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Bridging Structural Deficits: A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) on the Integration of Rural Tourism and the Creative Economy Based on Digital Inclusion (2021–2026)

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Abstract

This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) examines the convergence of rural tourism and the creative economy through the lens of digital inclusion between 2021 and 2026. Peripheral and rural territories frequently battle deep-seated structural deficits, including demographic decline, economic monocultures, geographic isolation, and technological marginalization. However, contemporary shifts demonstrate that merging cultural creativity with rural assets can foster regional resilience. By evaluating structural gaps and digital deployment patterns, this paper outlines how digital inclusion transforms passive rural spaces into dynamic ecosystems of co-creation. The review synthesizes the roles of the "rural creative class," institutional policymaking, community resourcefulness, and systemic innovations like agrotourism. The findings culminate in an integrated conceptual framework demonstrating that digital infrastructure, when paired with localized capacity building, transitions peripheral regions from vulnerability to sustainable development.

Keywords: *Rural Tourism, Creative Economy, Digital Inclusion, Systematic Literature Review, Structural Deficits, Peripheral Resilience.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural territories worldwide are undergoing profound structural transformations. Historically dependent on primary sectors like agriculture and forestry, contemporary rural economies face compounding structural deficits: geographic isolation, youth out-migration, low institutional capacity, and widening digital divide. To mitigate these challenges, rural tourism has emerged as a key strategy for diversification. Yet, conventional forms of mass rural tourism often fall into the trap of commodifying heritage, leading to seasonal vulnerability and economic leakage.

To bypass these limitations, researchers and practitioners are looking toward the “creative economy”, “Specifically”, “creative tourism”. This approach moves beyond passive sightseeing, offering tourists interactive experiences based on active participation, skill-building, and deep engagement with the intangible cultural heritage of a destination. Integrating the creative economy into rural landscapes allows destinations to unlock latent economic value while preserving local identities.

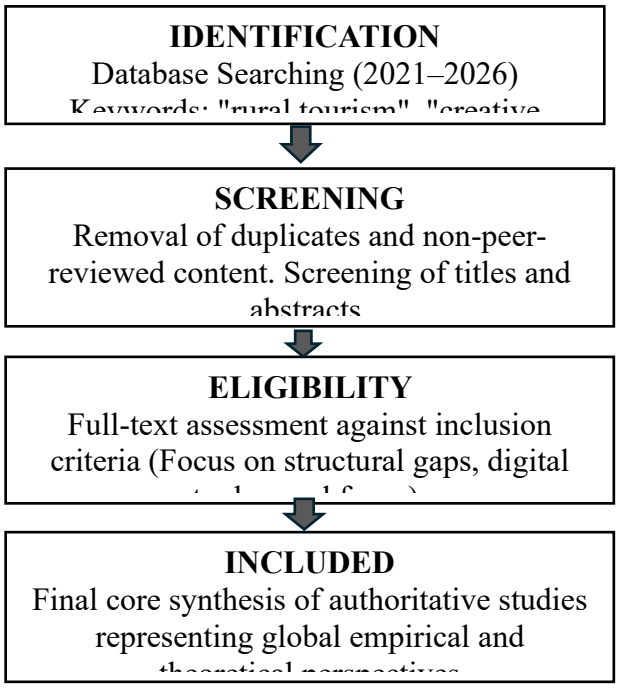
Crucially, the success of this integration between 2021 and 2026 relies on “digital inclusion”. Digital inclusion involves more than deploying broadband networks; it encompasses democratic access to digital literacy, smart platforms, e-commerce channels, and virtual co-creation tools. In peripheral zones, digital exclusion cements structural disadvantages. Conversely, robust digital inclusion acts as an infrastructure bridge, allowing rural entrepreneurs to bypass geographic barriers, connect directly with global markets, and foster a localized "creative atmosphere."

This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) synthesizes high-quality academic literature published between 2021 and 2026 to answer three main questions:

1. What core structural deficits impede the convergence of rural tourism and the creative economy?
2. How does digital inclusion serve as a catalyst to bridge these structural gaps?
3. What conceptual framework maps the interactions between local communities, the creative class, digital systems, and policy frameworks to ensure resilient rural development?

1. METHODOLOGY

This study follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure transparency, reproducibility, and rigorous analysis.



1.1 Search Strategy and Selection Criteria

A systematic search was performed across peer-reviewed databases (including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar) for literature published from 2021 to 2026. The search used combinations of boolean operators and keywords: ` ("rural tourism" OR "agrotourism") AND ("creative economy" OR "creative tourism") AND ("digital inclusion" OR "technological innovation" OR "digital divide") AND ("resilience" OR "structural deficit")

Inclusion Criteria:

1. Peer-reviewed journal articles, conceptual papers, and empirical studies published between 2021 and 2026.
2. Studies focusing on rural or peripheral geographies.
3. Research explicitly examining tourism alongside creative industries, cultural heritage, or digital transformation.

Exclusion Criteria:

1. Studies exclusively focused on urban creative hubs.
2. Document types like book reviews, editorial notes, or unverified blog posts.
3. Publications lacking direct relevance to tourism or rural economic development.

The final synthesis integrates core authoritative studies, providing a comprehensive view of global empirical and theoretical perspectives on the topic.

3. STRUCTURAL DEFICITS IN PERIPHERAL AND RURAL AREAS

Peripheral rural areas face distinct systemic challenges that limit their ability to easily adopt creative economic models. Analyzing these structural deficits reveals why traditional development strategies frequently fall short.

3.1 Geographic and Socio-Demographic Marginalization

Rural spaces are structurally vulnerable to demographic decline and human capital exhaustion. The sustained migration of youth to urban centers strips rural communities of their entrepreneurial core. Geng et al. (2025), through an extensive bibliometric analysis of sustainable rural tourism, emphasize that demographic fragility and poor infrastructure are persistent challenges to long-term rural sustainability.

Furthermore, this demographic shift alters how local communities view development. Shen and Quan (2022) observe that local farmers and residents perceive tourism development through a lens of economic precarity. When human capital is depleted, local communities struggle to manage complex tourism networks, leaving them vulnerable to external exploitation and economic leakage.

3.2 The Periphery Dilemma: Intangible Cultural Heritage Preservation

A major asset of rural regions is their rich supply of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). However, activating this resource in peripheral locations presents a structural paradox. As Richards (2026)

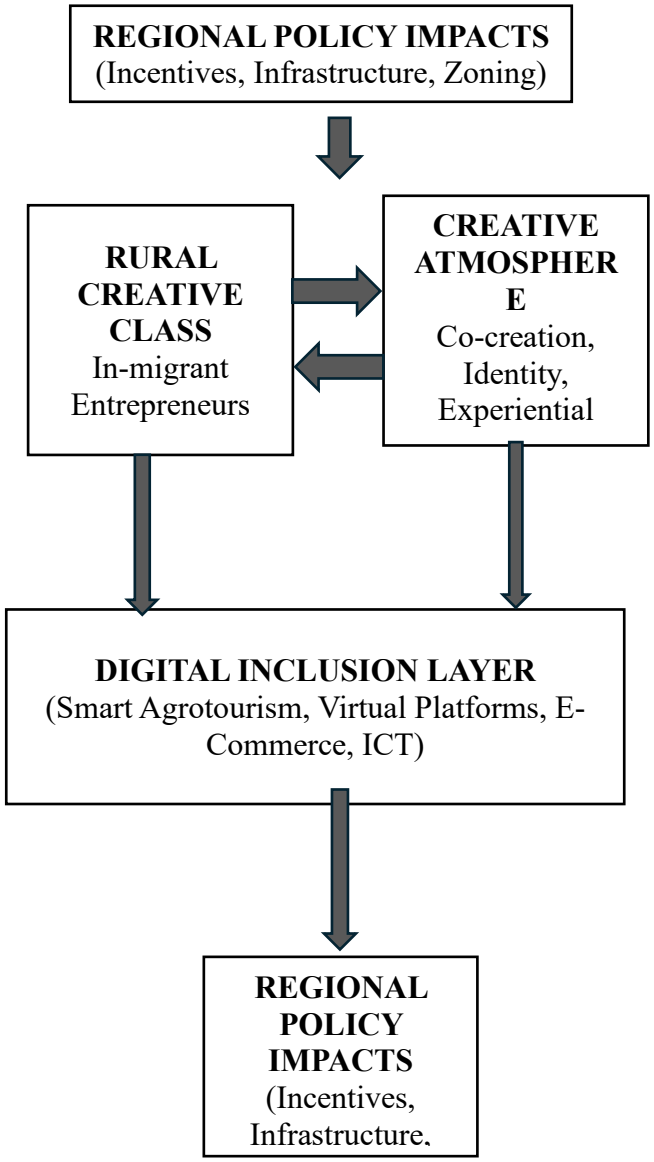
explains, shifting cultural heritage from urban centers to the periphery requires moving past passive preservation to active community engagement. Without interactive platforms, valuable cultural traditions risk fading away or becoming over-commercialized museum pieces. Gulbovaitė et al. (2026) highlight that peripheral destinations often operate on "latent experiential portfolios." These areas possess rich, underutilized cultural assets but lack the organizational capacity or market reach required for early-stage development, leaving their creative tourism potential largely unrealized.

3.3 Creative Destruction and Spatial Displacement

Unmanaged tourism growth in structurally weak areas can lead to negative side effects. Using the lens of "creative destruction," Xue (2022) illustrates how rapid tourism development can disrupt local place-making and strain rural resilience. When outside investments pour into traditional villages without safeguarding local community structures, historical spaces can become commodified. This alienation of the local population undermines the authentic cultural ecosystem that drew creative tourists in the first place.

4. The Creative Economy and Rural Tourism: Mechanics of Convergence

Bridging these structural deficits requires a shift from traditional sightseeing models to collaborative creative tourism. This transition relies on three primary drivers: the arrival of rural entrepreneurs, the intentional design of creative spaces, and community-led partnerships.



4.1 The Role of the "Rural Creative Class" and In-Migration Entrepreneurship

A key mechanism for revitalizing rural areas is the arrival of the "rural creative class." Xiong, Zhang, and Lee (2020) show that in-migration tourism entrepreneurship introduces vital human capital into declining rural zones. These incoming creative entrepreneurs act as structural bridges, connecting isolated rural communities with broader urban and

international markets. They blend urban business experience and digital networks with local traditions, introducing fresh ideas without eroding regional heritage.

4.1.1 Building a "Creative Atmosphere" and Spatial Dynamics

For creative tourism to thrive, a destination must cultivate a distinct “creative atmosphere”. Cheng and Chen (2023) conceptualize this as a multi-dimensional environment that enhances the visitor experience through sensory, intellectual, and emotional engagement. A strong creative atmosphere transforms a physical space into an experiential one, encouraging tourists to participate in local traditions rather than just watch them.

This atmosphere is closely tied to spatial characteristics. Li, Zou, Wang, et al. (2025) note a direct link between tourist behavior and the spatial layouts of rural destinations. Properly planned paths, interactive workspaces, and accessible cultural hubs encourage creative interaction, increase visitor length of stay, and boost local spending.

4.3.1 Community Resourcefulness, Resilience, and Partnerships

Sustainable creative economies cannot be entirely driven by outside forces; they must be rooted in “community resourcefulness”. Qu, McCormick, and Funck (2020) argue that community-led partnerships and local resourcefulness are essential for sustainable rural tourism. When local residents actively lead development, they build strong social capital that protects the community against economic shocks.

This internal resilience is crucial for traditional communities. For example, Chen and Li (2022) demonstrate that linking cultural creativity with tourism resilience helps traditional Chinese villages safeguard their architectural and social heritage. This approach allows communities to adapt to modern economic pressures while maintaining their cultural identity.

5. DIGITAL INCLUSION AS STRUCTURAL BRIDGE

Digital inclusion serves as the vital link that connects rural tourism, creative industries, and peripheral communities into a functional, resilient ecosystem.

5.1 System Dynamics and Innovation Systems in Agrotourism

To systematically combine rural tourism with the creative economy, destinations are adopting comprehensive frameworks like the “Village Innovation System (VIS)”. Santoso et al. (2022) use system dynamics modeling to show how developing an agrotourism-creative economy within a VIS framework creates positive feedback loops: Digital inclusion accelerates this process by giving local farmers and agrotourism operators real-time access to market data, smart farming tools, and direct-to-consumer sales channels, reducing their reliance on traditional intermediaries.

5.2 Overcoming Global Inequalities Through Certified Practices

Digital networks enable rural territories to join international creative associations and secure global certifications. Remoaldo et al. (2022) provides an international overview of certified creative tourism practices across both urban and rural landscapes. They note that digital platforms allow rural destinations to fulfill strict certification criteria, showcase their unique cultural initiatives globally, and align with international quality standards.

Furthermore, understanding visitor profiles helps destinations fine-tune these digital efforts. Research by Remoaldo, Serra, Marujo, et al. (2020) on creative tourism participants in small and medium-sized towns highlights the value of tailored digital outreach. By analyzing digital footprints and preferences, rural operators can design highly targeted marketing strategies that attract visitors seeking specific, authentic cultural activities.

5.3 Policy Dynamics, Incentives, and Heterogeneity

The roll-out of digital infrastructure and creative incentives is rarely uniform. Policies must account for regional variations. Liu, Guo, Xie, Chen, and Yang (2026) examine these policy impacts, showing that innovation incentives must be customized to fit regional realities. In highly peripheral zones, basic digital infrastructure investments take priority, whereas more digitally mature rural areas benefit most from incentives focused on advanced e-commerce platforms and virtual reality co-creation spaces.

Digital systems also play a key role in encouraging environmental responsibility. Huo, Zou, Zhang, and Ma (2025) find that clear regional environmental policies, backed by digital awareness campaigns, significantly boost pro-environmental behavior among rural residents. This alignment ensures that digital and creative growth supports long-term ecological sustainability.

6. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Synthesizing the literature from 2021 to 2026 reveals that bridging rural structural deficits requires a coordinated, multi-layered approach. The interaction of these elements can be organized into a cohesive, four-tier conceptual framework:

1. “The Policy and Incentive Layer:” Institutional frameworks that deploy targeted digital infrastructure, financial incentives, and environmental guidelines tailored to regional needs (Liu et al., 2026; Huo et al., 2025).
2. “The Digital Inclusion Bridge:” The technology layer consisting of smart networks, digital literacy programs, and e-commerce platforms that overcome geographic isolation (Santoso et al., 2022; Remoaldo et al., 2022).
3. “The Human and Social Capital Layer:” The collaborative core where the in-migrant rural creative class joins forces with resourceful local communities to drive innovation (Xiong et al., 2020; Qu et al., 2020).
4. “The Spatial and Cultural Experience Layer:” The final destination environment where a vibrant creative atmosphere and thoughtfully designed spaces

transform local intangible cultural heritage into sustainable tourism experiences (Cheng & Chen, 2023; Richards, 2026).

By organizing development along these lines, rural areas can prevent the displacement associated with unmanaged "creative destruction" (Xue, 2022) and build lasting socio-economic resilience (Chen & Li, 2022).

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 Key Synthesis and Theoretical Contributions

This Systematic Literature Review has synthesized the academic discourse from 2021 to 2026 at the critical intersection of rural tourism, the creative economy, and digital inclusion. The overarching finding demonstrates that the historical structural deficits of peripheral regions namely geographic isolation, demographic decline, and economic vulnerability are not permanent barriers to development. Instead, they can be mitigated through a coordinated, multi-layered ecosystem strategy.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in redefining the mechanics of rural transformation. By shifting the paradigm from passive, landscape-driven consumption to active, culturally rich creative tourism, this paper has mapped how human capital inflows (the rural creative class) and community-led networks interact. Crucially, digital inclusion emerges not merely as a technical utility, but as the foundational infrastructure bridge that allows peripheral destinations to bypass traditional geographic hurdles, optimize their spatial configurations, and project a localized creative atmosphere onto a global stage.

7.2 Practical and Policy Implications

For regional planners, policymakers, and rural practitioners, this study highlights several actionable mandates:

- Beyond Hard Infrastructure: Public investment must expand past physical transport networks to prioritize robust, democratic digital access, localized technical literacy, and targeted digital entrepreneurship incentives.
- Granular Policy Design: Institutional support must reject one-size-fits-all frameworks. Policy incentives must adapt to regional variations, offering basic structural support in highly isolated zones while providing advanced e-commerce and innovation ecosystems in more mature rural areas.
- Community-Centric Frameworks: Development frameworks must prioritize community resourcefulness and public-private-community partnerships (PPCPs). Ensuring that local farmers and residents are central stakeholders prevents the cultural erosion associated with unchecked commercial exploitation and preserves regional identity.

7.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this review provides a comprehensive synthesis of contemporary data, certain limitations remain. The rapid pace of digital innovation means that empirical studies often lag behind real-world technological deployments. Additionally, regional differences in institutional capacity, cultural values, and baseline infrastructure make universal applications difficult to standardize.

Future research trajectories should focus on long-term, empirical case studies that track the specific impacts of emerging technologies such as localized artificial intelligence, decentralized virtual platforms, and smart agricultural networks within peripheral creative tourism hubs. Further research is also needed to develop quantitative indicators that measure how a "creative atmosphere" directly impacts local wealth retention and slows down youth out-migration. Tracking these metrics will help ensure that the integration of the creative economy and rural tourism remains a sustainable path toward regional resilience.

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