

UNPACKING URBAN: TOWARDS COMMON DEFINITION

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Abstract. The lack of a universally accepted definition of the term “urban” has led to inconsistencies and challenges in the fields of research, policy, and practice. This paper addresses this problem by conducting a systematic literature review and bibliometric analysis of the concept of “urban”. By understanding the significance of a clear definition of “urban”, this study aims to facilitate better communication and comprehension among practitioners, policymakers, and researchers working in the field. The paper begins by tracing the historical origins of the urban concept and the factors contributing to the development of urban areas. It then examines the traditional, functional, social, and cultural approaches used to define urban areas, while also discussing the challenges and limitations of these definitions. The analysis reveals that a place can be identified as “urban” if it has a diverse and complex social structure, a vibrant economy, and a high concentration of facilities and cultural activities. The characteristics of an urban area may include diversified population, densely built environment, and an emphasis on business, leisure, and other forms of cultural expression. Despite grappling with issues such as pollution, crime, and social injustice, urban areas often embody creativity, inventiveness, and a fast-paced lifestyle. A comprehensive definition of the term “urban” may also contribute to the development of a widely accepted definition of “rural”, as the two terms are often considered opposites.

Keywords: urban, definition, city, urban development.

Introduction

Urban areas have traditionally been the epicentre of human civilization, serving as hubs for the advancement of the economy, society, and culture [1]. Understanding and defining the term “urban” is crucial to addressing the benefits and challenges that come with urbanization as the world continues to become more urbanized [2]. Although urban regions are important, there is no agreed-upon definition of what an urban area is [3]. Urban regions have been defined in several ways, which has resulted in a wide range of interpretations and complexity in comprehending the term [4; 5].

This research attempts to evaluate and assess the prior studies on the topic of defining urban areas, concentrating on the various approaches and perspectives. The primary research question is: how is the term “urban” defined and understood in the literature? While addressing this query we will try to synthesize the existing definitions to create a new one, that will tackle the shortcomings of the existing definitions of the term.

A precise and thorough definition of “urban” is essential for a number of reasons. To begin with, it helps decision-makers and practitioners address the opportunities and challenges that urban regions face, including social injustice, pollution, and crime as well as creativity, innovation, and economic development [6; 7]. Second, it fosters the development of a shared vocabulary and comprehension of the idea among scholars, facilitating more productive interdisciplinary collaboration [8]. Finally, understanding and defining “rural”, which is likewise devoid of a generally agreed-upon definition, depends on understanding and defining “urban” [9]. This study intends to open the door for a better understanding of the urban-rural divide and to contribute to more informed decision-making in both by giving a precise definition of “urban”.

Literature review

Throughout the historical development of the discussed term, there have been a number of approaches to defining it. The traditional method of identifying urban areas is based on administrative boundaries, population density, and size [10]. This method frequently uses parameters to distinguish between urban and rural settlements, such as a minimum population threshold or a particular population density [2]. The traditional approach has been criticized for failing to reflect the diversity and dynamic nature of metropolitan regions, despite being widely employed by national and international institutions for statistical reasons [5; 11; 12]. Administrative boundaries can vary over time and may no longer correspond with functioning urban regions; therefore, they may not always accurately depict the size of urban areas [6; 13].

The functional approach to defining urban areas focuses on the economic, social, and infrastructural characteristics of a settlement [4]. This approach evaluates variables like employment trends, transportation systems, and the availability of public services to assess a location's urban status [8; 14]. For instance, if a region has a significant concentration of non-agricultural employment, well-developed transportation infrastructure, and accessibility to a range of public services and facilities, it may be regarded as urban [15; 16]. Although the functional method offers a more sophisticated view of cities, it may still have trouble capturing the richness of urban life and establishing distinct lines between urban and rural areas [17; 18].

The social approach to defining urban regions places an emphasis on social organization, connections, and interactions among residents [19]. This method defines urban areas by taking into account elements like social variety, inequality, and mobility [20]. For instance, a region may be categorized as urban if it demonstrates a high level of social heterogeneity, with various socioeconomic, religious, and racial groups residing close to one another [21; 22]. Moreover, the existence of social networks and organizations that encourage communication and collaboration among residents may also be a sign of an urban environment [23; 24]. Despite its advantages, the social approach might not always offer distinct criteria for separating urban and rural areas because social processes and relationships can be present in both.

The unique cultural characteristics and symbolic values connected to urban life are highlighted by the cultural approach to defining urban regions [5]. This strategy considers elements including the presence of cultural institutions, artistic and creative endeavours, and distinctive urban identities [7; 25]. If a location offers a wide range of cultural amenities, activities, and expressions that contribute to a lively and dynamic atmosphere, it may be regarded as urban [1; 26]. The cultural approach also acknowledges the significance of the urban experience since how people view, interact with, and engage with cities shapes their urban character [19; 27]. Yet, because cultural characteristics are difficult to define objectively, the cultural approach may encounter difficulties [10; 12].

Some scholars have urged for an integrated approach to designating urban regions that take into account various aspects and criteria in light of the drawbacks and difficulties connected with each of the aforementioned approaches [4; 12]. An integrated approach refers to a method that combines different perspectives, disciplines, or practices to address a problem, issue, or concept in a holistic and comprehensive manner. This approach acknowledges the complexity of real-world issues and aims to provide more effective and sustainable solutions by taking into account various factors, stakeholders, and elements involved. To portray the complex nature of urban areas, this method includes components from the traditional, functional, social, and cultural perspectives [15; 17]. An integrated definition of urban regions, for instance, can take into account factors like population size and density, economic activity, social interactions, and cultural characteristics all at once [5; 8].

In a world that is changing quickly, the integrated approach is more adapted to take into consideration the complexity and dynamism of urban environments [6; 20]. It acknowledges that urban areas are dynamic and constantly change in response to a variety of social, economic, and cultural pressures [7; 28]. Moreover, an integrated strategy may be more adaptive and versatile in many situations, making it more appropriate to various urban environments around the world [10; 24].

Yet, because it calls for the use of numerous indicators and data sources to capture the diverse features of urban regions, the integrated method may also run into operationalization and measurement issues [18; 23]. Despite these difficulties, the integrated method offers a potential path for future study on urban area definitions since it is better able to capture the richness and diversity of modern urban life [16; 25].

Methodology

As discussed earlier, the definition of "urban" depends on the context in which it is used and the specific focus of the study. Although there are various definitions of the term "urban", they all acknowledge the significance of cities and urban regions in human society as well as the need to comprehend and manage them in a sustainable and liveable manner.

To analyse the meaning of this term in more detail 71 of the highly cited articles from Scopus and Web of Science databases with "urban" AND "definition" as the keywords were selected. Then the

articles were screened with 13 that were published in a language other than English, 45 that were not applicable to the current study and 13 that did not provide the definition of the investigated term were excluded. The results of this search are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Definitions of “urban” in selected papers

Authors, Year	Definition of “urban” and/or main ideas
Machek J., 2020 [26]	“Urban” is a synonym of “city”.
Pu X., 2019 [27]	Cities and urban settings are synonymous terms that refer to the focal point of a certain region’s politics, economy, culture, religion, and people. It is a sophisticated settlement that has seen the emergence and advancement of human civilization.
Tandel V., Hiranandani K., Kapoor M., 2019 [28]	If a settlement has a population of above 2500 (2500 +), it is considered urban; otherwise, it should be considered rural.
Božilová J., 2019 [29]	Lower territorial scale with great autonomy.
A. Eichler, 1998 [30]	The meaning of “urban” is “city”.
Iossifova D., Doll C., Gasparatos A., 2017 [31]	The urban is frequently compared to its “counter-concept”, the rural, and is ascribed to “varied assemblages of certain measurable features” and is thought to be “inherently spatial”.
Pierce J., Lawhon M., 2016 [32]	The functional qualities of population density, economic activity intensity and variety, and/or formal local government borders, such as in a city, are what are meant by the term “urban”.
Irby J.D., 2015 [33]	“Urban” is a characteristic of a city.
McComas W.F., 2014 [34]	Urban areas are typically distinguished from non-urban areas based on high population density, diverse economic activity that is largely non-agricultural, and increased home to work commuting patterns.
Osorio A., Ozkazanc-Pan B., 2014 [35]	A census tract, or group of census tracts, is considered an urban area if its population density is much higher than that of its bordering areas.
Schneider C., Achilles B., Merbitz H., 2014 [36]	The term has its roots in ancient Greece and comes from the Latin word “urbs” (the city). It also, predictably, refers to a lifestyle that is only found in cities.
Buendía E., 2011 [37]	The definition of “urban” has been condensed to racial, economic, cultural, and geographic characteristics that are thought to encompass all of their goals, encounters, and intellectual tendencies.
Ultramari C., Firmino R., 2010 [38]	Cities are boundary defined phenomena, while “urban” has unclear delimitations.
Sénécal G., 2007 [39]	Urban implies a society existing inside a region with a dense pattern of growth and a high level of social contact.
Monte-Mór R., 2005 [40]	The terms “urban” and “rural”, which originally referred to the city and the countryside respectively, have recently acquired the autonomy to also refer to a variety of cultural, socioeconomic, and spatial interactions between those forms and processes.
Hesselberg J., 2005 [41]	Urban is characterized in a variety of ways worldwide. The fundamental characteristics of a location of a given size with a predominance of non-primary economic activity, such as services, trade, and industry, are, nevertheless, shared by all definitions.
Wirth L., 2005 [42]	The urban is the effect that the size, density, and heterogeneity of the city have on the social character of collective life.
Mcintyre N.E., Knowles-Yánez K., Hope D., 2004 [43]	A consistent, quantitative description of urban takes into account the dynamic and heterogeneous physical and social characteristics of a territorial system.
Kim S., 2002 [44]	An urban area is defined as a densely populated place with a sizeable number of inhabitants.

Table1 (continued)

Authors, Year	Definition of “urban” and/or main ideas
Baumont C., Huriot J., 1998 [45]	“Urban space” is synonymous to “city”.
W. Magnusson, 1985 [46]	The use of “the urban” as an analytic category is widely regarded as a sign of intellectual or political underdevelopment.
Sayer A., 1984 [47]	“Urban” is a synonym for a “city”, however, it adds a social construct to it.
M. Feldman, 1978 [48]	The term “urban” refers to the ideological perception of the social reproduction of labour power in capitalist society.
McElrath D., 1965 [49]	“Urban” is “local area”.
Anderson N., 1962 [50]	Urban is the opposite of rural.
Anderson N., 1959 [51]	Urbanism theory is developed mainly in the more advanced countries.

As it is seen in Table 1, most authors refer to “urban” space as a city. Many scholars claim that “urban” also includes social construct that is absent in “city”.

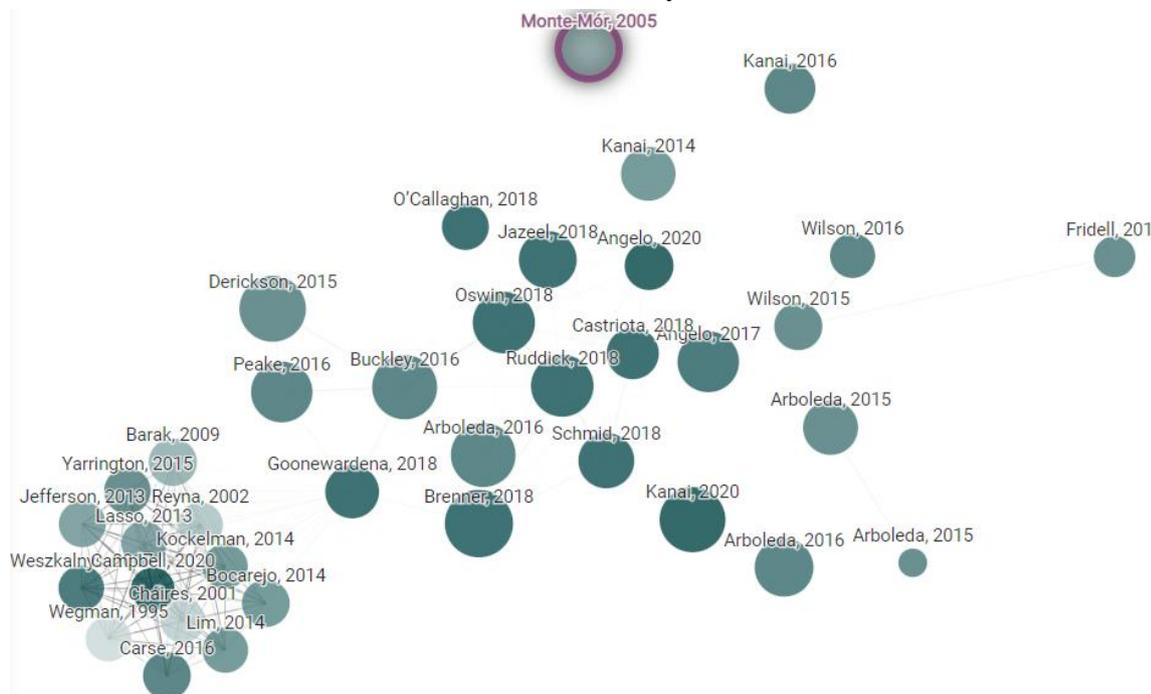


Fig. 1. Bibliometric analysis of “urban” and “definition” (developed by the authors)

Then the authors used the selected papers and tagged them during the screening process. The authors read the articles and looked for the words closely related to the term “urban” or used to describe it. Those papers that were untagged provided no relevance to this discussion information.

Overall, 4 main tags and 4 sub-tags were created. They are: Population, Economic vibrancy, Social and City. With lifestyle and culture being the sub-tags of social; and space and neighbourhood as the sub-tags of the city. It is clear that in spite of more terms used, “city” is the most common across the selected articles. It means, that the majority of authors either use “urban” as a synonym to “city”, or use “city” as the foundation of “urban” while adding more meaning to social, economic and other constructs.

Interestingly enough, when running a bibliometric analysis on “urban” and “definition”, we can notice that most of the articles are related to each other (Fig. 1), meaning that various authors that attempt to define this term refer to one another, thus, the gist of the term changes little-to-none from paper to paper. In the analysis presented in Figure 1, the authors took a paper “What is urban in the contemporary world?” by Monte-Mor [40], as it provides perhaps the most in-depth investigation into this term in the

past years. Most of the papers in the investigated scientific databases (WOS, Scopus and DOAJ) that were published after 2005 were either related to it or to another paper that referenced it.

It can be inferred from the aforementioned study that the term “urban” refers to a city or town, particularly in terms of its atmosphere, culture, and way of life, entailing traits such as a diverse population, a high density of buildings and people, and a focus on commerce, entertainment, and other forms of cultural expression. Urban areas frequently have a reputation for invention, inventiveness, and a fast-paced way of life, but they also struggle with issues like pollution, crime, and social injustice.

Implications for defining rural areas

Given the difficulties and complexities involved in defining urban regions, it is equally crucial to take into account how these definitions might affect our knowledge of the characterization of rural areas. The urban-rural continuum emphasizes how intertwined and similar urban and rural settings are, which can make it challenging to draw clear distinctions between them [52; 53]. To account for the variety and dynamic nature of both urban and rural settings, a more sophisticated view of the urban-rural continuum is required [54; 55].

While defining rural spaces, it is crucial to take into account the interdependencies between urban and rural areas. The linkages between urban and rural areas are becoming more complicated as urbanization processes continue to develop, involving flows of people, goods, services, and information [56; 57]. Understanding these interdependencies is essential for comprehending how rural areas are evolving and how they relate to urban spaces [58].

Rural areas are highly heterogeneous in terms of their economic, social, cultural, and environmental traits, just like urban areas are [59]. Due to this variability, it is challenging to construct a definition of rural areas that is applicable everywhere, as the distinctive characteristics and dynamics of rural spaces can fluctuate greatly depending on the setting [60; 61]. As a result, identifying rural regions calls for a flexible and adaptable strategy that takes into account the diversity and distinctiveness of rural environments around the world [62].

The difficulties in defining urban and rural places have important effects on policy and research because the definition chosen can have an impact on how both types of spaces are analyzed, interpreted, and understood, as well as the opportunities and challenges [63]. For instance, the definition of rural areas can affect how resources are allocated, how policies and programs are created, and how well they work to meet the needs and goals of rural people [64]. Similar to urban studies, research on rural areas can gain from a more thorough and integrated methodology that considers the numerous facets of rural life and their linkages to urban areas [65].

Identifying rural regions requires juggling with the dynamic, interrelated, context-specific, and subjective nature of rural spaces, which makes it just as difficult and complex as describing urban areas. For research and policy to advance in these areas, it is essential to develop a more thorough and nuanced knowledge of the urban-rural continuum and the relationships between urban and rural areas. Thus, we believe that our analysis on the identification of “urban” may pave the way for a discovery of a more commonly accepted definition of “rural”.

Conclusions

In this study, we have extensively analyzed the literature on the topic of “urban”, examining various definitions of urban regions and exploring different approaches to defining urban spaces. This led to the development of a new, integrated definition of the term. Moreover, we investigated the implications of defining urban areas for understanding and characterizing rural areas, addressing the urban-rural continuum, interdependencies between them, heterogeneity of rural areas, and the consequences for research and policy. To advance research, policy, and practice in these fields, it is crucial to acknowledge the challenges and complexities involved in defining both urban and rural areas. The conclusions drawn from this study are as follows:

1. The need for a more comprehensive, integrated, and nuanced understanding of the urban-rural continuum and the connections between urban and rural places emphasized.

2. By developing flexible and adaptable approaches to identifying urban and rural areas, the diversity and distinctiveness of these areas can be accommodated, which in turn can inspire more effective and inclusive policies and actions.
3. Establishing a shared language and understanding of the concept of “urban” enables practitioners, policymakers, and researchers in the field to effectively address the challenges and opportunities associated with urban and rural development.

These specific conclusions highlight the value of the performed literature analysis and the importance of refining understanding of “urban” and “rural” in order to enhance policy and practice in the urban-rural context.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, R.V.; methodology, R.V.; software, R.V.; validation, T.T.; formal analysis, R.V.; investigation, R.V.; data curation, R.V.; writing – original draft preparation, R.V.; writing – review and editing, T.T.; visualization, R.V.; project administration, R.V.; funding acquisition, T.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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