

# Progress or Regress in Phenomenological Research in Tourism? An Epistemological Assessment of Bibliometric Analysis and Visualization Tools

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Tomas Pernecky<sup>1</sup>  and Abrar Faisal<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

## Abstract

Phenomenology has become a popular approach in studying tourism experiences, rising to the forefront of methodological practice in the field. While phenomenological research numbered only in the dozens before the millennium, its application has since expanded to hundreds of studies. This rapid growth not only calls for a meta-analytical examination but also provides an opportunity to assess the suitability of various methodological tools and software for data construction, analysis, and visualization. This study is the first to critically examine the veracity of potential knowledge claims arising from the use of bibliographic data and VOSviewer by conducting a meta-analysis of phenomenological research in tourism. The results reveal that, despite VOSviewer's visually appealing imagery, notable epistemological pitfalls exist. The critical insights offered are valuable for navigating the evolving technological and methodological landscape in the field, particularly in understanding tourism experiences.

## Keywords

tourism experience, phenomenology, VOSviewer, epistemology, bibliometric, phenomenological

## Introduction: Bibliometrics and Tourism Research

Bibliometrics originated as a subset of scientometrics, a broad term encompassing the quantitative measurement of scientific activities. In today's academic landscape, bibliometrics and scientometrics are often used interchangeably to refer to the analysis of scientific output, occupying "a central position in the study of the dynamics of science" (Gingras, 2016, p. 1). The ability to apply statistical methods to analyze large sets of bibliographic data—including publishers, abstracts, journal and article titles, publication dates, and keywords—has made bibliometrics an appealing solution for addressing the challenge of keeping pace with the rapidly expanding body of research.

In tourism and hospitality studies, bibliometric analyses have been instrumental in understanding research progress

and bibliometric networks, with detailed reviews of the evolution and advances in scholarship provided by Ülker et al. (2023) and Ustunel et al. (2021). Notably, the first meta-analysis study was published in 1994, leading to a significant uptake of meta-analytical techniques after 2014 (Ustunel et al., 2021). Contemporary research (Cheng et al., 2018; Jiang et al., 2019; Koseoglu et al., 2016; Mody et al., 2021; Pelit & Katircioglu, 2022; Utkarsh & Sigala, 2021) has made significant strides in identifying intellectual foundations, impact factors, and overall contributions in the tourism literature. For instance, bibliometric analyses and visualizations have been used to determine future research agendas in domains such as disasters and crises in tourism (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019; Utkarsh & Sigala, 2021), travel experience (Au & Tsang, 2024), sustainable tourism (Mishra et al., 2022; Prerana et al., 2024), and other subfields. Moreover, an increasing number of bibliometric studies examine

## Corresponding Author:

Tomas Pernecky, Auckland University of Technology, Private Bag 92006, Auckland, 1142, New Zealand.  
E-mail: tomas.pernecky@aut.ac.nz

knowledge structures and publication patterns, including the use of terminology (Fauzi & Battour, 2024; Leiras & Caamaño-Franco, 2024; Sevilla-Sevilla et al., 2024).

Although bibliometric data analysis is often considered objective, the evaluation of science mapping and the interpretation of intellectual structures are regarded as both objective and subjective (Donthu, 2021; Koseoglu et al., 2016). As Wallin (2005) puts it, bibliometric methods are “quantitative by nature, but are used to make pronouncements about qualitative features” (p. 260). In other words, they can lead to assertions and judgments about the significance, quality, and impact of research. While noted for being particularly useful in investigating the historical and sociological dynamics of various disciplines and fields of study, scholars have emphasized the need for vigilance regarding the politics of evaluation (Gingras, 2016). In tourism studies, the broader issues of metric applications have been discussed, for example, by Hall (2011), who considers the implications for performance evaluation, career development, and the future directions of the field. Similar concerns have been echoed in other domains of knowledge (Werner, 2015), including by academics who argue that quantitative metrics are inadequate to “what should be the gold standard: reading the scholar’s publications and talking to experts about her work” (Bergstrom et al., 2008, p. 11433).

In this regard, most studies that use bibliometric analysis acknowledge certain constraints—namely, specific databases, language barriers, publication types and outlets, selected journals, and sample sizes—as the primary limitations of bibliometric methods. Several researchers (Cheng et al., 2018; Donthu, 2021) have recognized that the evaluative and relational techniques (Benckendorff & Zehrer, 2013) used in bibliometric methods may not truly reflect knowledge structures, and have called for a more robust methodological approach to evaluate the progress of research. Despite these calls, to date, no studies have systematically scrutinized the potential discrepancies that may exist between the actual literature and the knowledge outputs produced by means of bibliometric analyses and related tools.

To carry out network analyses and visualizations in bibliometrics, researchers can utilize a range of software with different capabilities, including Gephi, Pajek, CiteSpace, Netdraw, Sci2, and VOSviewer (see van Eck & Waltman, 2014). Among these, VOSviewer has gained popularity as a tool for visualizing progress and developments, as well as for assessing gaps in tourism research. For instance, Merigó et al. (2019) have used it to highlight major trends and dominant issues in the journal *Tourism Geographies*; Yanhao et al. (2024) have deployed it to scientifically map research on travel live streaming; Palácios et al. (2021) have applied it to examine trust in hospitality and tourism; and Singh and Bashar (2023) have turned to VOSviewer to reveal developments in e-tourism. VOSviewer is, therefore, a pertinent example of software that has garnered increasing interest in the academic community.

However, the potential epistemological shortcomings of relying excessively on such software and bibliometric data to make evaluative claims remain largely elusive.

Although researchers have conducted comparative studies of different science mapping software tools (e.g., Cobo et al., 2011), there are no publications in the tourism literature that provide rich and thick descriptions of bibliometric data visualization and analysis using VOSviewer. Moreover, discussions on the technical requirements and epistemic implications of such methods are still lacking. Among the salient issues to consider is whether the insights derived from VOSviewer analyses and visual maps accurately reflect the state of knowledge in the investigated field, as opposed to merely representing the epistemic practices of researchers. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to critically examine the veracity of potential knowledge claims arising from the use of bibliographic data and VOSviewer by conducting a meta-analysis of a specific domain of research in tourism: phenomenology.

## Phenomenological Research in Tourism

More than 4 decades have passed since Cohen (1979) contested the views of tourist experiences as superficial, frivolous, and trivial. Dissatisfied with these limited understandings, he set out to perform a phenomenological analysis—a project that sought to challenge the then received view of “the tourist. In search of a middle ground, he challenged the main perspectives that dominated the sociological tourism landscape. At one end were those thinkers according to whom tourism was an “aberration”—with the main targets of Cohen’s criticism being Boorstin (1964) and Turner and Ash (1975)—and at the other were those who championed a view of tourism as a quest for authenticity, with MacCannell (1973) leading the way. Cohen’s (1979) ambition was to broaden the theoretical base. His contribution heralded the complexity attached to the tourism experience, which was yet to be recognized and adequately explored in the field. Cohen’s pronouncement that “different kinds of people may desire different modes of touristic experiences; hence ‘the tourist’ does not exist as a type” (p. 180, italics in original) paved the way for more assiduous inquiries into the tourist experience, although, methodologically speaking, his work is considered to be “highly speculative” (p. 198). The invitation to phenomenological research remained largely unanswered for the next 2 decades. Contributions before the turn of the century were sporadic and accompanied by methodological ambiguity (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010), and it is only in the past 20 years that phenomenology has gained prominence among tourism academics.

The range of topics examined has been rich and diverse, encompassing a wide spectrum of research focuses, including experiences of international retirees in second home destinations (Wong & Musa, 2015); ayahuasca experiences in the Upper Amazon (Wolff et al., 2019); luxury experiences in hotels (Cetin & Walls, 2016); house music event

experiences (Grebena, 2020); experiences of spirituality in tourism (Willson et al., 2013); travel writing (Blaer et al., 2020); dark tourism (Boateng et al., 2018); and lived experiences of visiting remote destinations such as North Korea (Wassler & Schuckert, 2017). It is worth underscoring that the study of experience through a phenomenological lens has served as a foundational element in the acquisition of tourism knowledge, providing valuable insights into the motivations for travel and direct encounters with diverse places and cultures (Sharpley, 2016; Sharpley & Stone, 2012).

On a methodological front, phenomenology has long been a key method for grasping the intricacies of tourism phenomena, arguably surpassing other philosophical approaches in its prevalence. What sets phenomenology apart from other methods is its distinctive focus on first-person (lived) experience, leading to deeper understandings of the subjectivities that constitute the multifaceted nature of the tourism phenomenon at large. Although too ambitious to examine in depth here, it is crucial to acknowledge that various phenomenological approaches and schools of thought exist, ranging from the descriptive and transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl to the ontological focus of Martin Heidegger, as well as the French phenomenological movement, which includes Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, and others (see, for example, Luft & Overgaard, 2014). Collectively, these make phenomenology a heterogeneous and multifaceted field. Given the richness and centrality of experience, it is not surprising that the value of phenomenology has continued to be emphasized across the terrains of tourism, hospitality, events, and leisure scholarship (Fendt et al., 2014; Kirillova, 2018; Ziakas & Boukas, 2014), and has even been extended to more-than-human perspectives (Dashper & Brymer, 2019).

However, the growing popularity of phenomenology in tourism studies poses the broader concern of navigating and synthesizing large volumes of scholarly literature. The exponential surge in academic publications is accompanied by logistical constraints, managerial limitations, and organizational hurdles in consolidating insights. This not only prompts meta-analytical examinations but also provides an opportunity to critically evaluate the suitability of various methodological tools and software for constructing, analyzing, and visualizing data. By amalgamating the identified challenges—specifically, the use of bibliographic data and VOSviewer, along with the growing number of phenomenological studies being conducted in tourism—this paper seeks to tackle the veracity of knowledge claims, centering on VOSviewer.

## **Methodology**

As knowledge in tourism studies continues to proliferate, the use of diverse methodological tools and software for constructing, analyzing, and visualizing data has become invaluable. In

this regard, the significance of meta-epistemological works has increased in the endeavor to digest the ever-growing number of published manuscripts (Mody et al., 2021; Ritchie & Jiang, 2019; van Eck & Waltman, 2014). Using phenomenology as a delimited epistemic territory, this study examined the ability of VOSviewer to capture and visualize progress in phenomenological research in tourism since the turn of the millennium. The selection process for relevant literature (Mody et al., 2021; Ritchie & Jiang, 2019) involved a database search using generic keywords within the research domains of tourism. The cyclic act of the database search used Boolean search (i.e., the keywords “phenomenology” and “tourism”; “phenomenological” and “tourism”) to identify and retrieve scholarly works from the Web of Science and Scopus.

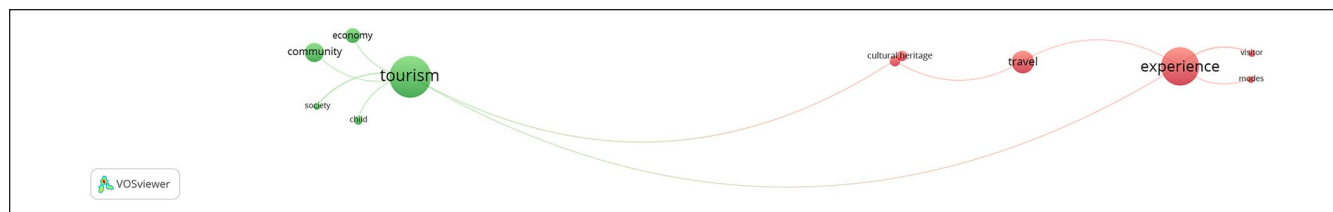
The algorithms used in the search engines of these databases, aiming for optimum results, scoured article titles, abstracts, and author keywords, ultimately generating a list of relevant articles published between 2000 and 2021. The selection of the timeframe was driven by the specific aim of assessing the capability of VOSviewer to accurately depict and analyze data within a contemporary context. While the range of years was not inherently critical to the examination, focusing on this extended timeframe allowed for the inclusion of a diverse array of studies and insights relevant to the software’s performance. To further refine the search, publications beyond the scope of this study or those lacking institutional affiliation were excluded. Moreover, only abstracts of articles published in English were included, as the natural language processing algorithm of VOSviewer is unable to process languages other than English (van Eck & Waltman, 2011).

A total of 376 journal articles were identified as having made some contribution to tourism phenomenology. The article title, author(s), year, journal name, author-provided keywords, abstracts, and URL/DOI/ISSN information that emerged from multiple databases were documented and stored in a spreadsheet. Article information was manually checked to avoid duplication, and full articles were downloaded and archived for an in-depth qualitative analysis. Due to the vast number of articles that have identified phenomenology as a significant component of their research, it was deemed unfeasible to undertake an in-depth analysis of the methodological treatment and contribution of each paper to the field. Rather, given the large sample size, the opportunity was to examine the progress of phenomenological research by focusing on bibliographic data, namely distance-based mapping of the co-occurrences of keywords. A total of 2100 author-provided keywords from the 376 articles were checked for errors in transferring data to the spreadsheet and to ensure consistency in spelling before creating term maps based on a corpus of documents. Another attempt at data cleaning confirmed that there were no duplicates or incorrectly formatted data within the dataset of the corpus document.

In the first cycle of data visualization using VOSviewer (Waltman et al., 2010), a full count of terms (i.e., authors’







**Figure 4.** Co-Relations Within the Largest Cluster After Application of Exclusion Criteria.

between keywords of scientific publications reflect on the “essence” of the research and complement phenomenology. Density visualization identified the dense areas of nodes and offered a deeper understanding of how respective researchers in tourism associated their phenomenological research with or within the subfields of tourism. However, computational limitations in analyzing the keywords, normalization of the differences between nodes, positioning of the nodes in clusters, and understanding the relatedness of any pair of nodes were critical in creating and analyzing the visuals.

### Epistemological Analysis

As outlined in the preceding section, the methodology was designed to demonstrate and, to some extent, replicate similar research in the field (e.g., Singh & Bashar, 2023) to assess the efficacy of VOSviewer in accurately depicting knowledge developments. The results, based on bibliographic data visualized in Figures 1 and 3, indicate a notable increase in phenomenological research in tourism. The range of topics associated with phenomenological inquiries and the diverse applications of phenomenology suggest a burgeoning interest in this approach. Figure 3 portrays a densely populated sphere with keywords and clusters of varying sizes, signaling a heterogeneous landscape in phenomenological research on tourism. However, significant limitations and epistemic pitfalls emerged during the analysis. These are thematically organized into three overarching themes and are addressed in this order: (1) lack of traceability and limited programming logic, (2) limited epistemic and methodological transparency, and (3) limited epistemic correspondence.

#### *Lack of Traceability and Limited Programming Logic*

The methodology section clarified that since the purpose of this research was to evaluate phenomenological research in tourism, it was expected that all studies identified during the initial phase would address the theme of tourism phenomenology. In other words, all of the nodes represented in Figures 1 and 3 are significant for tourism and phenomenology due to the initial search for the keywords “tourism” and “phenomenology” and the screening process. Therefore, the keywords “tourism” and “phenomenology” were removed from the keyword pool in the VOSviewer data file before

generating the visuals offered in Figures 3 and 4. Notably, VOSviewer regenerated the node “tourism,” as shown in Figure 3, due to keyword phrases that included the word “tourism,” such as “dark tourism,” “urban tourism,” “rural tourism,” “tourism experience,” “cultural tourism,” “transformation tourism,” “tourism destination,” and “fair tourism experience.” As a result, the main cluster generated by VOSviewer (Figures 3 and 4) labeled “tourism” implies, oxymoronically, that tourism is one of the key clusters in phenomenological research on tourism. This finding reveals that VOSviewer may produce skewed interpretations when keyword phrases are used.

Another related issue is that the programming logic of VOSviewer makes it impossible to track the articles that were included in any of the clusters, including the largest cluster labeled “tourism” (Figure 4). In fact, VOSviewer does not generate a file or a list of publications used to produce the visual data. This means that detailed analysis and cross-checking were not possible. Although it was feasible to consult the master spreadsheet and attempt to identify phrases that may have been included in the node “tourism” (i.e., “dark tourism”), this could not be verified. The ramifications are noteworthy for several reasons: the potential unpredictability of co-word analysis and cluster composition, the inability to trace articles through VOSviewer-generated results and conduct detailed analyses within any of the generated clusters and nodes, and the impossibility of validating results without a methodological tool to maintain an audit trail.

#### *Limited Epistemic and Methodological Transparency*

The inability to track academic articles representing the nodes and clusters (as shown in Figures 1–4) poses a significant challenge to epistemic transparency. Epistemic transparency—a concept in the philosophy of knowledge that emphasizes the importance of clear evidence, reasoning, and processes to justify knowledge claims (Smithies, 2012)—is compromised when it is not possible to trace and verify how data are processed and interpreted to produce meaningful information and knowledge. In instances where this involves specific steps, such as data availability, coding, and procedures, there is also a lack of methodological transparency (Marsden, 2020).

As acknowledged by the VOSviewer architects, in a distance-based approach, “loss of information takes place in reducing bibliographic data to a bibliometric network. For instance, when textual data are reduced to a co-occurrence network of terms, information on the context in which terms co-occur is lost” (van Eck & Waltman, 2014, p. 28). In the context of this research, this means that epistemic and methodological transparency could not be established because the nodes and clusters produced by VOSviewer could not be evaluated with sufficient clarity and accuracy. Furthermore, the distance between any pair of nodes or clusters of nodes does not reflect their relatedness with the accuracy needed to explore and analyze the co-occurrences of terms in bibliometric networks.

To address these challenges to a limited capacity, the only viable approach was to conduct a thorough review of the dataset in conjunction with VOSvisuals. Focusing on Figure 4, it became imperative to meticulously scrutinize the original master spreadsheet to pinpoint potential articles that could have contributed to the generation of clusters by VOSviewer. The process involved two main steps: (1) consulting the VOSviewer data file and corpus of documents to determine how nodes may have been generated (as in the case of the node “tourism” in Figure 4), and (2) consulting the original master spreadsheet and using keyword searches to identify the articles that may have been used by VOSviewer to form the nodes. While acknowledging the inherent challenge of verification, these steps enabled a limited analysis of the smaller nodes in Figure 4, namely “child” and “society.” It is important to emphasize that attempting the same process for larger nodes, such as “tourism,” proved futile due to the sheer volume of articles using the term “tourism,” the application of exclusion criteria (as detailed in the methodology section), and the general inability of VOSviewer to reconcile the corpus file and the master spreadsheet.

Regarding the first node, “child,” two publications were manually identified in the master document (Sedgley et al., 2017; Sojasi Qeidari et al., 2021). The first article, by Sojasi Qeidari et al. (2021), was a descriptive phenomenological account of the learning experiences of children using interviews and paintings. The second article (Sedgley et al., 2017), grounded in interpretative phenomenological analysis and psychological methodology, explored the lived experiences of mothers of children with developmental difficulties. Assuming that these were the articles that might have contributed to the generation of this node, no discrepancies were noted regarding the thematic relevance of the “child” node, as both studies appeared to align well with the theme.

In contrast, the node “society” in Figure 4 was manually linked in the master spreadsheet to a single article titled “Sustainable Community Tourism in Puerto El Morro: Analysis of Its Application and Economic Impact” (Torres, 2019), which listed the term “society” as one of the keywords. Upon detailed inspection and translation of this article, it was found that it only mentioned the phrase “phenomenological action” in the abstract, without further explanation in the

methodology section or in the remaining parts of the paper. It is questionable whether this article should be considered a contribution to tourism phenomenology, given its lack of methodological details, phenomenological analysis and discussion, as well as the absence of any references to phenomenology. This finding highlights that VOSviewer is restricted to structured data, such as keywords, and is otherwise unable to read and interpret the contents of documents—a task traditionally performed manually by researchers. Consequently, this may result in a superficial clustering of keywords and the inclusion of research articles that have little to do with phenomenology.

Conversely, through manual analysis of the master spreadsheet, it was possible to identify other research articles with societal significance that were not included in the node “society.” For instance, a study by Aquino and Andreck (2018) examined the experiences of volunteer tourists in host communities, evaluated using social representations theory. However, since articles like this one did not use the word “society” as a keyword, they were excluded by VOSviewer from the node “society.” Thus, relying solely on VOSviewer may not only result in the inclusion of non-phenomenological studies or those only loosely related to phenomenology—such as the aforementioned research by Torres (2019)—but it may also overlook other relevant research, potentially distorting the depiction of phenomenological coverage in tourism studies.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that nodes such as “disability,” “transformation tourism,” and “social responsibility” in Figure 3 all have societal relevance, yet none of them were detected or linked by VOSviewer to the node “society” (in Figure 4). This suggests the possibility of alternative nodes—and possibly more rigorous ones—revealing a significant interpretative and analytical constraint. These observations are somewhat supported by van Eck and Waltman (2014), who contend that “even if we are aware that there may be inaccuracies in a bibliometric network visualization, it remains difficult to assess the magnitude and the consequences of these inaccuracies” (p. 30). The visual mapping facilitated by VOSviewer raises important questions about interpretative validity and accuracy, particularly if researchers rely solely on bibliographic data sourced from databases and processed without further intervention and critical scrutiny. This leads to the final observation regarding limited epistemic correspondence.

### *Limited Epistemic Correspondence*

Different theories of truth, supported by various philosophical traditions, have played a pivotal role in discussions on knowledge, including within social science and qualitative inquiry (see Pernecky, 2016). In epistemology, the correspondence theory of truth puts forward a straightforward claim: truth is determined by how well statements correspond to reality (see, for example, Marian, 2022). Accordingly, statements are only true if they accurately describe actual states of

affairs. If statements do not accurately correspond to reality, their veracity is undermined. The correspondence theory of truth is particularly valuable in the epistemological assessment of bibliographic research because if bibliographic assessments of knowledge are true, then they should accurately correspond to the research carried out. Thus, whereas “epistemic correspondence” refers to the relationship between reality and our knowledge of it, “limited epistemic correspondence” is observed when the knowledge produced fails to accurately capture the reality it aims to understand, as seems to be the case with VOSviewer’s depictions of phenomenological research in tourism in this study. When epistemic correspondence cannot be accurately established, it undermines the value of the knowledge produced, resulting in compromised insights and flawed conclusions.

It is important to reiterate that, although it is beyond the limits of VOSviewer to analyze the content of documents, the visual representations produced by VOSviewer may lack substance and rigor without researchers carrying out these steps, potentially leading to pseudoepistemic claims. Taking the nodes in Figure 4 as an example, it is questionable whether the main cluster titled “tourism”—linked to the nodes “child,” “society,” “economy,” and “community”—amounts to meaningful, let alone accurate, knowledge. Unless researchers can validate the nodes and clusters generated by VOSviewer and evaluate the content of each study, the ability of VOSviewer to provide an accurate depiction of any “developments” in a given domain should be treated with caution.

## Conclusions

As knowledge creation increasingly relies on software and tools that facilitate the analysis, synthesis, and visualization of extensive datasets, it becomes imperative to understand the constraints and shortcomings associated with these technologies. The primary focus of this meta-analytical review was to examine the processes through which knowledge is generated with the assistance of the network visualization software VOSviewer and consider the resulting implications for tourism epistemology. In this regard, this article has been the first to scrutinize the methodological approaches of data visualization for identifying and understanding the inherent complexities that exist in the knowledge structure of a large and diverse body of research in tourism. The spotlight on phenomenology yielded secondary but useful insights, indicating that phenomenology remains a popular approach in the field, with a growing application and use for studying tourism experience. However, despite the heterogeneity of approaches available in phenomenological inquiry, researchers may face the same difficulties that have been identified in this paper with respect to the visualization and mapping of knowledge. Several noteworthy epistemological issues were raised in the assessment of VOSviewer, which are summarized as follows:

- Key epistemological shortcomings identified in this research include the lack of traceability and limited programming logic, limited epistemic and methodological transparency, and limited epistemic correspondence.
- The ability to generate, cluster, and link nodes was found to be constrained without substantial data manipulation by researchers.
- Due to VOSviewer’s inability to discern and evaluate the content and coverage of topics in scholarly articles, providing qualitative assurances was not possible.
- There is no basis upon which to confirm that the visual maps produced by VOSviewer accurately represent the state of phenomenological inquiry in the field; other, more accurate, representations may be possible.
- Failing to critically review and apply expert judgment to the publications used by VOSviewer can compromise the reliability of the resulting insights.
- Overdependence on VOSviewer may lead to pseudoepistemic assertions and a skewed portrayal of knowledge.

In summary, while VOSviewer facilitates text mining and provides visually appealing representations of mapping and clustering, its utility is restricted by its technical parameters and the listed epistemological challenges. The visual maps presented in this study are more aptly understood as signifying individual and collective social and cultural practices within the field, akin to Bourdieu’s (1979/1984) notion of habitus. In other words, they are windows into how researchers propose, justify, evaluate, present, and legitimize (phenomenological) knowledge claims (Kelly, 2008). Therefore, it is important to maintain vigilance about the types of understandings derived from VOSviewer analyses and visual mapping, as these may not accurately reflect the state of knowledge in the investigated domain but rather speak to the epistemic customs of researchers. Sole reliance on tools like VOSviewer—without understanding the noted pitfalls—may lead to epistemic regress, wherein superficial visualizations replace comprehensive assessments.

## Limitations, Recommendations, and Future Research

The insights provided in this research ought to be understood in light of several limitations. The study findings are constrained by the use of VOSviewer and the steps outlined in the methodology section. Notably, the distance-based mapping of co-occurrences was limited to keywords; these were deemed the most relevant type of data, as academics strategically use them to signpost and communicate the content of their research. Future analyses could incorporate datasets that contain additional information, such as abstracts or a combination of abstracts, titles, and articles. However, a significant limitation of the software—which seems unavoidable—is the inability to trace the scholarly publications associated with each node. As a result, conducting an in-depth analysis of the visualized maps

generated by VOSviewer becomes impractical. Furthermore, the absence of audit trails for bibliometric data and the lack of in-depth qualitative analyses of relevant publications pose a danger of overstating the usefulness and implications derived from bibliometric networks, leading to potential false assumptions or inferences about the epistemological state of the studied domains of knowledge.

In terms of objectivity, understood as “faithfulness to facts” (Reiss & Sprenger, 2020), meaning accurately describing facts about the world, this study contends that using VOSviewer to map phenomenological research and progress in the field of tourism is subject to significant drawbacks. These arise from the aforementioned difficulty in verifying and further checking the sources from which nodes are created, compounded by the possibility that the data used to produce nodes, such as keywords, may be used superficially and may not accurately represent the actual content of studies. One way to overcome these pitfalls could be to cross-check the accuracy of all keywords and data used in the analysis. However, this means that researchers cannot rely solely on bibliometric data derived from article titles, abstracts, and keywords, which is often the motivation behind such analyses. Relatedly, considering the richness and methodological diversity that phenomenology, as a philosophy and approach, offers, it is important to reiterate that VOSviewer’s capabilities are limited to analyzing selected bibliometric data. In-depth reading and analysis of individual manuscripts are still required to discern the methods and philosophies underpinning each study, as VOSviewer may fail to capture crucial methodological intricacies.

In addressing broader considerations related to the politics of knowledge production and the need to embrace pluriversality in the field (Pernecky, 2023, 2024; Rastegar, et al., 2023), it is also paramount to emphasize that VOSviewer is only able to process the English language (see van Eck & Waltman, 2011). This has obvious ramifications for the visibility/invisibility and inclusion/exclusion of research published in other languages, highlighting the technological hegemonies of which researchers should be aware. It is questionable whether software like VOSviewer can provide an inclusive and encompassing picture of the social and intellectual trends of a scholarly community based solely on citations, co-authorship, co-occurrence, and so forth, when only the English language is included. In this regard, the use of certain terminology in bibliometric studies is equally alarming, such as the notion of “certified knowledge” (Koseoglu et al., 2016; Ramos-Rodríguez & Ruiz-Navarro, 2004) designated for articles published in leading scientific journals. This raises troubling questions about the fate of knowledge that is not disseminated through “leading” journals and other publishing outlets, including publications in languages other than English.

Finally, it has been argued that a lack of appropriate keywords may lead to poor visibility in meta-analytical studies. While not a sole solution to the nuanced epistemological and

methodological issues raised in this paper, this is a consideration that researchers, as well as editors, may wish to address as part of journal policies and practices to ensure a better portrayal of published research.

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### ORCID iDs

Tomas Pernecky  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6418-8020>

Abrar Faisal  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9276-3483>

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### Author Biographies

**Professor Tomas Pernecky** is based in the Faculty of Culture and Society at Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand. His work examines philosophical, theoretical, and methodological issues across the critical humanities, social sciences, and the fields of tourism, leisure, and events studies. He is the author of *Epistemology and Metaphysics for Qualitative Research* (SAGE) and a number of edited texts, including *Postdisciplinary Knowledge* (Routledge).

**Dr Abrar Faisal** is a senior lecturer and programme leader of Postgraduate Programmes in Tourism, Hospitality and Event Management. Abrar's research expertise is inter-disciplinary; his research, teaching and postgraduate research supervisions at Auckland University of Technology reflect a wide range of his research interests and primarily focus on urban resilience, organisational ecology, risk & crisis management, entrepreneurial resilience, urban tourism, placemaking, destination marketing and management, event impacts and legacies and qualitative research methods.