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Full Length Article

Theory in tourism

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ABSTRACT

Tourism's relationship with theory is a vexed and complex issue. Previous research has examined the status of the academic study of tourism in disciplinary terms and the epistemological basis of knowledge production, yet very little examination of the conceptual structure of tourism has been undertaken. This conceptual article examines the presence of theory of tourism. It presents evidence, via the use of case study vignettes, of examples of theory/theorizing at the meta-, middle range and micro-levels. It articulates guidelines for theorising tourism and principles for developing a theoretical contribution to knowledge, critical to Annals of Tourism Research, whose mission is to advance knowledge of tourism phenomena at the conceptual level that can lead to progress in theory development.

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“The mission of a theory-development journal is to challenge and extend existing knowledge, not simply to rewrite it” (Whetten, 1989, 491).

Introduction

The occasion of the 50th Anniversary of Annals of Tourism Research offers an opportunity for reflection on the progress made in the development of theory in tourism. Annals positions itself as a social science journal with a specific purpose to ‘advance knowledge of the phenomena of tourism at a conceptual (i.e., *theoretical*) level’ which made it exceptional among the other journals that were in existence when it was founded (see Jafari & McCabe, 2024, in this volume), and has sustained it as a distinctive research outlet in tourism for the last 50 years (Xiao, Jafari, Cloke, & Tribe, 2013). Its aim to develop and advance knowledge at the theoretical level makes it particularly appropriate to examine what role ‘tourism theory’ has played in the development of tourism knowledge, and to assess how far we have come towards developing theory in tourism. For while theory is very much evident in all the material published in the journal, the extent that it is derived from concepts, definitions, propositions, relations among variables that are intrinsic to understanding and explaining tourism phenomena is moot. I argue that in recent decades we have come to rely on a theory *and* tourism approach, rather than aiming to develop and advance theory *in* or *of* tourism.

The aim of this paper is to address this issue and to propose that the tourism academy should re-connect with early attempts to develop theories grounded in tourism's essential characteristics and features. Whereas previous research has addressed its status as a discipline and knowledge production (Tribe, 1997), the role of theory in tourism knowledge has been largely overlooked.

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Discussion focused on the status of tourism knowledge at the epistemological level, and a general acceptance that tourism is best understood as representing applied, contextual understandings (Tribe & Liburd, 2016), has deflected attention to theory development in tourism. I suggest that as an academic community, now is the time to redouble efforts to develop theory in tourism if we are to continue to make the case for tourism as a legitimate area of social and academic activity in an increasingly uncertain global future.

The academic study of tourism has made important strides in the development of conceptual research but has fallen short in relating concepts into a wider theoretical structure. It has not followed either Popperian notions of scientific advancement through the accumulation of knowledge built around testing propositions in accepted theories. Nor has it followed Kuhnian ideas of knowledge built up at a paradigmatic level, which in reaching a critical point, breaks or 'shifts' to create new pathways (1962). We have come to accept the 'theoretical inadequacies' of research in tourism (Xin, Tribe, & Chambers, 2013: 84) relying instead on the importation and application of theory from social science disciplines, which has failed to integrate into a coherent structure or a defined process, which are necessary for the construction of general theories (Bagozzi, 1984). Therefore, the article will define what is meant by theory to gain a deeper understanding of the process by which it is constructed and developed.

One of the most immediate obstacles in the task of locating theory in tourism is its ephemerality and polysemic nature as an 'object' or phenomena, as Tribe reflects "Tourism is more than can be told" (2006: 362). Tourism is ephemeral in that it encompasses many diverse forms of activities and actions; from simple domestic holiday trips taken by private car to visit distant friends or relatives, to fully 'industrialised' international travel involving many businesses oriented to the provision and delivery of seamless, constructed experiences. This means that it is difficult to identify *essentialising* characteristics from which to 'build' coherent and unifying theory. Perhaps it would be more meaningful to talk about theories of tourisms. Tourism is polysemic in that it can be viewed differently from many different disciplinary perspectives and within disciplines. It is this kaleidoscopic nature of tourism that has led to the enormous growth in academic interest in the subject, but which perhaps has also hampered the development of a reasoned theoretical understanding in the scientific sense. With this in mind, the article outlines different levels of theory as one mechanism through which we can begin to manage complexity in theory development processes in tourism.

There are countless theories from many different disciplinary perspectives which have been applied to examine tourism phenomena (Jafari & Ritchie, 1981). This borrowing or importation process, has meant that theory has advanced at an 'atomistic' level in an unconnected way in disciplinary silos. While early energy was put into the development of theoretical constructs (cf: Dann, Nash, & Pearce, 1988), this was not sustained. Twenty years ago, Dann claimed that much of tourism research; "constitutes largely descriptive, case-confined wishful thinking" (1999, 14). It would be wrong to argue that little has changed. Tourism research has matured significantly, the quality of research has improved consistently, which is underlined by the increase in quality of the main journals in the field compared to rivals in related 'disciplines' such as organization studies. Additionally, challenges of theory building, development and the practice of theorising are not uncommon to other branches of social science, including business and management studies (cf Hammond, 2018; Oswick, Fleming, & Hanlon, 2011).

Tourism social science research is often couched in terms of multidisciplinary mainly used as a synonym for a similar kind of borrowing from disciplinary theory. This is not negative *per se* and is somewhat inevitable given the extent and heritage of knowledge development. However, the straightforward importation of theory from one discipline into another can create problems of over-dependence which could constrain the generation of original ideas and theories (Oswick et al., 2011), which is essential to the flourishing of academic research. Moreover, the vagaries of the publication system, which expects 'new' theoretical contributions in every published paper, means that theory building, based on the logical empiricism method is disfavoured, in place of microscopic foci on relationships between variables, methods of measuring or predicting relationships or application of a concept into a tourism context.

This article seeks to reengage with early attempts to develop theory in tourism. It defines what is meant by theory and explains the role of theory development and theorising in tourism research, identifies some characteristics of tourism that can form the basis for theory development as examples (rather than a sum total), and provides guidance on theorizing as a process to assist in positioning research that makes a theoretical contribution suitable for publication in Annals of Tourism Research. The paper argues that theory in tourism should be developed and integrated with theories from social sciences. Researchers should aim to build theory that is based on core features of tourism rather than simply apply theory from one disciplinary context into tourism. It focuses on tourism's relationship to social science disciplines and theories, not ontological or epistemological theories which have been the subject of most debates in relation to tourism knowledge production (cf Tribe, 2006). Here, the emphasis is on theory in tourism as the basis for the discussion.

The approach taken comprised a 'selective', critical literature review, following an adapted scoping review methodology process (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The advantage of this type of review process is that it is more suited to the type of broad topic addressed in this paper. The first step involved a search for all titles and abstracts containing combinations of theory and/in/of tourism. This yielded few results. The second step involved a more detailed search of early tourism texts followed by a snowball technique to identify relevant articles and other works where theory in tourism was a specific goal. The main consideration was to identify the key historical literature on theory development through a hand search in key journals and then to trace the trajectories of those ideas in subsequent studies, rather than full comprehensiveness, recommended as part of the scoping review process (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The next two stages included reducing the amount of data to be included in the analysis (selecting the types of case study areas of theory for example) and producing a narrative review.

What is theory?

Theory itself lacks a clear-cut definition and can mean different things to different disciplines (Stergiou & Airey, 2018). Theory can be defined as "...a statement of relations among concepts within a set of boundary assumptions and constraints" (Bacharach, 1989:

496). However, this simply takes a descriptive approach. Corley and Gioia develop this a step further and while they argue that there is no fixed answer to the question of what theory is, they define it as “a statement of concepts and their interrelationships that shows how and/or why a phenomenon occurs” (2011: 12). The purpose of theory therefore is to go beyond description to include an explanatory purpose. A theory clearly communicates ideas, presented as concepts or processes in a systematic way that can describe, explain, and interpret or predict social phenomena. The inclusion of a range of different elements in lieu of theory adds complexity, since researchers often interpolate references, data, variables, diagrams and hypotheses for theory (Sutton & Staw, 1995). The notion of ‘boundedness’ is important as a theory should be capable of rendering the complexity of a phenomenon in such a way as to ensure it can be investigated meaningfully. Yet, this view of theory is not shared by all in recognition that developing theory is not a simple task and it is here where recognition of the process of theorising should be made.

The differences between theory as a product and theory as a process is also connected to a differentiation between ‘strong’ versus ‘weak’ theories (Weick, 1995). According to Weick, most theory in organisational science is ‘approximated’ rather than fully realised. The difference between Grand Theory or Good Theory, which provides a general falsifiable explanation of a phenomenon contrasted with the development of a conceptual framework or model is a good way to explain these variable interpretations. Theory has been used loosely according to Weick, synonymously to mean suppositions, propositions, hypotheses, conceptions, explanations, models, making it difficult to disentangle what theory is, from what it is not. Rather than considering theory to represent an end product, Weick argues we should understand theory as a continuum, including the process of theorising. This he outlines as consisting of:

“...activities like abstracting, generalizing, relating, selecting, explaining, synthesizing, and idealizing. These ongoing activities intermittently spin out reference lists, data lists of variables, diagrams, and lists of hypotheses. Those emergent products summarize progress, give direction, and serve as place markers. They have vestiges of theory but are not themselves theories. Then again, few things are full-fledged theories.” (1995: 389).

In the context of tourism, Dann et al. defined theory as ‘a body of logically interconnected propositions (that) provides an interpretive basis for understanding phenomena (1988: 4). In analysing the use of the term theory in published research articles in tourism, Smith and Lee identified seven different ways in which theory had been connoted. These included ‘traditional theory’ of the form used in natural sciences, theory as synonymous with an a priori, empirical model, theory as equivalent to statistical analysis, as an untested verbal or graphical model, theory as epistemology, grounded theory and theory as an ungrounded label or adjective (2010: 31). This plasticity of the ways in which researchers (not only in tourism) use and apply the idea or label of theory to their work not only leads to inconsistency and expansion in the meaning of theory, but also impedes communication and Smith and Lee called for greater clarity in precision as desirable to advancing academic understanding.

The synonymous use of ‘concepts’ for theories rather than as an element in the theoretical toolkit is commonplace in tourism research. Concepts are observable features of the world, which can be experienced (making them different from constructs, which are more abstract). Whetten (1989) argues that a complete theory must comprise four essential ingredients: the ‘what’ i.e., the factors (variables, constructs, concepts) to be included as part of the explanation of the phenomenon of interest. Secondly, the ‘how’, which consists of a statement of ideas or propositions on how these variables or concepts are related. The purpose of this is to create order within the framework which allows for an assessment of causality. Two criteria are then used to determine the effectiveness of the theory – comprehensiveness (are all the important factors considered?) and parsimony (are any extraneous variables included unnecessarily?). Whetten states that these two elements constitute the subject, or domain of the theory. The next type of criteria is the ‘why’ or the underpinning psychological, economic or social forces that determine the selection of the factors and proposed causal links. This, according to Whetten provides the theoretical ‘glue’ that holds the model (framework) together, which can be interrogated by and through research to give credibility and substance to the theory. At this stage, empirical data to test the theory is not necessary. Theorists have to convince the academy that the propositions make sense and can be useful to guide future research. Whetten goes on to outline the differences between the three processes thus far. The what and the how type questions are descriptive elements of theory building, the why type questions offer explanatory capabilities.

For example, the idea of a ‘tourist’ is a conceptual category. The tourist concept can describe and perhaps explain a type of human behaviour that is categorically different from a traveller or migrant (or other type of mobile subject), and it can be measured directly by recording people’s purpose, experiences or meanings associated with their travel behaviour. It is a conceptual category existing alongside its general use as a lay term, with which it is often conflated. However, the tourist is often portrayed pejoratively both by tourists and other categories of traveller (cf MacCannell, 1976 (1989)). Therefore, it has symbolic associations and is used as a linguistic device to position social identities and role characteristics. It is in this sense that the concept tourist can be considered a metaphor for modernity since the ultimate expression of modernity is ‘being a tourist’ (Bauman, 1998). McCabe and Stokoe found for example that day visitors constructed tourists as people who participate in negative behaviours, such as ‘swarming’ about, voraciously and inappropriately ‘collecting’ experiences of places and sites (2004). Jacobsen drew on Goffman’s role theory to explain how charter tourists displayed ‘anti-tourist’ attitudes towards other tourists based on shallowness of the experience of places and behaviours associated with superficial visits to sites of interest (2000). Thus, the concept of a tourist can be used to form the building blocks of theory and theorising about tourist activities, practices and agency that could be developed to generate explanatory frameworks that can predict tourist behaviours.

The importance of theory in tourism is without doubt, it is often a highly debated issue on the Tourism Research Information Network (TRINET). While there is sometimes a lack of consensus on the relationship between theory and practice in the academy and the role theory can play in helping bridge the worlds of scientific knowledge and the wider industry (Stergiou & Airey, 2018), theory is fundamental to the advancement of scholarship (Smith, Xiao, Nunkoo, & Tukamushaba, 2013). Theory underpins knowledge about

a phenomenon either implicitly or explicitly, it provides the basis for developing explanations for activities or actions in the real world as well as for creating generalisable models and patterns at a more abstract level.

Theory in tourism or theoretical anecdotalism?

Given that there is a lack of consensus on the meaning of theory, it is perhaps of little surprise that it is used in a range of different ways in tourism research. Rojek and Urry argued that “tourism is a term waiting to be deconstructed ... a chaotic conception, including within it too wide a range of disparate phenomena” (1997: 1). Is there really too much chaotic and confusing about tourism that it cannot be theorised? To assess the possibility of theory in tourism, it is useful to start from reversing the question. To what extent is it meaningful to assert that tourism is atheoretical and that all research in tourism is merely theoretical *anecdotalism* (i.e., a case example of a theoretical issue, just an illustration of a theoretical ‘truth’ from a discipline)? Firstly, it would be wrong to claim that tourism is atheoretical. As a social, observable phenomenon, tourism exists in the real world and therefore, is it possible to theorise about it. Secondly, there is much about tourism that is unique or distinct from other, related contexts of leisure consumption. Therefore, tourism contains its own ‘truths’, distinct theoretical ideas that may or may not be determined by or based on theory from other disciplines or fields.

Fig. 1 outlines what could be considered essential properties of tourism that distinguish it from other kinds of consumption and production activities. However, in doing so, it must be recognised that such an exercise is partial and subjective. The purpose here is illustrate some of the kinds of ideas and thinking on tourism phenomena which were specifically aimed towards theorising or theoretical development of tourism in the early years of the academic development of the field. However, the scope of such an exercise is naturally limited by the vastly expanding universe of new research directions which have continued from these early foundations. It can be argued that three essential elements can be identified that are intrinsic to tourism and can be useful for considering how tourism can be conceived theoretically (Fig. 1).

These three elements concern the micro-level of the individual, the meso-level of interactions between people and between people and organisations and states and the macro-level of the wider structural system which supports tourism (see Table 1). The first is a tourist culture. A desire for tourism consumption and participation predicates any form of tourism activity. A culture of tourism drives other activities associated with it and tourism consumption patterns reflects societies characteristics. Secondly, unless there is a ‘welcoming environment’ tourism is not possible. Therefore, an ethics of hospitality both determines what is possible in tourism at the level of host-guest relationships and for destinations/nations. Finally, at the level of the wider environment, the enabling structural systems which comprise the technological and hygiene factors that create the necessary conditions for tourism to take place.

Tourist culture

The earliest attempt to develop theory in tourism came from Enzensberger (1958), who identified tourism as an emerging aspect of modern culture. He conjectured that mass tourism was driven by a romantic interest for the distant, exotic, pristine nature and a desire to escape a suffocating and confining modern social reality. This set the context for much of the subsequent research which has been directed at theorising tourists and their motivations, desires and behaviours. Germunden notes in her assessment of Enzensberger’s ideas, something of the paradox that has led to an enduring focus of academic interest in theorising tourists. She

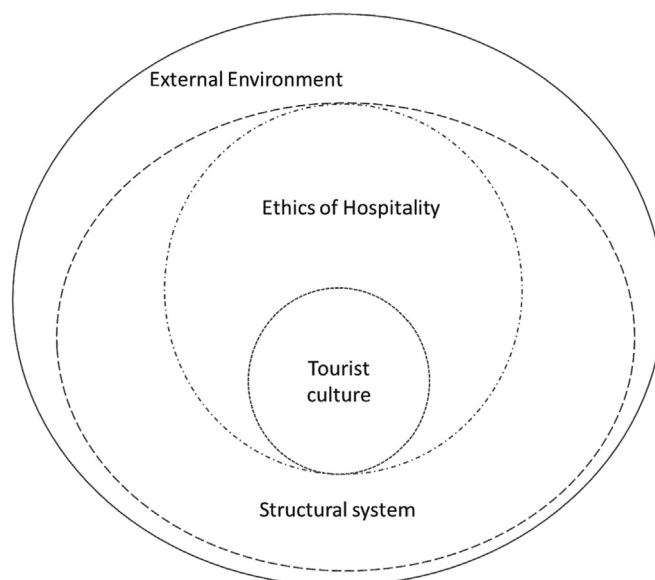


Fig. 1. Elements of theory in tourism.

Table 1
Identifying levels and areas of potential theory in tourism.

Level of analysis	Individual	Interactional	Structural
Micro	The tourist consumption experience. Tourist demand.	Tourism product/service configuration. Experience design.	Local tourism planning and politics.
Midrange	Tourist interactions/ ethics of hospitality.	Performances and delivery of tourism services. Technology affordances and effects.	Regional and inter-regional collaboration and stakeholder relationships.
Macro	Tourist culture.	Exchange logic in tourism. Impacts of tourism on communities.	International relations. Climate change adaptations and policies. Political economy of tourism. Global flows of capital.

summarized Enzensberger's theory regarding the goal of a search for escape, as being that we are inevitably constrained by the processes and structures of society, and yet, when we finally reach what we are looking for via tourism, 'utopia', we transform it, and by doing so, or by *being there*, we are complicit in its ultimate destruction.

This dialectic is possibly one unique aspect of tourism as a cultural phenomenon: "Thus the revolutionary notion of tourism remains paralyzed between the implicit critique that motivates its escapism and a nostalgia that mourns the loss of an untouched nature and longs for pre-industrial conditions. Unable to see through these dialectics, tourists are condemned to ever more subtle forms of confinement and exploitation." (Gemünden, 1996: 113). The theory arose out of a reflective view on the development of culture and society at a meta-level (Bruner, 1991). Tourists are condemned to a fruitless endeavour, the search for authentic meaning in life from travel, for whom, despite its impossibility of attainment, the search continues to occupy their fantasies and drives behaviour.

This important idea informed the early sociological theorists in tourism (Knebel, 1960). Boorstin (1964) for example, argued that tourists were gullible 'dopes' who were deceived into buying into the pseudo-events, fake images and idealised offerings created by the tourism industry. This position was later challenged by MacCannell (1976 (1989)) who equated the modern tourist with a secular pilgrimage, explaining tourist behaviour as a search for meaning, structure and/or agency in the context of an increasingly alienated social world. The later shift in thinking heralded by postmodernism/poststructuralism witnessed the idea of dedifferentiation between representation and reality, the image, the sign and authenticity are all thrown into the pot-pourri of relativism, exemplified by 'hyper-real' attractions, whose simulated features appear more real than the original (Eco, 1987). It was also pointed out that all cultures are constantly being remade, reinvented or revised in the face of inexorable capitalist development and modernisation (Crick, 1989 summarises literature on this point). Thus, the pursuit of theory of tourist culture became a diminishing possibility after Bauman (1998).

The extent that an analysis of tourists, their motivations and their actions and agency could offer a window into the processes of modernity and society itself (a key goal of Urry's when writing the *Tourist Gaze* [1990]) was an early attempt to examine culture and society through the lens of tourism, which by the turn of the millennium had been completely inverted according to Franklin and Crang when they launched *Tourist Studies* (2001). Their review article criticised the problematic relationship between the study of tourism and its rightful 'objects', which had not been systematically defined or regulated (2001: 7), leading to an over-emphasis in research on tourism as an economic phenomenon (which has widely moved on in subsequent decades, no doubt in part due to the success of the journal and the growth of networks including the Critical Tourism Studies groups). They furthermore pointed to a 'poverty of tourism theory' lamenting that the study of tourism had developed as a series of discrete, localised events, producing case analyses of activities and impacts, and where tourists were categorised into ever finer subdivisions or typologies. The focus of research on the study of tourism as culture and the tourist as a metaphor for the social world (see Dann's collection on the topic 2002), had withered.

Ethics of hospitality

A second area of theory in tourism relates to Derrida's formulation of the ethics of hospitality. Derrida was prompted to consider this as a response to a law permitting the prosecution of those who took in and helped foreigners of illegal status, *delit d'hospitalite* (Molz & Gibson, 2012 provide an excellent analysis on this topic). Derrida captures the antinomy at the core of the ethics of hospitality, the unconditional acceptance of the stranger, together with the conditional, implicit norms that govern how hospitality is both provided and received (see Kakoliris, 2015; Still, 2010). The ethics of hospitality provides a structured basis for understanding host-guest relationships, changes in attitudes and behaviours, and how these are altered due to changes in practices, demand and supply dynamics and the external environment based on reciprocity, social exchange, and social norms. Independently, anthropological analyses of the 'host-guest' relationships (Graburn, 1977[1989]; Smith, 1989), ideas of the 'stranger' and the familiar as underpinning dynamics in social relationships between tourists and other groups (Cohen, 1972) emerged. Aramberri skilfully dissects the theoretical premises of the host-guest paradigm as it had been proposed by the anthropologists, largely from the perspective of Marxist thinking, arguing that the power imbalances between hosts and guests and the commodified exchange relationships that drive the tourism demand and supply system effectively undermine conventional notions of hospitality (2001).

Yet, it is exactly these dynamics and changing nature of relationships in tourism that makes it suitable to consider as an essential aspect of theory in tourism. The ethics of hospitality are changing in an increasingly volatile world, where boycotting (Yu, McManus, Yen, & Li, 2020) and exploitative commodification of human beings for tourist gratification cast doubt on the ethics, agencies and consequences of many tourism encounters (Guia & Jamal, 2023).

Another affirmation of the relevance of the ethics of hospitality is the developing literature on its antithesis, inhospitality, which has been developed through the concept of animosity. Farmaki examined resident animosity towards Russian tourists to Cyprus in the immediate aftermath of the start of the war in Ukraine, finding this a complex construct, influenced by a range of factors including event specific or more stable opinions about cultural or political affinity (2023). Previously, Mouffakir had found that Dutch perceptions of Moroccan immigrants to the Netherlands negatively influenced their intention to visit Morocco as tourists (2014). The lists of the least most visited countries in the world (apart from tiny Pacific Island nations, for whom access is the main cause) also confirm that these are inhospitable in the Kantian sense of cosmopolitanism (see [Guia & Jamal, 2023](#)) in that entry visas are difficult to obtain (due to war, internal political strife or corruption. Cf: Somalia, Yemen, South Sudan, Turkmenistan, Liberia, Djibouti, Sierra Leone, Dominica, Timor Leste, North Korea).

Tourism is only possible where there is a welcome at the level of human interaction and also at the level of the nation state. Analysis of global travel visa regimes (a key method of control of free movement of a population by nation states and a foreign policy instrument – through involvement in bilateral and multilateral visa waiver schemes) shows some evidence of a ‘north-south’ mobility divide between the rich nations of the OECD, where visas restrictions have steadily decreased over time for travellers within those countries, whereas for travellers from non-OECD countries wishing to travel to the ‘West’, regimes have become progressively more restrictive and more expensive to obtain ([Czaika, De Haas, & Villares-Varela, 2018](#)). The ethics of hospitality remain very potent in the current climate in relation to changes in host-guest and tourist-locals interactions brought about by automation and robotics in service encounters or in light of pressure of tourist demand in overtourism, highlighting its enduring potential as a basis for theory development.

Structural system

Thirdly, there is the role of the tourism system involving the industrial production process and the public sector in enabling the servicing of tourists needs as well as the wider environment. The extent that tourism could be considered an ‘industry’ formed an early part of the debate on theorising tourism (see [Smith, 1994](#)). Some protagonists argued that tourism could not be classed as an industry since there is no single production process, yet Smith articulated five components; the physical resources that attract tourists, the input of ‘services’ to meet their needs, the provision of ‘hospitality’ (as per the above), the input of tourists themselves and their involvement in the process. Gunn outlined a functioning tourism system comprising of supply side elements including attractions, services, promotion and transportation, arguing that tourism is much more than simply the provision of accommodation and airlines but a system of components that are connected together in interdependent ways (1988; see also [Morrison, Lehto, & Day, 2018](#)).

That tourism operates within a structural system is intuitive and enables an assessment of the links between tourism activity and the roles of the government in enabling tourism development at the local, regional and national levels, the interactions between interested stakeholders as well as the processes through which tourism is made possible at the international level by global flows of capital that facilitates trade. At the macro level of international relations and the political economy, tourism exists through these structural mechanisms which is indicated by the porosity of the dashed lines in [Fig. 1](#). There is an emerging sense that tourism has a unique role to play in debates about climate change given the focus on air travel in relation to carbon emissions, the plight of least developed countries, many of which rely primarily on tourism for foreign exchange income and the links to climate change adaptations and policies. However, the following section assesses the contribution of systems theory to tourism in more detail.

Illustrations of theory development in tourism

As per [Table 1](#), it is useful to differentiate between different levels of theory in considering how theory can be developed, at the macro-level (metatheory or grand theory), middle range (meso level) and micro-levels. Metatheory can be described as an attempt to provide an overarching framework through which the entire phenomenon can be contained, and/or perhaps where one main variable is central to the social process. Since tourism is a multi-faceted aspect of global society, and can be approached from many disciplinary perspectives, it may be disingenuous (as well as nigh on impossible practically) to aim to encapsulate all possible permutations into a single theoretical model. Whereas midrange theory may offer more realistic opportunities, recognising the complexity of social, political and environmental issues connected to tourism phenomena. Midrange theory can be considered central to the development of understanding the social process but may not be capable of explaining the entirety of it. Microlevel theory focuses on one or two key variables in order to render a highly complex multifaceted phenomenon amenable to theorising, which may also offer promising avenues for theory development. [Fig. 2](#) outlines the different levels of theory with examples from within tourism knowledge.

What is tourism? Early theorising on the macro-level in tourism

In this journal, probably one of the most cited and influential papers is *The Framework of Tourism* by Neil Leiper in 1979. The framework was not designed to be classed as a theory, but rather it can be defined as a classic piece of theorising. Leiper’s aim with the article was to provide a holistic definition of tourism which could be then used as a framework to guide the general study (education and research) of tourism. Hitherto, the rapid growth of interest in the academic study of the subject had led to fragmented ‘camps’, one more interested in the business and market development of tourism and other more concerned about the effects and impacts of the activity on host communities. In his thorough review of the different elements involved in the production and consumption of tourism, Leiper, argues for the importance of a clear definition from the point of view of technical requirements by governments and international agencies to monitor and account for the size and contribution of tourism as an activity to economies and their

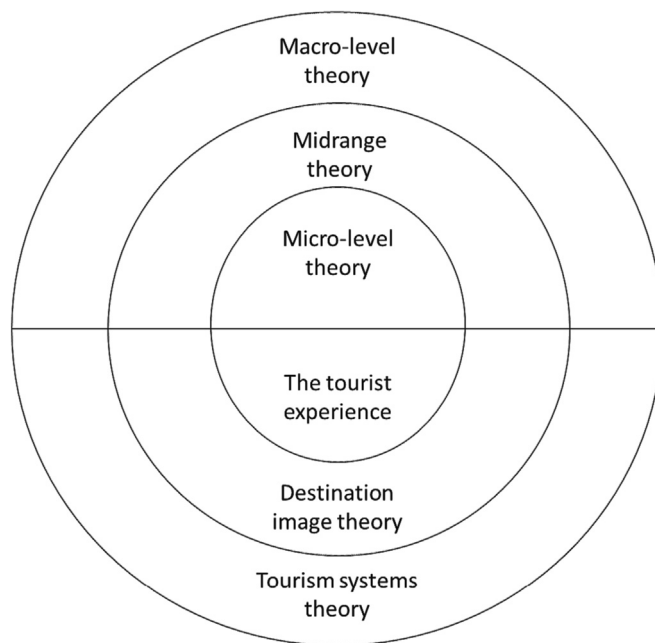


Fig. 2. Examples of theory levels and theories within tourism.

development. However, the differences between the conceptual definitions and technical criteria were brought together in a new, holistic definition:

(Tourism)...“is the system involving the discretionary travel and temporary stay of persons away from their usual place of residence for one or more nights, excepting tours made for the primary purpose of earning remuneration from points en route. The elements of the system are tourists, generating regions, transit routes, destination regions and a tourist industry. These five elements are arranged in spatial and functional connections. Having the characteristics of an open system, the organization of the five elements operates within broader environments: physical, cultural, social, economic, political, technological with which it interacts.” (Leiper, 1979: 403–4)

An important aspect to consider in the production of this work and one that has characterised much scholarship and theorising work in tourism is the rather weak way in which the originating theory has been examined. This is in no way meant to devalue Leiper's work or contribution to tourism. The framework he developed has stood the test of time and remains an important building block of theory development today. However, in developing the framework, Leiper drew solely on one reference to open systems theory, Von Bertalanffy's synthesis published in the *Academy of Management Journal* (1972). Von Bertalanffy was a biologist and in pioneering the theory of open systems, as opposed to the closed systems of physics, which imply a steady state in the environment, created the platform for the transference of general systems theory into a wide range of disciplinary contexts. However, the tourism academy failed to really follow up on Leiper's entrée (e.g., tourism sociologists did not follow the debates that occurred in sociology on systems theory).

For example, let us consider if Leiper and others continued their investigation into the nature of systems and how they might relate to tourism. Systems theory generally tends to consider open systems as processes that transform inputs into outputs, and our thinking in tourism has generally remained at this level of analysis. Societies or tourism economies are considered to be complex adaptive systems constantly responding to turbulence in the external environment through feedback mechanisms. Mingers problematises this literal translation of open systems theory into sociological theory (2002). Firstly, he argues that this gives primacy to the environment – the system is forced to adapt itself. The implication is that the environment determines the structure of the social system. Mingers argues that it does not make sense to conceptualise a society (tourism is an embedded element of a social system) as an industrial process of inputs and outputs.

The scholarly development of tourism systems theory might have turned to the concept of autopoiesis (from the Greek literal translation to self-produce, see Seidl, 2004), originally introduced by two Chilean biologists Maturana and Varela, who were interested in understanding what distinguished the living from the non-living. Autopoietic systems are those that reproduce themselves from within themselves, in other words, they are in one sense closed (operative closure) but this does not mean that they are not open systems, since they have contact with the environment (interactional openness) (this is indicated by the different types of dashed lines in Fig. 1). An example is given by a tree. The tree is a system that reproduces itself from within its own cellular structure, yet it interacts with the environment as it relies on water, energy and air for survival. The theory was developed and expanded by Luhmann to form the concept of autopoietic social systems. In tourism research, the debate has instead moved to examine specific types of systems through the lens of alternate theories, such as complexity theory in destination systems (see for example Baggio

& Sainaghi, 2011). Yet, the notion of autopoiesis would be highly relevant to tourism systems, perhaps helping to explain why some destinations are more resilient to fluctuations in cycles of demand and supply than others for example.

The framework for tourism does not satisfy all the criteria for theory since it provides a description of the different elements in the system. Later iterations and debates that followed Leiper's model crucially did not aim to build on it as a proto-theory or from the theory-building perspective to develop its predictive and/or explanatory capabilities.

Destination image. Midrange theory in tourism

Destination image is one example of how a theory can be introduced, which captures significant aspects of the processes at play in understanding how potential tourists choose between different alternative options for their holiday/travel destination. The theory has been developed and extended to provide internally consistent integration of concepts from social sciences in a way that is unique to tourism. The process begins with the translation and integration of a theory from one or more disciplines and is then tested through empirical studies and developed over time. Yet, it could not encapsulate the entire process of destination choice or selection behaviour so is classified as mid-range theory.

Destination image is fundamental to the success of tourism. As an intangible good, tourism marketing is essential to be able to present the features and attributes of the destination in an appealing way to potential tourists (Ahmed, 1991). However, the perceptions of potential visitors may vary from the official representations. Social media and the Internet have provided affordances for polysemous representations of places, which must also somehow be 'managed' by tourism marketing organisations. Early research on tourist destination image can be traced back to Gunn (1972) who first proposed that cognitive images of destinations are formed through induced and organic agents. Gartner pioneered much development of how images are formed throughout the 1980s mostly via empirical studies published in the *Journal of Travel Research*.

The entire early structure of the destination image theory was imported from the discipline of marketing, largely based on Boulding's influential work (1956). Crompton's (1979) definition of an image "as the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination" (1979: 18) is based directly on Boulding's definition for example. The conceptual structure of the theory developed via empirical observations (e.g., through surveys and studies). For example, Crompton's study found that geographical distance between potential tourist and destination influenced the overall impressions American's had of Mexico. It also found that there was a great disparity between respondents' descriptive image of Mexico and the attributes they considered important as influencing their potential visit to the country. Like others, Crompton also noted the relative stability of image over time, once an image has been formed, it tends to be quite sticky and difficult to change.

However, while early attempts at theorising destination image formation were useful in identifying the *how* and *what* components (e.g., Echtner & Ritchie, 1991), at a conceptual level, the process of destination image formation was modelled for the first time by Baloglu and McCleary (1999), which remains one of the most cited articles in the field of tourism studies, developed and tested/extended by Beerli and Martin (2004). Space does not permit a detailed examination of the thousands of articles which have been written on destination image: its formation process, the factors influencing destination image, the role of attributes and their relationship to perceived importance, the interrelation between personal factors, such as motivation and affective image, and countless other conceptual and empirical developments. The salient points are that the conceptual model is based on the idea that image is a mental construct, influenced by personal and stimulus factors. Image is constructed of perceptual/cognitive, affective factors and a global evaluation. Personal factors including social and demographic characteristics, motivations and in terms of stimuli, the types and sources of information as well as previous experience all inform the process of image formation. We can call this a theoretical model because it aimed to provide an explanation of how images are formed, including pathways between the variables. The model was empirically tested, and unanticipated relationships were discovered, leading to new research questions.

The destination image theory can be considered a midrange theory in tourism since it attempts to provide a hypothetical model on how tourists perceive destinations and how they choose among a multitude of different available options. It does not solely focus on the individual however and recognises the influence of the actions of the market on shaping and positioning the image of destinations, specifically the role of destination branding based on image. The research in the field continues as the industry embraces big data, and seeks to develop and design experiences (e.g., Lalicic, Marine-Roig, Ferrer-Rosell, & Martin-Fuentes, 2021). The development of theory on destination image through refinement and constant adjustment to new conditions is consistent with theory development logics. The theory in tourism has outgrown its basis in the marketing discipline, where product image research could be considered to be less intense.

Tourist experience. A micro-level theory in tourism

Possibly the greatest advances in theory development in tourism have occurred at the microlevel, particularly in the focus on the tourist experience (incorporating the tourist as a consumer which is based in the application of consumer behaviour theory). One of the main theoretical contributions which emerged in the early years of tourism research was the work undertaken by Cohen (1972, 1974, 1979b). Taking a sociological approach, this early emphasis on defining, creating typologies and setting out a classification of different modes/types of experiences phenomenologically, underpinned by sociological theory and based on a critique of earlier theorisations on tourist experiences exemplifies theory development. Cohen sought to develop theory through developing a classification of tourist or traveller experiences, which was firmly based on social theorists such as Simmel's (1950) ideas of strangerhood, and Victor Turner's (1969) notions of the religious 'centre', which Cohen modified to create an explanatory framework around the phenomenology of tourist experiences (Cohen, 1979b, see also Dann, 1999).

However, in order to address the 'why' type questions required for theory development, the sociological investigations were then overtaken by a shift in focus towards understanding the psychology and social psychology of the experience, zooming in on the level of the individual and the range of motivations (e.g. Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977) or theorising the search for meaning through travel experience as akin to a 'sacred journey', or modern pilgrimage (Graburn, 1977). Dann theorised tourist motivation in terms of a motivational 'push' (a sense of anomic meaninglessness with daily life, and a lack of sense of belonging to the home society), which leads to a compensatory search for experiences that match those desires through the 'pull' factors of destination attributes or marketing images. Another type of push factor, ego-enhancement comes into play when final evaluations are made where there is alignment between the self-identity of tourists matched with the promotional offerings of the destination. Dann's ideas derived primarily from Durkheim (anomie) and Veblen (ego-enhancement through conspicuous consumption) are possibly one of the most influential in theory development in tourism. The ideas have been widely accepted and tested in empirical studies. While Crompton's classification of types of tourist motivations built on Maslow's theory, classifying motives in terms of an escape from a perceived mundane environment, exploration and evaluation of self, relaxation, prestige, regression, enhancement of kinship relationships, facilitation of social interaction, novelty and education (see Crompton & Petrick, 2023). This remains one of the most cited pieces of research in tourism and has led directly to many empirical studies on tourist motivations, which became, together with measures of tourist satisfaction, a mainstay of tourism business and management research in the 1980's and 1990's. Recent thinking has cast the tourist motivation as emerging from a state of entropy in daily life (Li & Li, 2023). Tourism is driven by a desire to reduce entropy, thus restoring daily life 'order', increasing energy and effectiveness.

While early research focused on the individual level and largely on the tastes, mores and experiences of the educated, white, middle classes, a vein of research continued to recognise the importance of the recreational function of tourism, including the democratization of travel and tourism experiences through 'mass' market opportunities (Jacobsen, Skogheim, & Dann, 2015; Löfgren, 1999). An important sociological link was made with the role that 'play' performs in social family life in tourism (Cohen, 1985), and indeed, the importance of sociality in tourism experiences, providing a space for people to create and perform idealised versions of family life and quality time together (Obrador, 2012).

The key plank of MacCannell's theory of the tourist (1976 (1989)) as a search for authenticity and meaning in life becomes problematic in the context of many types of tourist experience, including visiting Disneyland, hedonic forms of tourism including sun, sea and sand holiday making, which comprise the vast majority of tourists. Wang (1999) sought to reconcile these problems by extending the concept of authenticity into three distinct elements, which includes the subjective and existential forms which related to experience. Yet, consumer's desire for authenticity is a powerful driver of many different forms of consumption experiences (authentic foods, etc) so the concept of authenticity in tourism, despite its enormous power, conceptual richness and depth, continuing interest and longevity in the field is not necessarily intrinsic to theory of tourist experience. Indeed, recent research indicates the fissure between theory of authenticity and its practical/empirical connotations (Moore, Buchmann, Månsson, & Fisher, 2021).

The nature of tourist experience has been widely theorised from the perspective of those philosopher's which deal with the nature of lived experiences such as Heidegger and Dewey. This has provided a very rich vein of literature on experiences that has incrementally and vastly informed our understanding of tourist's thoughts and actions, their emotions and embodied practices, perception, cognition and responses, their sense of self and how they are transformed through tourism. The literature has reached a level of theoretical maturity and spans a broad range of disciplinary perspectives, from a focus on 'experience economy' and the design and marketing of tourist experiences to the deeply philosophical, transformational styles. While the theoretical development of knowledge on the tourist experience has been informed from the basis of importation of many different concepts and ideas from sociology and psychology, the unique context of tourism as a consumption experience has led to their transformation, integration and application in a specific way that demarks tourist experience from other kinds of consumption. However, this knowledge exists at the micro-level as it focuses on one key variable in isolation from broader concepts that connect with or influence the tourist experience and it has failed to develop into an integrated and unified theory.

Developing a theoretical contribution in tourism

Like most high-quality journals in the management and business discipline, tourism journals require a 'theoretical contribution' as a main criterion for publication. For journals such as *Annals*, contributions need to meet a threshold of 'significance', which means to be generalisable or have quite significant impact on the area of research in question. Whetten outlines some of the misrepresentations that sometimes occur when editors assess claims of theoretical contributions in papers submitted to journals (1989). This cannot be when a theory (or the relationships between some variables, more often) is found to not hold true when tested in an anomalous setting. This type of contribution helps to clarify questions of the boundaries of a theory which can then be revised to accommodate the new information. Similarly, by applying an established model in a new setting does not constitute a theoretical contribution, unless it attempts to provide an explanation of why the model fails to explain the processes or relationships under investigation and a new set of relationships/variables is proposed.

However, much research in tourism, and it is not alone in the social sciences in this respect, takes an atomistic approach to claiming a theoretical contribution to knowledge via examining a specific relationship between concepts or variables in isolation from a broader theoretical grounding. Conceptual models and theories tend towards the localised and particular, rather than the generic and transferable. Good theory building moves beyond such atomistic and narrowly focused approaches, to try to "resolve tensions, inconsistencies, and contradictions surrounding an issue" (Van de Ven 1989, cited in Gilson & Goldberg, 2015). Theory papers should provide a synopsis of the key literature within the subject domain representing a state of the art within it, without necessarily being a systematic review of the entire corpus of knowledge. They should also provide a sense of how the field has developed over time, how

have we got to the present point? This needs to be succinct so that the paper can then go on to outline and justify the new conceptual links it proposes. Alternatively, conceptual (the general way we refer to theory papers) papers could aim to “build theory by offering propositions regarding previously untested relationships” (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015: 129).

In developing a theoretical contribution to knowledge in tourism we can learn much from the literature in the organization and management/marketing fields, which have gone through similar processes of reflection. Corley and Gioia explain that there are two main criteria for judging contributions to knowledge in management; advancing knowledge by building on and extending previous ideas, providing new linkages between previously developed concepts and the extent that the ideas hold utility for practice (the industry), which we might extend to include communities, or policy in tourism (2011). I echo their calls for researchers to develop a more systematic approach to knowledge about tourism which starts with insightful thinking and based on some distinct domains of theorising. A contribution to knowledge can be either incremental or revelatory (similar to incremental or radical innovation). Incremental contributions to knowledge build on existing ideas, progressively advancing understanding. A key test of incremental advances is their utility, the extent that the ideas are deemed to be credible by our peers. Partly, this can be ascertained via the peer review process, yet a more compelling argument is the extent that the contribution's advances accurately reflect the reality 'on the ground', reflecting real world practice. The concept of significance is important in the context of the additional value offered by the contribution – the extent the findings or the concepts or model can be applied to different contexts beyond that of the empirical study in which the contribution is based.

Whereas a revelatory contribution to knowledge develops completely new ideas. New theory “allows us to see profoundly, imaginatively, unconventionally into phenomena we thought we understood.... theory is of no use unless it initially surprises, that is, changes perceptions” (Mintzberg, 2005: 361, Cited in Corley & Gioia, 2011: 17). Contributions of this type tend to have a high degree of novelty; they challenge our existing ideas or assumptions about the field. Novelty is highly prized and constantly sought after by the top journals, but it is also rare and aiming to develop completely novel and thought-provoking new conceptual understandings are risky, due to the inherent risk-averse nature of the peer review process in scientific research. Additionally, given the massive amount of information and knowledge being produced and with increasing accessibility of research globally, highly novel research and theoretical advances are increasingly difficult, especially for early career researchers.

However, the practice of tourism is constantly evolving and therefore, the opportunities for developing new theory based on the changes in practices or structures of tourism offer much scope. In much the same way that the resistance to tourism within communities in 2017–2019 led to protests aimed at tourists but directed towards the policies and practices of the tourism industry, resulted in the concept of ‘overtourism’ being established and developed at a conceptual level (Gössling, McCabe, & Chen, 2020), so the developments following the global covid-19 pandemic offer much scope for a rethinking of tourism and its contributions to society.

So, what is the process of theory-building? Weick (1989) outlines that theory construction begins with ‘disciplined imagination’, whereby the theorist begins almost by a process of ‘artificial selection’ rather than natural selection – in other words, imagining and ideation are critical to theory construction. This approach diverts from the ‘problem-centred’ or problem-solving approach. Dubin argued that “a theory tries to make sense out of the observable world by ordering the relationships among elements that constitute the theorist’s focus of attention in the real world” (1976: 26, cited from Weick, 1989: 519). This involves a process of ‘sensemaking’ and selecting concepts or variables and specifying the relationships between them. This selection process and the criteria by which variables and relationships are included or excluded involves trial and error and calls for various (thought or empirical) experiments. The development of problem statements is an intrinsic aspect of the process of theory development, since it is through these statements that a set of assumptions are contained, which are then subject to being confirmed or disconfirmed.

Good theory involves the development of ‘thought trials’ (Weick, 1989: 522) which include a large number of diverse conjectures. Finally, self-conscious manipulation of selection process is a hallmark of theory construction, according to Weick; “The greater the number of diverse criteria applied to a conjecture, the higher the probability that those conjectures which are selected will result in good theory” (1989: 523). This enables researchers to verify the theory empirically. The selection criteria include: interest, obviousness, connectedness, believability, beautiful, real. While this represents only an example of good theory building, and many more exist, it helps show us 1) how little as a community we have focused on processes and protocols for good theory development and construction in the past, and 2) offers us a template to guide future studies, which aim to develop theory and enhance our understanding of tourism phenomena by building and developing theory internally.

Conclusions

Tourism is a quite unique and distinct aspect of leisure consumption. Its many forms and expressions leave an indelible impression on individuals and societies. Tourism is essentially a form of individual expression, a consumption activity that is quite distinct from others. Due to the necessity of physical relocation from a usual environment to a novel one, where production and consumption take place, it has some essential features from which theory can be developed. Tourism is made possible at the international scale by political, capitalism, mobility, and technological affordances, which enable freedom of movement, flows of financial exchange and an ethics of hospitality. Much tourism happens within domestic (national) environments. It can take place in more or less (in)formal institutional arrangements, which can be considered a more or less closed but porous system. Its institutional arrangements and political economy are connected to global social problems; freedom of movement, the problems of overcrowding and social density, and importantly, the challenges posed by climate change and political volatility, specifically how these lead to increased migration pressures. These are ‘wicked’ problems, which makes it seem implausible or impossible to create theory around.

As an applied field, tourism research has relied on the importation of theories from social sciences into its contexts as a means to generate high quality research aimed at understanding the various phenomena, explaining and predicting outcomes. It has done so

through the application of theories from the social sciences, which is the bedrock on which our understanding of tourism is built. Tourism contexts provide an excellent laboratory for social scientists from a range of disciplinary contexts to work together to solve problems and challenges generated by tourism activity or policies. The main benefit of social science theory is it allows application and cross-fertilisation between different areas, connecting theories from different disciplines. This brings the prospect of new theoretical interstices to be identified or developed, which can generate new theory-building.

While the field of tourism research has produced many notable successes and achievements over the last 70 years, evidenced by the enormous growth in research in the domain, the rapid improvements in the quality of research produced, its influence on 'communities of interest' and the flexibility and resilience the field has shown in the face of a dynamic and shifting higher education and research environment, it has not fully and confidently developed its own foundational conceptual pillars from which good theory is developed.

The academy moved away from an early orientation to developing theory in tourism, towards a focus on incorporating ideas from social science disciplines (theory and tourism), the result has been a disconnection from the early theoretical advances made in tourism. In practice, there is much useful theory in tourism but even after 70 years of academic interest, we lack the confidence in our internally developed theoretical progress. This article hopes to spur debate about the development of concepts and theories based on the internal characteristics of tourism phenomena and to reconnect with foundational premises and knowledge. It offers a reflective lens through which we can begin to question the fields' relationship with theory based in *the phenomena* and to call for greater inward-looking and more self-confident development of theories based on empirical observation, application of scientific thinking and good practices in theory development.

Contributions to knowledge in tourism are inadequately specified and this paper calls for greater dialogue and engagement on what makes good tourism theory, how theory can be progressed and how contributions to knowledge can be assessed, not as an alternative to the integration of social science theories, but in conjunction with them. The 50th anniversary of Annals of Tourism Research provides the perfect opportunity to begin the process of looking forward to the next half-century with greater confidence and urgency in locating tourism theory within the social sciences disciplines which can be of use to policy makers, the industry and to help understand tourism's role in improving the lives of people.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Scott McCabe: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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