et al.*, 2016; Del Chiappa, Bregoli and Kim, 2019).

Besides, there are studies on wine routes adopting the conceptualization instituted by national authorities, for instance in Italy (Patti, 2013) or Spain (López-Guzmán, Cañizares and García, 2009; Gomis *et al.*, 2010). In Italy, wine and food routes are defined by law as “itineraries created in geographical areas where quality wines are produced...” (Patti, 2013, p.296). López-Guzmán, *et al.* (2009) presented a definition provided by the Spanish Ministry of Tourism, in 2000, which defines a wine route as “... the integration of both existing and potential resources and services of interest to tourists in winemaking areas to form a single thematic concept...” (p. 424). Additionally, Gomis *et al.* (2010) described the wine routes of Spain as a tourism product club, a concept in which companies work together to develop new tourism products or add value to existing products as well to enhance tourism development by reviewing common problems.

The literature also presents studies on similar organizations around distinct products, such as ale trails (Plummer, Telfer and Hashimoto, 2006), or olive routes (Millán-Vazquez de la Torre, Arjona-Fuentes and Amador-Hidalgo,

2017), among others. The understanding of these routes is similar to wine routes; for instance, as explained by Millán-Vazquez de la Torre, Arjona-Fuentes and Amador-Hidalgo (2017), a gastronomic route is "... an itinerary that allows the agricultural and industrial productive process and the sampling of the regional cuisine... made up of producers... and regional restaurants... organized around a key product that characterises the route named after it or, in some cases, around a basket of products, and the itinerary is developed based on the roadway network..." (p. 101).

3.3.2 The history and pilgrimage thematic groups on a transnational scale

The routes under the history and pilgrimage thematic groups on a transnational scale are mainly related to international cooperation projects, such as the Cultural Routes of COE program or the UNESCO Slave route initiative. However, it is also possible to identify the dichotomy between tourism routes as a network of stakeholders and a path to be followed by tourists. For instance, Djukic and Vukmirovic (2012) understood the cultural route of Roman Emperors as a cooperation project between European countries, whilst Božić and Berić (2013) and Božić and Tomić (2016) emphasized the route's purpose of connecting neighbour regions or countries and to link touristic attractions. Moreover, the Slave Route initiative is described as a project involving African, American, and European countries that is managed by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Brower Stahl, 2010; Yankholmes, Boakye and Wellington, 2010), which work together with the UNWTO in a cultural tourism program for the preservation and restoration of slave trade heritage (Teye, Turk and Sönmez, 2011). Moreover, the studies on the Silk Road mentioned the route as a network of trade routes connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe (Wang, Qi and Xu, 2010) and the element of tourism associated with the project (Sun *et al.*, 2011). Another example is the Liberation Heritage Route in Africa, which is described by Snowball and Courtney (2010, p.563) as "... a strategy which links up less well known, often rural, tourist attractions in order to market them more effectively under a unified theme and improve the management and conservation of heritage assets."

Furthermore, studies on the Way of Saint James focused on the routes as a simple itinerary connecting the visitor's points of origin and destination and the touristic attractions along the way (Murray and Graham, 1997; Lois González and Somoza Medina, 2003; Fernandes *et al.*, 2012). Murray and Graham (1997) addressed the Way of Saint James as a path to be followed and defined it as "an intricate web of connections (both terrestrial and maritime), which linked all of Europe to north-west Spain" (p.15). Nevertheless, the Way of Saint James is no longer merely a pilgrimage itinerary towards Santiago de Compostela, but it is a Cultural Route of the COE; thus, according to the COE's view, it is a tourism cooperation project aiming the development and promotion of a series of itineraries based on transnational heritage representing European values and a network that connects territories under a common heritage theme. Likewise, the Via Francigena, which is another cultural route of COE, is understood as an itinerary based on a historic route that links heritage (nodes) along an axis (line) (Diti, Torreggiani and Tassinari, 2015; Trono and Oliva, 2017). On the other hand, Bellens *et al.* (2016) adopted the concept of cultural routes of COE to study the Via Francigena, which implies tourism cooperation for the development and promotion of the destinations and the importance and sharing of common values. Øian (2019) mentioned that the Saint Olav Ways connect not only the heritage sites but also communities, regions, and landscapes, while Serenelli *et al.* (2017) studied the Via Lauretana, which is not a cultural route of COE, but it is addressed as one by the authors.

4. Conclusion

The study of tourism routes has been focused on two main types of routes, one under the thematic group of food and drink on a regional scale, such as wine routes, and another under the history and pilgrimage thematic groups on an international scale, such as the cultural routes of COE. In broad terms, both might be organizations that result from partnerships between stakeholders to promote tourism development under a common theme. Our results support the idea that the concept of tourism routes has been enlarged from the narrow perception of a journey between two points to a network of stakeholders that work together to achieve common goals. In fact, wine routes evolved from initiatives to map and link wineries through a linear or circular itinerary to a network of stakeholders, including public and private agents, that eventually could manage a destination. The network is promoted by stakeholders, such as wine producers, public authorities, academia or other private stakeholders from the hospitality industry, complementary services, among others. Besides, the creation of programs such as the cultural routes of COE, which promote the cooperation between stakeholders on existing routes, e.g., the Way of Saint James, and includes routes with no fixed itinerary, e.g., the ATRIUM (Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes of the 20th Century in Europe's Urban Memory Route) validates the same idea.

Nevertheless, there are multiple definitions and concepts used to refer to tourism routes in the literature, even though this review aimed at a specific type of tourism route. Besides, those concepts are understood differently by the authors.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is one of the first literature reviews using a PRISMA scoping review approach in the tourism field. It is also worth mentioning the usage of VOSviewer to identify the main terms used in the literature on tourism routes.

This scoping review has three main limitations. First, the choice of the keywords “tourism” and “route” may influence the proportion of European/Western research in the analysis, and it may explain a lack of results from other parts of the globe, for instance, Asia and Oceania. Second, the application of a filter based on the author keywords using VOSviewer may have resulted in the exclusion of studies on routes associated with other touristic products than those included in the selected keywords. Third, another limitation is related to the PRISMA-ScR format, namely the exclusion of the results of individual sources of evidence reporting all relevant outcomes data for each source. In addition, adjustments were made to match the PRISMA-ScR protocol to the journal guidelines for publications, namely the abstract is not written by topics as it should be, the results and discussion sections are together in a single section, and an acknowledgements section was added to include the funding data.

Declaration of interest statement

None.

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