Supporting the Planning Management of UNESCO Sites: A Literature Review Between Urban Showcase and Gentrification

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Abstract. Fostering tourism with UNESCO World Heritage sites needs to address sustainability by balancing the preservation of cultural heritage, local economic growth, and tourism enhancement. Despite tourism is one of the sectors of the economy which can increase economic attractiveness, with benefits on local employment, real estate prices, or social capital, it could also increase costs sustained by cities and territories, require to adapt their system's rules to a different entity of flows, manage and avoid the risk of gentrification and displacement of local residents. Within this context, the present contribution examines the complex dynamics behind sustainable tourism management with particular reference to UNESCO World Heritage sites. This research work develops a literature review presented through the PRISMA approach (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) to deliver to public bodies a synthesis of the relevant scientific documents to identify a set of multidimensional assessment tools for achieving a sustainable tourism planning in their contexts. The outputs may be of decision-aiding utility for local public bodies, urban planners, and local communities to balance tourism management with heritage preservation and social well-being. This paper contributes to the ongoing debate on sustainable tourism management and planning in urban contexts by highlighting the UNESCO challenges and proposing a systematic approach to assess and manage tourism. The relevance of adopting a multidimensional approach may contribute to envisioning winning strategies for safeguarding cultural assets and urban development.

Keywords: UNESCO · Sustainable tourism · Strategic assessment · Gentrification · Literature analysis

1 Introduction

Tourism is recognized to be one of the cornerstones of the economy of a country, even if it was born as a niche travelling practice (i.e. *grand tour*) for business, aesthetic, or educational purposes, ranging from visiting Greek classical artefacts to Mediterranean

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culture or exotic landscapes, among others. With the progressive industrialization and globalization of our planet, this practice was opened to the whole society. Therefore, tourism demand and tourism accommodation supply became widely available over time and well-linked with the world such as via railways, cruise ships, or airplanes.

In the previous century, urban and territorial marketing founded in tourism as one of the major driving forces for sustainable local development, by capturing financial resources (e.g. EU INTERREG – European Interregional funds, EU FESR – European Funds for Rural Development), with direct and indirect effects on cultural and natural heritage, and urban and territorial criticalities as well (e.g. abandonment of inner and rural areas, seasonal employment, or facilities and accommodation availability) [1]. Even if some places are recognized as tourism destinations thanks also to their initial geomorphological and weather conditions, this badge is even more revealing a double-edged sword due to interdependent factors: the negative impact of high tourism flows on the environment (from garbage to illegal urbanization of water-edge) is closely related to the progressive lowering quality of tourism experience and local residents' dissatisfaction (or rather who cannot gather any profitability by imbalanced and massive tourism arrives) [2].

In a few words, we are assisting a mixture of bad and good practices which foster obstacles and opportunities for sustainable development at the same time. The landscape is further difficult when a UNESCO World Heritage site is present within a tourist destination. In some cases, cultural heritage and landscape become showcases for tourists and the remaining city could risk being gentrified, leading to some positive implications, such as the regeneration of decaying or down-grounded parts of the city [3], but mostly negative implications, compromising community welfare and historical preservation [4, 5]. In some other cases, the presence of UNESCO can lead to enriching multi-cultural values, and economic prosperity, thus aiding in the conservation of the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) [6].

While the UNESCO designation confers worldwide recognition, if public administration is not ready, this benefit could bring more vulnerability than expected. In light of this scenario, multidimensional assessment approaches are crucial for determining the sustainability of tourism planning and management, requiring a winning strategy capable of mirroring all the interests of actors and stakeholders involved in the process [7–13].This research work aims to enhance and stimulate the current debate on sustainable tourism planning and management in UNESCO World Heritage cities by focusing on a systematic literature review, using the database Scopus and presenting the procedure to the PRISMA approach (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses[1]) [14]. The literature aims to favor useful insights, identify the most widely used evaluation methods, and monitor sustainable tourism development trajectories by conducting a systematic synthesis of both academic literature and empirical evidence. Indeed, the research focuses on a broad view of the relationship between gentrification and WHL nomination, detailing it through the analysis of several specific case studies. The outputs are addressed to public bodies and local stakeholders and aim to provide

[1] www.prisma-statement.org *(last access march 2024).*

urban planners, technicians, tourism specialists, and local communities the tools necessary to counterbalance the over-tourism promotion of cities and territories with social welfare and tangible and intangible heritage preservation for the next generations [15].

After this introduction, the paper is structured as follows: Sect. 2 focuses on the positive and negative features of UNESCO inscription, Sect. 3 explains the methodology that founds the literature review using the PRISMA approach, Sect. 4 discusses the main findings and provides subsequently some final remarks and future steps of this ongoing research.

2 Positive and Negative Aspects of UNESCO Inscription

To promote cross-cultural awareness of culture and nature, the United Nations (UN) regularly identifies some exceptional and valuable elements to be included in the prestigious and highly recognized list of World Heritage [7]. Currently, 1199 properties are inscribed in the list, of which 933 are cultural, 227 natural and 39 mixed [16]. Recognition in the World Heritage List (WHL) is beneficial for the good inscribed, which could find solutions before a deterioration, for its conservation and promotion. Additionally, the place hosting the valuable element can benefit from it from several points of view, such as social cohesion and inclusion, education, environmental awareness, cultural significance, new jobs and services for the community, tourism opportunities and economic growth [17, 18].

Sites that have been nominated for inclusion on the list must maintain and safeguard their OUV for both the current and future generations [7, 19]. However, given the complexity of today's world, many variables can impact these valuable elements, and the various values at stake, spanning tangible, intangible, ecological, cultural and social values [20]. Firstly, climate change, natural disasters and, more in general, anthropogenic activities produce many threats to UNESCO WHL goods, such as the interaction of pollutants with materials leading to artworks and materials degradation and damages [21], biocultural landscape losses and hazard risks [22], as well as extremes of heat, fire weather conditions, heavy rainfall days, changes in mean sea level and aridity with a direct effect on the OUV of the good [23]. Secondly, unprepared public administrations and financial restrictions may cause greater vulnerability, due to a lack of practice in "good governance principles" characterized by openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness, coherence and subsidiarity to assure the successful implementation of public policies, efficient and effective allocation of public resources and to increase citizen's direct participation, involvement, engagement and empowerment [24]. Thirdly, wars and conflicts could provoke a fragile state of conservation of monuments, habitats and landscapes due to abandonment and military action [25]. Fourthly, the increase of infrastructure and specialized services to serve the nominated place could compromise traditional landscape, local specificities and views, as well as local economies. Fifthly, and partially connected to the previous impact, it is related to the negative outcomes on the local population and community, due to the spread of second-houses, Airbnb and displacement of residents (i.e., gentrification) due to the phenomenon of over-tourism [22]. In some cases, this type of problem can be caused by inefficient planning documents, which are too general or focused on a single issue without an overall view.

The relationship between planning and tourism development is complex and needs an integration of the top-down view- for the regulatory planning of tourism development - with the bottom-up view - for the inclusion of the social component at the local level [26].

Particularly for some of these reasons, UNESCO has realized the List of World Heritage in Danger. The list aims to inform the international community of conditions which threaten the very characteristics for which a property was inscribed on the WHL and to encourage corrective actions [25]. Some examples of goods included in this list, recalling the vulnerabilities previously mentioned, are listed here: the Bamiyan Valley in Afghanistan where the property is in a fragile state of conservation considering that it has suffered from abandonment, military action and dynamite explosions [25]; the middle of Vienna is consider in danger due to high-rise projects realized, that adversely impact the OUV of the site [27]; the Everglades National Park where the native plant and animal communities are extremely vulnerable to disturbance from human activities, and are threatened by agricultural and urban expansion, drainage, deliberate and accidental burning, water and air pollution, and the introduction of exotic species [28]; the Coro and its Port site in Venezuela was inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2005 due to the unusual rains and subsequent damage to the cities of Coro and La Vela, as well as for the construction of a new beach walkway and gateway to the city, in the buffer zone, which could have a significant impact on the value of the site [29]; the Abu Mena World Heritage property is threaten by the effects of rising groundwater [30]; the Medieval Monuments in Kosovo for the absence of management and legal protection, as well as political instability [31]; Rachid Karami International Fair-Tripoli is in a precarious state of conservation, also due to a lack of funds for its maintenance [32].

Beyond the usefulness of the World Heritage in Danger list, UNESCO seems to pay little attention to the negative impacts on local populations and communities due to the spread of over-tourism, the displacement of residents, the proliferation of second homes, Airbnb, and the cost of buying and renting in World Heritage areas and cities. However, these phenomena have both economic and social implications, as well as in some cases also on the landscape and the environment. In this paper, we are particularly interested in gentrification, which term also embeds these negative outcomes on the local population and community.

Originally, the term gentrification was introduced in the academic field by English sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964 to describe the physical and social changes in a London neighborhood following the settlement of a new middle-class social group [33]. Over time, authors have identified different and sometimes interrelated causes of gentrification diffusion, based on social, economic and environmental processes, including retail gentrification, environmental gentrification, climate gentrification, studentification, tourism gentrification, and health care gentrification [34].

Due to the purpose of this paper, tourism gentrification is of special interest. Urban development and community change in response to the demands of wealthy tourists are prime examples of tourism-related gentrification [35]. This kind of gentrification is the growth of short-term rentals, which drives up housing costs, alters retail and service offerings, creates a transient population, and drives long-term residents out of the area

[34, 36]. Examples of tourism gentrification are analyzed in different places by authors: e.g. the city of Barcelona [] and the New Orleans' Vieux Carre (French Quarter) [35], Latin America [37], Asian Pacific region [38], South Africa [39], Mediterranean country, such as Croatia [40], Portugal [41], Spain [42].

Despite their valuable contribution, to our knowledge these papers analyze the specific relationship between their own case study and gentrification, without a comprehensive view of the phenomenon and without providing solutions to prevent it. This paper specifically fills this gap by exploring this possible relationship through a literature review.

3 Methodology

To better understand how the issue of gentrification has been studied and analyzed for UNESCO sites, in terms of its definition, the methodologies used, and the specificity of the cases analyzed, an analysis of the relevant literature is provided. The database Scopus was used to conduct the literature review between November 2023 and February 2024 and the PRISMA diagram [14, 43] to clearly report our systematic review. The literature review considered three combinations (or strings) of keywords that provided different results in terms of the number and type of documents found.

In the first case, the keywords 'UNESCO', 'gentrification' and 'sustainable tourism' were chosen. This combination generated only one useful result. The publication by Chan et al. (2016) [44] deals with tourist gentrification in the Honghe Hani Rice Terraces region of China using interviews and non-participant observation conducted with inhabitants. However, it is not enough to investigate the complexity of gentrification. Therefore, the search continued to investigate the remaining queries for additional results. It should be noticed that the same document was later found in subsequent searches, thus proving its relevance for this topic.

The second string used for the search contained the keywords 'UNESCO', 'gentrification', and 'tourism' and 21 documents were obtained. Out of these, 7 were not consultable, one was irrelevant to the topic and another one was written only in Spanish, so they were discarded (Fig. 1). Among the remaining papers, several case studies were considered relevant to the research goal.

To find additional academic articles relevant to the research topic, a final more general string was generated, containing only two keywords: "UNESCO" and "gentrification".

The latter produced 40 useful results, including also those found in the previous combinations. Out of these, only 17 were available for consultation. Another 5 were excluded from the analysis because the topic of tourist gentrification was only touched. For example, a paper carries out a critical review of flood management solutions for the UNESCO site of Krakow, in which it also mentions the problems of gentrification of the site. This brought the final number of consulted papers to 12, as shown in Fig. 2.

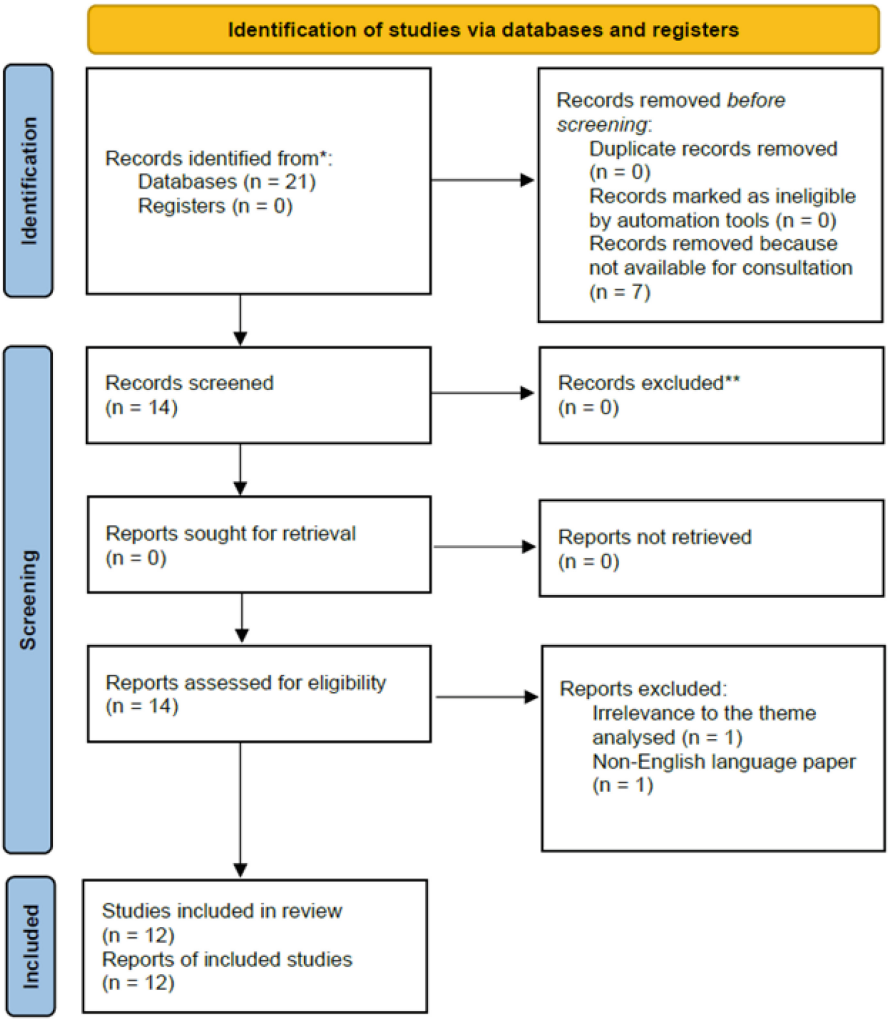


Fig. 1. PRISMA approach [14] string n.2

After this step, we conducted an initial analysis of the title and abstract to determine whether the contribution discussed the gentrification phenomenon in general or used case studies to validate the research hypothesis.

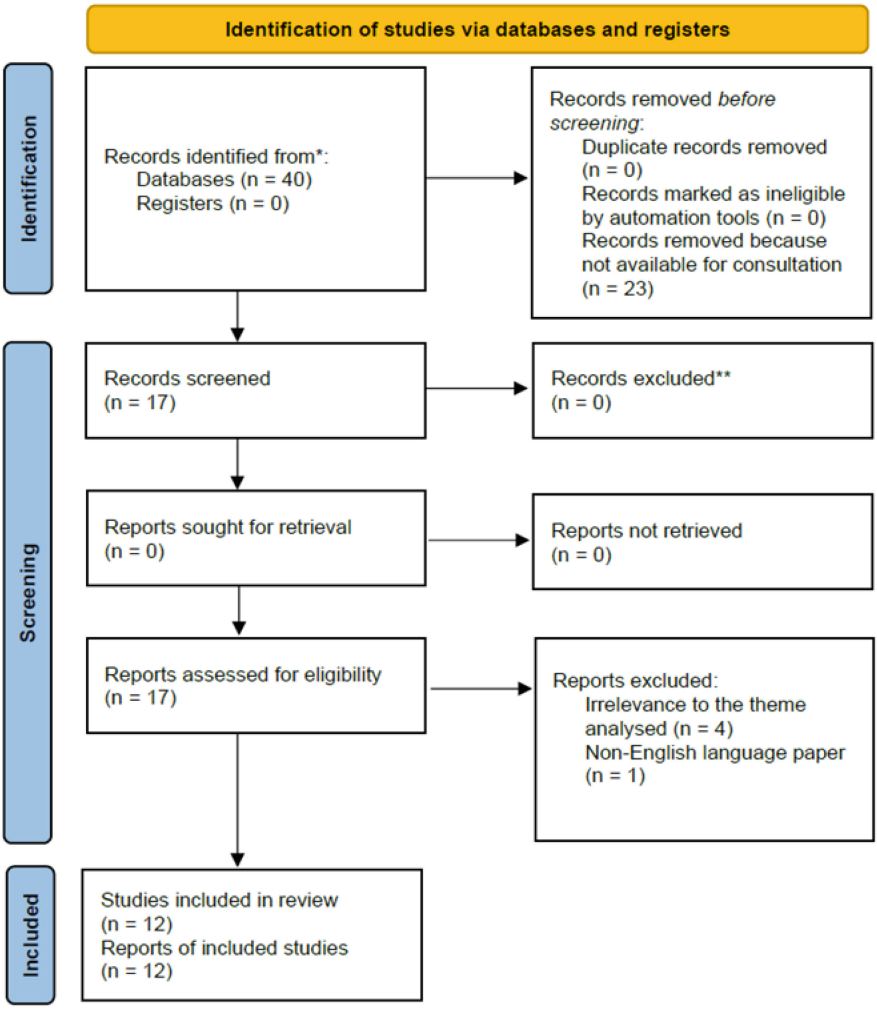


Fig. 2. PRISMA approach [14] string n.3

4 Results

4.1 Time and Location

The literature analysis was conducted from string number 3, which also includes the results of the previous two strings. It found bibliographical contributions, particularly in the fields of Social Science (34%), Arts and Humanities (15%), Business, Management and Accounting (12%), and Economics, Econometrics and Finance (10%). These contributions were published in the last twenty years, starting in 2002. However, it was not until 2010 that the literature was consolidated. As shown in Fig. 3, the number of contributions on this topic has been increasing in recent years, and case studies have been progressively used to validate hypotheses.

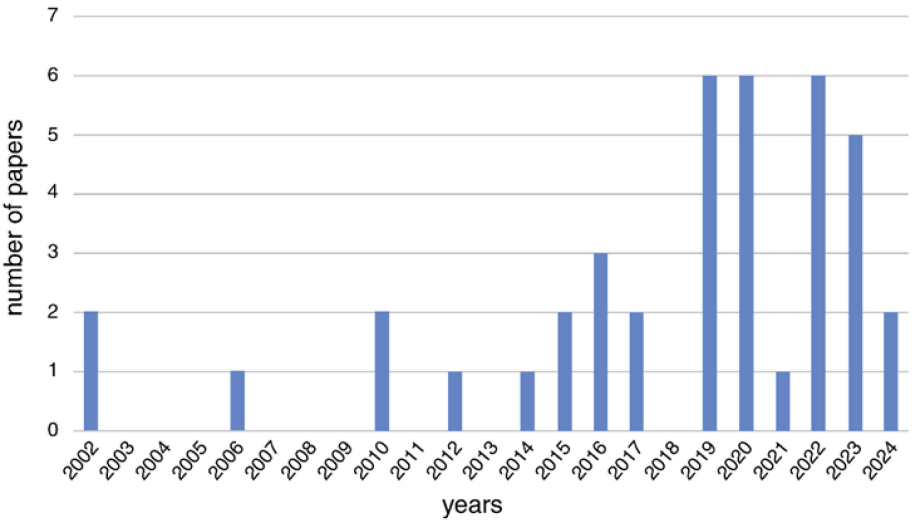


Fig. 3. Number of papers per year

The final mapping includes 13 case studies from 11 different cities worldwide and one case considering the geoparks of an entire region. The countries covered by these studies are shown in Fig. 4 and are China, Chile, Ecuador, Jordan, Laos, Malaysia, Spain, Vietnam, Yemen, and Indonesia. It is important to note that 85% of case studies are located in countries in the southern hemisphere, except for Ibiza and Cordoba in Spain. In fact, it is assumed that the inclusion of a site in the WHL can accelerate economic development and also trigger urban transformation in the South at a faster rate than in European countries [45]. Additionally, Southern countries are generally more vulnerable to gentrification phenomena, such as rapid population growth, exponential

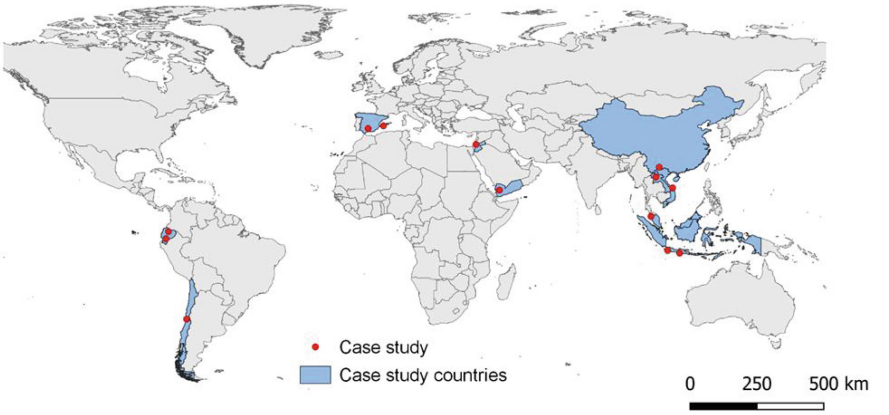


Fig. 4. Location of paper's case studies

economic development and lack of housing alternatives. These aspects explain why most scholars study this phenomenon in Southern cities rather than those in the Northern countries.

4.2 Analysis of the Papers

As anticipated in the previous section, the literature search resulted in a total of 17 papers, of which only 12 were consistent with the topic of analysis. Among these, Radaelli (2019) [46] and Hayes (2020) [47] did not use a real methodology but relied on a description of the gentrification phenomenon. In the first case, the proposal of a new governance model for the city of Cordoba is described. In the second case, the preservation of the universal heritage and urban regeneration of Cuenca, from a historical and social point of view, is highlighted. Instead, Soccali and Cinà [45] compared three WHL sites, identifying recurring patterns in each case analysed: Quito (Ecuador, inscribed in 1978), Sana'a (Yemen, 1986), and Luang Prabang (Lao People's Democratic Republic, 1995). The analysis highlighted how national neo-liberal agendas on tourism development treat urban heritage resources as commodities, hindering participatory practices. On the other hand, 'rights-based' approaches are more likely to promote awareness of local heritage values and encourage identity construction.

Other analyses in the literature primarily use sources from interviews and focus groups to analyse different case studies. This is the case of Foo and Krishnapillai (2019) [48], which investigated the enrolment phenomenon in George Town, Malaysia. They conducted interviews with various stakeholders (including local businessmen, displaced residents, old quarter residents, international and domestic tourists, tourism representatives from public and private sectors, representatives from the site management agency, local urban regeneration agency, heritage activists, and academics) and two focus groups of 8–10 people each with the residents living in the old quarter. These interviews highlighted how WHL registration generated an unprecedented capital appreciation, a surge in rents and an increase in transactions of pre-war commercial houses, inevitably triggering gentrification phenomena. Chan et al. (2016) [44] also employed interviews to collect data on the gentrification phenomenon, which was divided into three types. The researchers conducted a total of 65 interviews on the Honghe Hani rice terraces in Yemen. Of these, 25 were semi-structured interviews with pre-set questions, and 40 were unstructured in-depth interviews without pre-set questions. Ristiawan et al. (2024) [49] conducted 32 interviews with different actors in the Gunungsewu and Ciletuh UNESCO Geoparks, showing how finance and local-regional governance power are intertwined in the production of tourist destinations against state power. The last paper of this typology is proposed by Cáceres-Seguel (2023) [50], who analysed the case of the Valparaíso tourist area using 40 semi-structured interviews with residents of Concepción and Alegre hills. Residents have identified the issue of the transformation of houses into shops and hotels. This study highlights the propensity of historic Latin American cities to be more affected by gentrification.

In addition to these types of analysis and data collection methodologies, some studies integrate and support interviews with numerical data to explain certain phenomena. For instance, Woo and Khoo (2023) [51] studied the affordability of housing in the George Town World Heritage Site (WHS). After conducting a content analysis of the

literature on this subject, they proceeded with cross-sectional surveys. They structured 320 questionnaires, with one section dedicated to house prices and the other to socio-demographic information. The respondents indicated that renting after WHL registration has become too expensive, and none of the respondents were aware of any government strategies to provide access to affordable housing. Instead, the paper by El Faouri and Sibley (2022) [52] aims to retrace the process that led to the candidacy of the As-Salt site in Jordan through the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data, followed by interviews. These were conducted with different members of the local community, to gather not only their perceptions of the regenerative practices that were transforming the city but also their hopes for the future. The study investigated the perception of the local community through a content analysis using the software tool NVivo 12 [53] to code the responses. The study also used a Geographic Information System (GIS) to map the transformations in the city that occurred before and after the candidacy. The study reveals that the city has implemented tourism-driven interventions that have had a transformative effect. However, these interventions have undermined the OUV which was the reason for exclusion in the first attempt to the UNESCO candidacy process. Therefore, the focus shifted from tangible to intangible values. The study also highlighted the risk of heritage-led regeneration in this region, destroying and neglecting other important values for both the site and the local community. González-Pérez and Novo-Malvárez (2022) [54] conducted qualitative-quantitative analyses using GIS. The study integrated the potential of this tool with the Spanish National Statistical Institute's database, including demographic data (e.g. number of residents, foreigners, or people born outside the island) and tourism data (e.g. number of beds in hotels, rural hotels, and tourist flats extrapolated from tourist accommodation facilities). This study aims to examine the relationship between tourism and gentrification in Ibiza, one of the most popular tourist destinations in Spain. The findings indicated a significant social and cultural transformation in the historic centres, characterized by a decline in the local population and a rise in the number of tourists.

Finally, some papers have addressed the topic using satellite images and thematic cartographies in a GIS environment. For instance, Hidalgo (2014) [55] studied the impact of the WHL candidacy of the city of Valparaíso. The analysis of satellite images enabled the identification of transformations that occurred due to both natural and anthropic causes, as well as those specifically related to the candidacy. The results indicated evidence of gentrification, which, on the one hand, maintains the value of the built city but, on the other hand, weakens the social situation. Jones, Bui and Ando (2022) [56] study the same phenomenon in the city of Hoi An, Vietnam, which has been transformed over the years by tourism development due to the candidacy. For this study, 22 interviews with stakeholders and informal talks with the local population were supplemented with socio-economic and cartographic data. The findings were combined with secondary data, which included statistics collected by government departments, local and regional master plans and policy documents. The data were entered into the GIS with MapInfo software [57] to generate visual representations of the expanded buffer zone and the population of the different neighborhoods. The results showed that the WHL nomination brought a significant increase in tourists and a rise in Gross Domestic Product. In addition to the direct benefits of WHS investments, subsidies and ticket revenues to Hoi

An's Old Town, the indirect economic benefits have facilitated a genuine architectural renovation of the core area. However, the negative impacts of WHS status involve both economic (e.g. increased property prices) and social consequences (e.g. stricter planning regulations and increased tourist congestion).

All the analysed papers deal with the topic of gentrification always referring to case studies to validate our hypothesis. Specifically, 10 papers focus on a specific case [44, 46–48, 50–52, 54–56] one refers to two case studies in the same country [49] and one proposes a comparison between three different case studies [45].

4.3 Role of Evaluation Methods in Studying the Relationship Between UNESCO Sites and Gentrification

Two distinct categories of analysis emerged from the various papers: those employing qualitative analysis and those utilizing quantitative analysis to complement the qualitative findings. Belonging to the first category, 7 papers investigated the phenomenon through methods such as interviews, cross-sectional surveys, thematic comparative analysis, content analysis, focus groups and informal talks. In the second group, statistical analysis, and satellite and cartographic analysis, supported by the GIS tool, were integrated into previous methodologies.

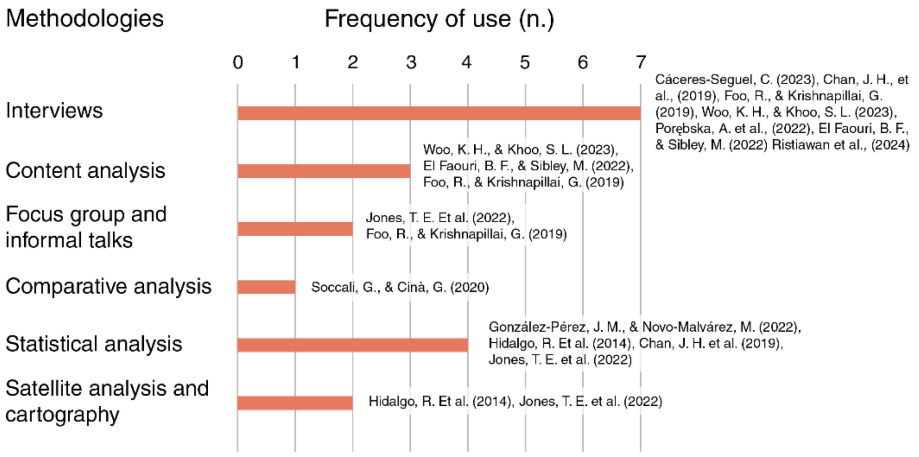


Fig. 5. Methodologies used in the analysed papers and frequency of use

Finally, in order to identify the most commonly used approaches to analysing the issue of gentrification, the study calculated the frequency of use of each identified methodology. As can be seen from Fig. 5, most of the analyses start with interviews, ranging from in-depth to simple informal conversations and focus groups. In some publications, evaluation methods are simply used to discuss qualitatively what is happening in the case studies. In other contributions, these methods are supported by quantitative data and statistical analysis to measure and monitor the phenomenon effectively. As

described in detail in the previous section, other methods found in the papers used comparative analysis, content analysis and cartographic and satellite analysis, although to a lesser extent than interviews.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

This study conducted a Scopus-based literature review to discuss the possible negative implications of tourism on UNESCO sites with particular reference to gentrification and the methodologies used to study this phenomenon. The PRISMA approach was used to present how the search results were filtered and extracted for our analysis.

The findings of this analysis led to some important reflections. It is clear that this phenomenon is well suited to be studied with qualitative methodologies that assess the satisfaction and perception of the various actors, from the local population to the decision-makers involved in territorial management. At the same time, it is also evident the lack of the use of strictly quantitative methodologies capable of extrapolating and studying the externalities produced by the phenomenon itself. From this analysis, however, it can be expected that statistical analyses will be increasingly used in these studies, thanks to the use of databases and GIS tools capable of handling large amounts of data.

In addition, a few numbers of methods have been employed to explore the phenomenon since the early stages of WHL pre-inscription. In fact, the literature review has given back many methods which are employed after the WHL inscription, such as interviews, focus group, comparative analysis, or statistical analysis among others. Thanks to the results obtained, it can be stated that an appropriate analysis could support the several stages of the process more effectively. For example, before the WHL inscription (ex-ante phase) the framing of the problem, the data gathering and statistical analysis could be supported by spatial SWOT analysis, together with statistical analysis, Stakeholder Analysis and tourism capacity calculation, since these are recognised to be very useful tools to aid decision-makers in better understanding the real scale of the phenomenon. The definition of sets of multi-spatial indicators could be suitable during the process of WHL inscription (in-itinere phase), because indicators can measure the past and current performance of the process and be also employed to simulate potential trends. Their employment could therefore aid decision-makers to intervene on negative states and trends by changing strategies. After the WHL inscription, these methods are considered very suitable to analyse and assess the phenomenon from the point of view of the various consequences. In fact, these tools are retained crucial for the UNESCO Management Plan and monitor the potential implications derived from the implementation of strategies and projects that received economic investments.

In conclusion, it is possible to state that the various methodologies found in the literature are employed to analyse and assess the phenomenon of gentrification, even if a long-term view of the capability of these different evaluation methodologies to cover every stage of the process still lacks today. In light of the goal of UNESCO to preserve, enhance and manage WHSs, and bring benefits to the surrounding area, the current and future research must be even more complete with solutions capable of minimizing gentrification, and more in general all those human and natural hazards that could affect the heritage value.

The current demand for innovative and integrated methods to support the early stages of WHL application could help on the one hand to achieve the nomination, and on the other hand, once included in the Management Plan, to predict and improve the performance of the application.

Since the present research work is ongoing, some future perspectives are identified and explained below. The first future perspective is to deepen the literature review to encompass documents that deal with the phenomenon before and after the WHL nomination (ex-ante and ex-post), noting the limited number of papers available for analysis. Starting from a limitation recognized by the authors, we do not want to focus only on the Scopus bibliographic database. Indeed, we would like to include other databases, such as Web of Science and Google Scholar, as well as national and international reports on the topic, to return an integrated and comprehensive literature review on the state of the art. In addition, a more comprehensive examination will be undertaken regarding other critical issues that characterize UNESCO sites, including commodification, alienation of local communities, and loss of authenticity, to obtain a holistic understanding of the topic. Another future perspective is to employ the founded methods in a real case study involved in an ongoing WHL candidacy process. After the potential nomination, the same methods will be directly integrated into the UNESCO Management Plan.

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