

## **Trail-related tourism and rural community economic growth: a review of empirical literature**

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Recreational trails offer a range of trail-related tourism (TRT) activities, including horseback riding, biking, rafting, and hiking. Although TRT has recently attracted the interest of academics and practitioners, the economic benefits of trails have typically been examined at the national level. However, rural communities - often the primary beneficiaries of TRT - should be actively engaged and equipped with new skills to meet increasing demand and achieve economic independence, especially through entrepreneurship and business development.

Despite this, little is known about how different TRT business sectors contribute to the development of local rural communities, particularly in terms of trail visitors' expenditure patterns and economic impact. To establish a sustainable endogenous TRT sector with its own economic infrastructure, rural TRT is crucial both as a strategic sector and as a driver of rural growth - supporting local populations and attracting businesses and entrepreneurs.

This study aims to review existing research and provide a comprehensive overview of the key factors in TRT development that contribute to the economic empowerment of rural communities. Using the Scopus database, a systematic literature review and bibliometric analysis were conducted on academic articles published between 1994 and 2024, focusing on sustainable local economic development through TRT and rural community economic empowerment. A mixed-method analysis - both quantitative and qualitative - was applied to identify key themes, patterns, emerging trends, and future research directions.

This research identifies and categorizes the key endogenous and exogenous factors as themes that drive economic empowerment in rural communities. The first theme includes endogenous factors such as accommodation, transportation, food services, and guided tours, which help minimize economic leakage and ensure that benefits remain within the community. The second theme encompasses exogenous investments, including formal economic education and land ownership, which are equally important. Together, these factors show that TRT can promote sustainable development, strengthen local economies, and preserve local culture - ultimately empowering rural communities.

This research provides an important theoretical contribution to the understanding of key factors for successful TRT development to economically empower local rural communities and their independence, which until now has not been systematically studied. Moreover, expansion of theoretical knowledge provides a framework for new empirical research. New research agendas will be fundamental to provide innovative, clear, and actionable guidance for rural policymakers, development agencies, and local entrepreneurs interested in

harnessing TRT for sustainable development with regards to community skill development, support for local businesses, infrastructure planning or public-private partnerships.

**KEYWORDS:** trail-related tourism, rural community, economic growth, systematic literature review, endogenous and exogenous factors, sustainable development.

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