

Review Paper

The Application of Theories in Edutourism Research: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: A systematic literature review was conducted to address the gap in understanding how theory is applied within the growing field of edutourism research. Adhering to PRISMA guidelines, we analysed 68 journal articles and classified them by their theoretical approaches and research themes. A primary finding was that a significant portion of studies currently lack a specific theoretical framework. A key insight was that those studies that do implement theory achieve a higher average weighted citation impact, suggesting a clear link between a strong theoretical foundation and academic influence. The review successfully identified 12 distinct theories employed in the literature, with Experiential Learning Theory being the most dominant and frequently used framework. Our analysis also revealed no statistically significant association between a study's specific theme, such as cultural, environmental, or academic tourism and its chosen theoretical approach. This suggests that the research topic does not limit the consistent application of theory. These results collectively highlight a critical need for a more robust theoretical foundation in edutourism research to enhance its overall academic credibility and influence. This study offers an in-depth evaluation of the current state of theory use and serves as a call for future research to be more explicitly guided by theoretical frameworks, thereby advancing the field as a whole.

Keywords: Edutourism; systematic review; theoretical frameworks; citation impact; research trend

Introduction

Edutourism has emerged as a distinct and rapidly expanding domain within the broader tourism field (Harazneh et al., 2018). In earlier definitions, Bodger (1998)'s conceptualised educational tourism as "any program in which participants travel in groups to a specific place, with the primary goal of gaining experience and participating in destination-specific training". Today, more recent perspectives have broadened this view. Ritchie (2003) offered a more inclusive definition, describing it as "A tourism activity undertaken by individuals who travel on one or more nights with a primary or secondary purpose of education and learning." This definition has been instrumental in extending the concept of edutourism beyond traditional school-based trips to encompass the diverse educational pursuits of individuals, thereby reflecting the widening scope and nature of the field (Bhuiyan et al., 2010).

The scholarly definitions of educational tourism are notably diverse, ranging from formal (Bodger, 1998), institutionally-organized programs (Tomasi et al., 2020) to broader self-directed learning activities (Ritchie, 2003). This conceptual heterogeneity has pushed researchers to draw upon a variety of theoretical frameworks to explore edutourism's various aspects. However, a critical review reveals a significant gap: there is a lack of scholarly consensus on the efficacy and contextual applicability of these theoretical frameworks. This absence of a clear theoretical hierarchy hinders the development of a unified foundation that could guide

future research and practice in the field. This systematic literature review aims to address this gap by systematically mapping the different theories that have been utilized in edutourism research. Specifically, this review will address the following research questions: 1) What are the key theories that have been employed in existing edutourism research? 2) How have these theories been applied to explore various aspects of the edutourism? 3) What are the gaps and limitations in the current theoretical approaches, and what new directions can be explored to advance the understanding of edutourism?

Literature Review

The notion of traveling for educational purposes is not new (Gibson, 1998; Kalinowski & Weiler, 1992), and the academic discourse on edutourism has evolved significantly over time. While the term "edutourism" is a relatively modern construct, the application of theoretical frameworks to understand this type of travel has historical roots. Early studies, though not explicitly focusing on edutourism, demonstrated the importance of theory. For example, Crompton (1979) utilized a theory of motivation to show that a trip's educational value for children often influences family vacation planning. Similarly, (Gibson, 1994) applied a model of the adult life course to reveal a significant increase in women's participation in educational tourism during their fifties. These studies confirm that the use of a theoretical lens to analyze educational travel is not a recent development.

As the field matured and research began to focus directly on edutourism, its vast expansion has raised new questions about the application of theory. Given the field's rapid growth, one would expect a corresponding increase in the diverse use of theoretical frameworks to provide structure and depth. Indeed, edutourism research has become highly interdisciplinary, frequently borrowing from various fields. For instance, researchers have utilized the Theory of Staged Authenticity from sociology (Vieira, 2018), the Experiential Learning Theory from education (Iskhakova et al., 2023; Northcote et al., 2014; Wee, 2019), and the Arousal Theory and Value-Belief-Norm Theory from psychology (Zahrae Afellat & Alipour, 2021; Zhang & Gibson, 2021). This widespread borrowing is a testament to the field's complexity, as edutourism encompasses a wide range of aspects. From earlier studies, edutourism is known to be a broad subject as it is comprised of several sub-types including ecotourism, heritage tourism, rural/farm tourism, and student exchanges between educational institutions (Ankomah & Larson, 2000; Rabu, 2016).

Despite the documented history of theory use and the current expansion of the field, there is a lack of a comprehensive overview detailing what theories have been applied, how they have been used to explore various aspects of edutourism, and to what extent their implementation is widespread. This study aims to fill that gap by systematically mapping the theoretical landscape of edutourism. We will examine the patterns of theory utilization to understand which frameworks are most prevalent, for which sub-types of edutourism they are used, and whether their application is consistent with the field's rapid growth and diversification.

Methodology

This systematic literature review will provide a comprehensive synthesis of the theoretical frameworks that support Edutourism research. The search strategy will employ a combination of keywords and subject headings to capture relevant studies. The search string is adapted as needed for each database to ensure optimal coverage. Table 1 shows the single string adapted in both databases. Previous literature reviews have used different approaches to find relevant documents. For example, a study by Dahlander and Gann (2010), searched a single database like the ISI Web of Science (WoS). For this review, we followed the approach of Van der Have and Rubalcaba (2016) by searching two databases, the Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus.

The use of the right keywords is essential when searching for articles. The single strings, as stated in Table 1, are adapted to both Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases. By using a single-line search, a broad range of results can be obtained from a specific database. This approach aids in identifying relevant articles and focuses on the most pertinent information (Bramer et al., 2017). The terms "Educational Tourism", "Edutourism" and "Study Tours" were used to represent the core concept of travel for educational purposes. The terms are intentionally broad to encompass various forms of Edutourism, including formal study programs, heritage tours with an educational component, and other travel experiences designed for learning. Meanwhile, the terms "Theories", "Theoretical Framework," and "Conceptual Model" target the fundamental

theory of Edutourism research. The inclusion of additional terms like "framework" and "model" will increase the probability of capturing articles that might use different language to discuss theoretical perspectives.

Table 1. Search strings used

Database	Search String	Number of Articles
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Educational Tourism" OR "edutourism" OR "Study Tours") AND ("theories" OR "theoretical framework" OR "conceptual model") AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE , "j")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE , "final")) AND (LIMIT-TO (OA , "all"))	84
Web of Science (WoS)	ALL= (("Educational Tourism" OR "Edutourism") AND ("Theories" OR "Theoretical Framework" OR "Conceptual Model")) and Article (Document Types) and All Open Access (Open Access))	1

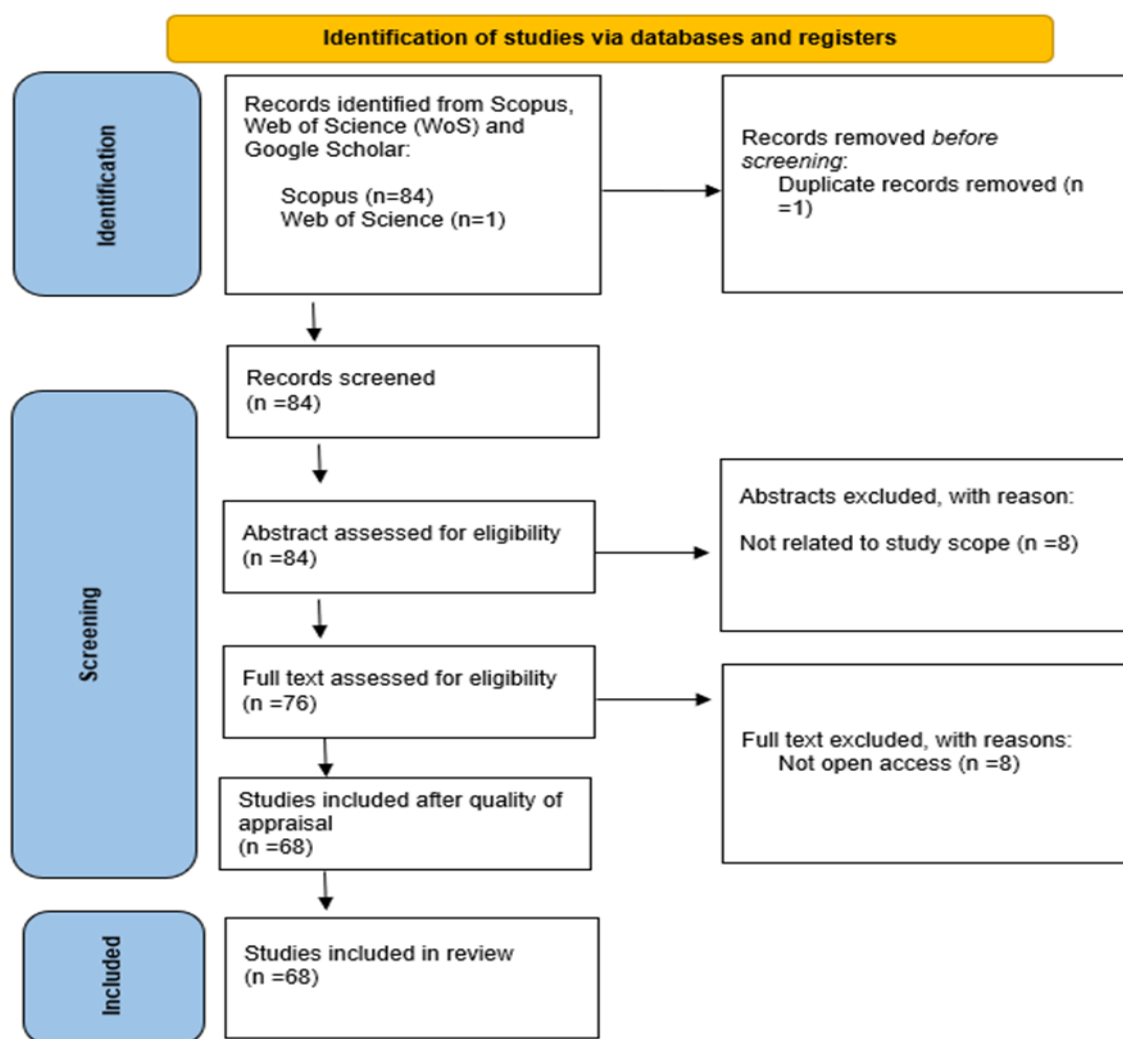


Figure 1. PRISMA flow to illustrate an overview of the article search and selection process

To ensure a rigorous and replicable approach, this review will adhere to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. A comprehensive search will be conducted across two prominent academic databases: Scopus and Web of Science. These databases were selected due to their extensive coverage of social science literature, including tourism and education. Figure 1 visually

represents the study selection process, detailing the number of articles included and excluded at each stage of the systematic review. The flowchart adheres to PRISMA guidelines (Liberati et al., 2009a, 2009b) with minor modifications tailored to the specific aims of this review. With the search string applied in the Scopus database, 338 studies were found.

After setting the limitations to selecting only Journal Articles, only Final Publication and only Open Access, the search result went down to 84 articles. The same limitations were applied to the Web of Science (WoS) database, excluding the open access limitation, and it resulted in only 1 article. Combining both databases, 85 articles were identified for screening. Bibliographic data, including article title, author list, journal name, publication year, and abstract, were extracted from both Scopus and Web of Science databases and compiled into a CSV file. This file was then converted into an Excel spreadsheet for further processing. Duplicate entries, identified by comparing titles and author lists, were removed from the combined dataset to ensure that each study was represented only once. Abstracts were screened to identify studies specifically focused on Edutourism. Articles that do not primarily address Edutourism as a central theme were excluded. In total, 68 studies are eligible to be reviewed

The Findings

In this section, we present data collected with the aim of providing an updated picture of the theories implemented in all reviewed studies.

1. Theoretical and Conceptual Grounding of Edutourism Research

This section examines the extent to which existing Edutourism research utilizes theoretical frameworks and conceptual models. We analysed 68 journal articles to determine how theory and models were implemented into their research designs. Studies were classified into four categories:

- i. Integrated Theory and Model: Studies that implemented both a theoretical framework and a specific model.
- ii. Theory-Driven: Studies that primarily relied on a theoretical framework to guide their research.
- iii. Model/Concept-Focused: Studies that are centred around a specific model or concept without explicit reference to a broader theoretical framework.
- iv. Lacking Theoretical or Conceptual Grounding: Studies that did not explicitly incorporate any theory or model.

As depicted in Figure 2, a significant portion of the reviewed studies (41.17%) did not explicitly incorporate any theoretical framework or model. Of those that did, a greater emphasis was placed on either theory alone (19.11%) or models/concepts alone (27.94%), with only a small percentage (11.76%) integrating both.

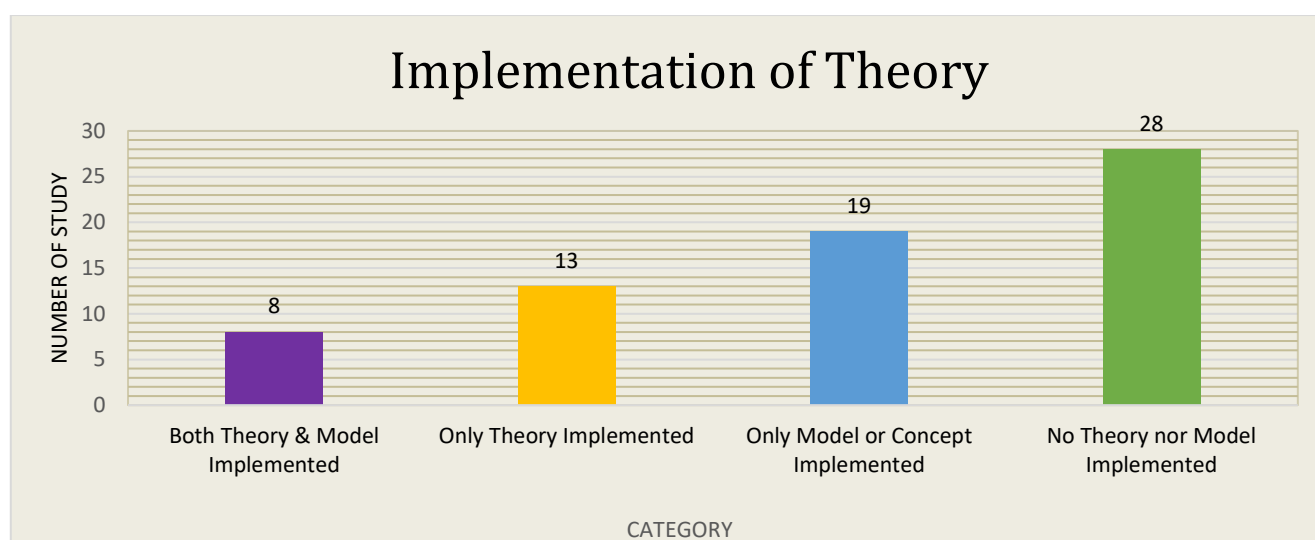


Figure 2. Implementation or theory in the studies reviewed

2. Theories Implemented in Edutourism Research

A total of 21 studies implemented theory in their framework. Figure 3 visual representation of the theoretical landscape, this section provides a detailed analysis of the theories identified in the reviewed literature. Among the 12 theories that were found to be explicitly applied, Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) emerged as the clear frontrunner, used in a majority (58.33%) of the theory-incorporating studies. This dominance highlights the centrality of the learning process in edutourism research. Following ELT, several other theories demonstrated a notable but less frequent application including Diffusion of Innovation Theory, General Theory of Fighting Arts, and Theory of Planned Behaviour, each appearing in two separate studies. The remaining eight theories were each applied in only a single study which points to a wider but less concentrated exploration of diverse theoretical perspectives. This distribution reveals that while some frameworks are consistently used to understand edutourism, a broad spectrum of disciplinary lenses is also being tested.

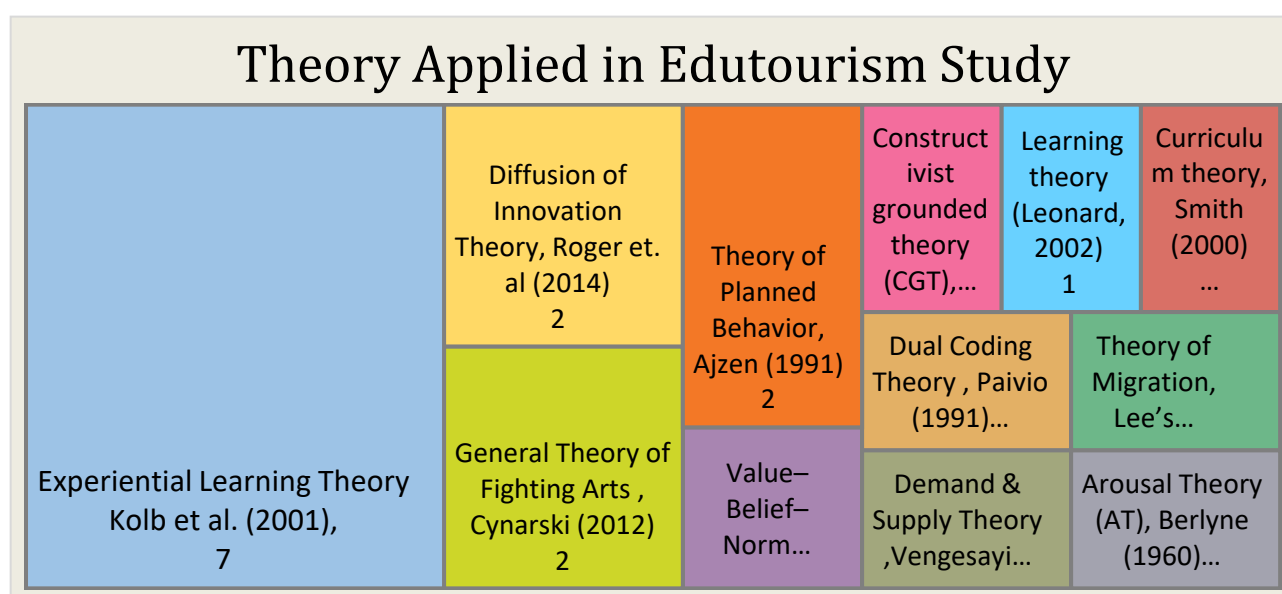


Figure 3. Theory applied in edutourism study

Table 2 provides a comprehensive overview of the 12 theories, along with their key elaborations and original authors. Following this, we will also outline the specific models and concepts that were identified in the literature which, while not comprehensive theories, provide structured approaches to a study's research design.

Table 2. List of all 12 theories and their respective elaboration

Theory	Elaboration	Author
Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb et al., 2001)	This theory emphasizes the importance of experience in the learning process. It suggests that learning occurs through a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.	(Boyatzis et al., 1999; Kolb & Fry, 1974; Leggett, 2019; Nadarajah, 2023; Pennings et al., 2019)
Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Roger et. al, 2014)	Rogers et al. (2014) state that an innovation is a 'social process, even more than a technical matter'.	(Nishimura, 2012)
General Theory of Fighting Arts (Cynarski, 2012)	"This new-paradigmatic theory gives us the Language of the Theory. Terms, such as physical culture, martial arts, ways of martial arts (Budo), combat sports and combat systems are important to the creation of the General Theory of Fighting Arts (GTFA)" (Cynarski, 2016).	(Cynarski, 2016; Figueiredo et al., 2020; Kubala et al., 2019)
Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991)	"The TPB model consists of three psychological domains: attitude, subjective norm and perceived behaviour control (PBC). Attitude is one feeling of favourableness towards a specific behaviour. On the other hand, the subjective norm is the perception of significant others who influence decision-	(Ajzen, 1991; Haron et al., 2023)

	making (Ajzen, 1991). Meanwhile, PBC is a person's ability and opportunity to engage in a particular behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). The TPB asserts that attitude, subjective norms and PBC are antecedents of behavioural intention (Fauzi et al., 2024).	
Value–Belief–Norm (VBN) Theory (Stern et al., 1999)	The VBN theory proposes that “an individual's norm, value and belief predict their pro-environmental behaviour”.	(Fauzi et al., 2024; Stern et al., 1999)
Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2006)	A CGT assumes that “neither data nor theories are discovered, but are 'constructed' through the interactions between the researcher and the participants”. Then the research procedures are coloured by the researcher's perspectives, values, privileges, positions, interactions, and geographic allocations to obtain satisfactory, fruitful research (Charmaz, 2006; Gardner et al., 2012).	(Charmaz, 2006, 2017; O'Donnell et al., 2023)
Learning theory (Leonard, 2002)	This theory believes that “humans learn from the five senses, which help individuals learn. Three levels of learning occur, namely (1) sense activity, (2) memory, and (3) conceptual thinking or understanding. The new knowledge, and existing knowledge are linked together, and they can be applied to new problems”.	(Suksutdhi, 2024)
Curriculum theory (Smith, 2000)	Curriculum is defined as "the totality of learning experiences provided for students so that they can attain general skills and knowledge at a variety of learning sites".	(Al-Romeedy et al., 2020)
Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1991)	According to the dual coding theory, “verbal and visual channels in the brain assimilate information”. Learning occurs from the interaction between these channels and to the degree they are developed in each person. When verbal and nonverbal channels function together, there could be an additive impact on recall of information and cognition (Paivio, 1991).	(Harder & Bruening, 2011; Paivio, 1991)
Demand & Supply Theory (Vengesai, 2003)	This theory stated that “destination supply factors and tourist demand factors help in creating an environment in which tourism flourish and can be consumed satisfactorily”.	(Vengesai, 2003; Wijayanti et al., 2017)
Theory of Migration (Lee, 1966)	McMahon (1992) developed a push-pull model based on Lee's (1966) Theory of Migration. The push-pull model has three stages. In Stage 1, the prospective educational tourist chooses to study internationally or locally, a choice that is influenced by a number of push factors operating within the home country (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). Once prospective students decide to study abroad, they move on to Stage 2 of the process, in which the host country is selected. In Stage 3, the educational tourist is expected to choose a specific host institution. Pull factors are institution-specific.	(Ezel & Arasli, 2021)
Arousal Theory (AT) (Berlyne, 1960)	The theory “posits that when arousal is minimal, individuals feel comforted, but as arousal increases, it can lead to distress” (Reisenzein, 2017).	(Zahrae Afellat & Alipour, 2021)

In addition to theoretical frameworks, the studies incorporated a range of models and concepts, including.

- i. Theoretical framework of affective, cognitive, and behavioral (Basri et al., 2022)
- ii. Value–Belief–Norm (VBN) model (Zhang & Gibson, 2021)
- iii. Transfer of Learning model (Glaser et al., 2021)
- iv. Multiple Streams (MS) Model (Nishimura, 2012)
- v. Place Practice Model (Selby, 2021)

- vi. World-Mindedness Scale (WMS) (McGladdery & Lubbe, 2017)
- vii. Cultural Intelligence concept (McCrea & Yin, 2012)
- viii. Davison's (2017) Empathic Pathway (Karn, 2024)
- ix. Embodied Insights framework (Nadarajah, 2023)
- x. Multimedia Development Life Cycle (Sukmawati et al., 2023)
- xi. Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) model (Lin et al., 2023)
- xii. Interactive Model For Data Analysis (Sugiarti et al., 2019)
- xiii. Maccannell's Concept Of Staged Authenticity (Vieira, 2018)
- xiv. Anatomy Of Curriculum (Nasir, 2020)
- xv. Path Analysis Model (Wijayanti et al., 2017)
- xvi. Hardy's Successful Tourism Route Model (Mapjabil et al., 2022)
- xvii. Push-Pull Model (Harazneh et al., 2018)

3. Trends in Edutourism Research by Theory Use

Figure 4 below illustrates the evolution of edutourism research over time, specifically analyzing the trends in the use of theoretical frameworks.

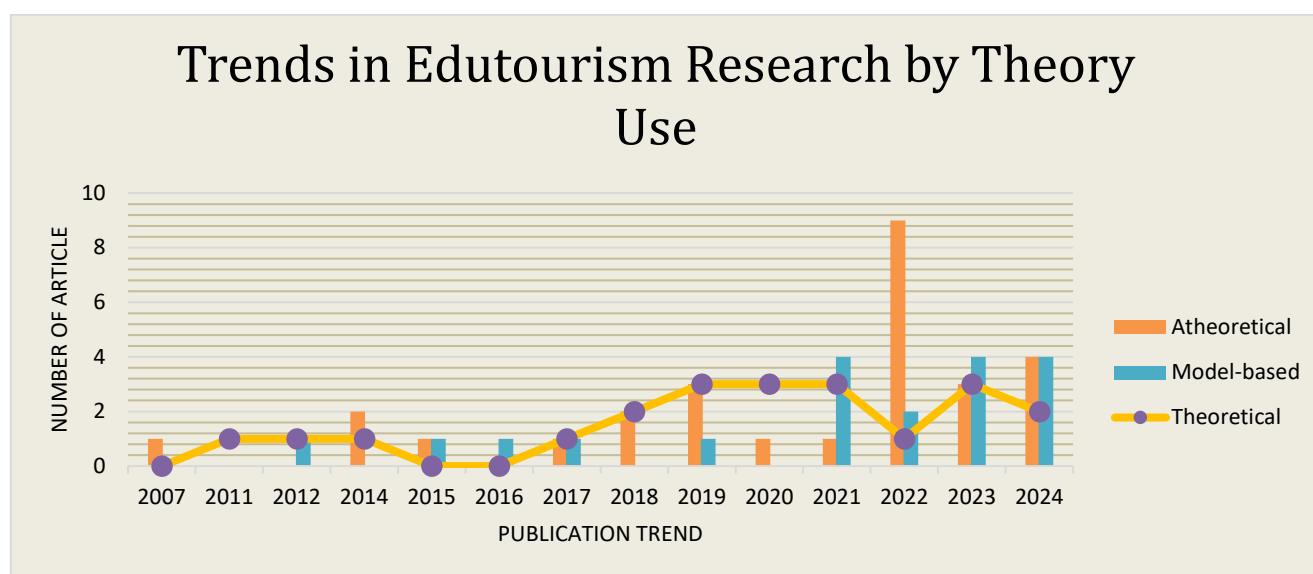


Figure 4. Trends in edutourism research by theory use

Based on Figure 4, there is a notable upward trend in edutourism research from 2007 to 2024. Initially, most articles were atheoretical which means they did not rely on a specific theoretical framework. However, around 2011, the use of theoretical and model-based approaches began to increase, suggesting a development of the field. The number of publications surged significantly after 2018, peaking in 2022, primarily driven by a major rise in atheoretical articles. This increase in atheoretical research suggests a growth in descriptive studies or case reports, but the consistent growth of theoretical and model-based research indicates a continued effort to ground edutourism studies in established academic frameworks. The data for 2023 and 2024 shows a more balanced mix, with all three approaches being used, indicating the field is becoming more diverse in its methodologies.

4. Overall Impact of Different Theoretical Approaches in Edutourism Research

In this analysis, we compare the overall impact of different theoretical approaches in edutourism research by examining their citation influence. The methodology involved several detailed steps to generate a weighted citation metric that provides a more nuanced measure of impact than simple citation counts. To do this, we first classified articles as either Theoretical, Atheoretical, or Model-based. For each article, a weighted citation score was calculated by multiplying the journal's Scimago Journal Rank (SJR)-based Impact Factor (IF) with

its citation count from Google Scholar. The resulting weighted citation was then averaged for each of the three categories. Figure 5 shows the overall impact of different theoretical approaches in edutourism research.

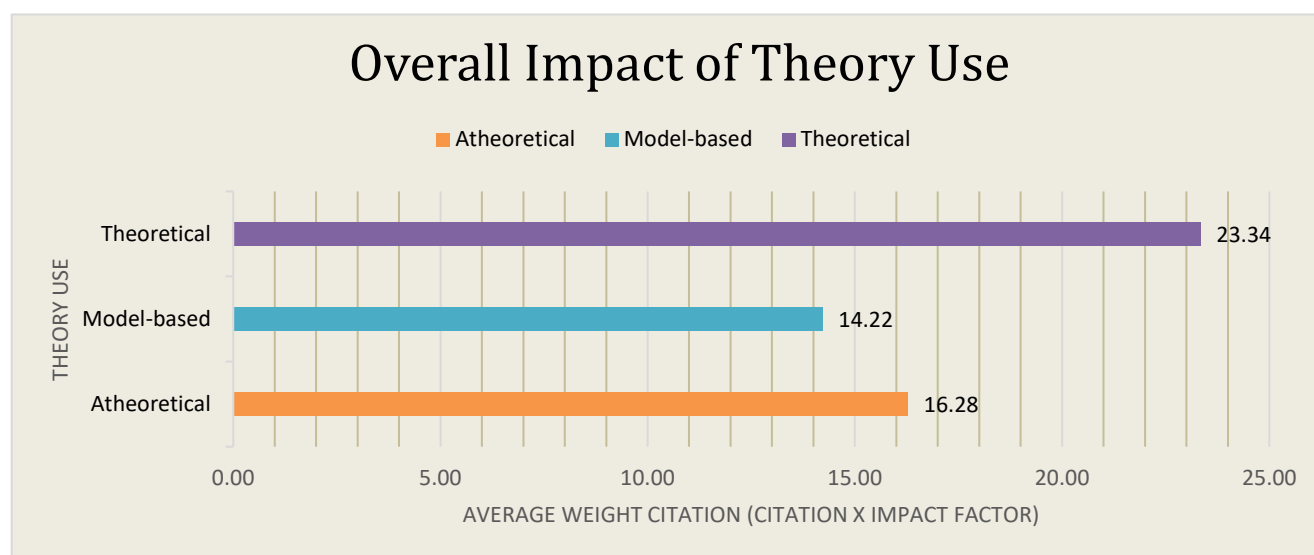


Figure 5. Overall impact of theory use

Our analysis revealed a clear hierarchy of impact: Theoretical studies had the highest average weighted citation (23.34), followed by Atheoretical studies (16.28), and Model-based studies (14.22). These findings suggest that research grounded in a strong theoretical framework not only enhances credibility but also significantly increases its overall academic influence and citation performance within the field.

5. Patterns in Theories Application

We used a rigorous thematic analysis process to understand the theoretical foundations of edutourism research. This involved reviewing the theories and models employed in each of the selected studies and identifying patterns in their application. Through this process, five distinct yet interconnected themes were found.

Impact and Outcomes

The analysis reveals that a significant portion of edutourism studies incorporates theories and models that focus on understanding impacts and outcomes. For instance, Al-Romeedy et al. (2020) utilized the Curriculum theory (Pawson, 2002) to examine the effectiveness of tourism education in preparing students for the labour market. Their findings highlight the importance of designing curricula that equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge for successful careers in tourism. Besides, Suksutdhi (2024) has implemented the Learning theory in his research to develop an innovative training model for the hotel industry in Nakhon Ratchasima Province. It emphasizes the importance of considering behavioural, cognitive, and constructivist learning theories when designing training programs. Zhang and Gibson (2021) applied the Value–Belief–Norm (VBN) theory to assess the long-term attitudinal and behavioural changes resulting from participation in international sustainability-focused edutourism programs. The study findings concluded that three behavioural changes identified by the participants were lifestyle, professional development, and responsible travel behaviours.

Beyond behavioural theories, conceptual models have also been employed to analyse community attitudes towards edutourism. Basri et al. (2022), for example, used an affective, cognitive, and behavioural framework to understand communal attitudes toward English Educational Tourism (EET) in Eastern Indonesia. Furthermore, Selby (2021) integrated the Place practice Model to study how intercultural interactions and identity transformations occur during student educational journeys abroad. Besides, a more empirical model like the World-Mindedness Scale (WMS) was applied to quantify global mindedness among high school learners. It demonstrated that the most effective way to develop global mindedness is by learning to greet people in the local language and visiting museums, cultural and historical sites (McGladdery & Lubbe,

2017). Rogers et al. (2014) implemented the Diffusion of Innovation Theory, which examines how new ideas and technologies spread within a society. While not directly focused on Edutourism, he provided compelling evidence for the potential of study tours to influence policy decisions. The study's findings suggest that the Minister of Energy's participation in a European study tour contributed to his support for the Green Energy Act.

Learning and Personal Development

We have also explored the learning and personal development-related theories and models of the edutourism studies that were reviewed. As presented in Figure 3 previously, the Experiential Learning Theory was most applied in the reviewed studies. These studies utilized the theory to study a wide range of topics, starting from the development of edutourism to its impact. For example, the study by maldaldarajah (2023) applied the Experiential Learning Theory as well as the Embodied insights concept in her study to examine a pedagogical approach to development studies study tours. This paper studies the ways that classrooms can be transformed into critical, reflexive spaces for engagement that serve as a platform to develop new forms of development praxis through educational tourism.

Furthermore, Iskhakova et al. (2023) focused on identifying what types of concrete experiences participants perceive as meaningful during their short-term study abroad (STSA) programs. By applying the Experiential Learning Theory, the study examines how these concrete experiences contribute to the learning process and facilitate better understanding and personal growth. Other studies that implemented this study cover the impact of experiential learning during edutourism programs. Generally, they focus on how exposure to new cultures and environments, along with critical reflection on these experiences, leads to significant shifts in perspectives (Karn, 2024; Leggett, 2019), awareness (Wee, 2019), social responsibility (Virtue, 2022), and overall educational outcome (Pennings et al., 2019). Additionally, Figueiredo et al. (2020) applied the General Theory of Fighting Arts in their study to examine how participants engage in martial arts training and workshops as a means of experiential learning.

Kubala et al. (2019) applied the same theory in their study to summarize the experiences gained from two foreign martial arts conferences in Japan. He mentioned that the increased knowledge resulting from these expeditions will make it possible to deepen the information on people and places in the future. It will also improve participants' knowledge of their fields and what new fields of research can be explored (Kubala et al., 2019). Meanwhile, a study by Harder and Bruening (2011) used the dual-coding theory to determine the effectiveness of online videos in modifying students' knowledge and perceived barriers regarding study abroad opportunities. The results indicated that videos through the university's online course computer management system increased students' knowledge regarding study abroad opportunities.

Motivation and Decision-Making

On the other hand, several studies focus on the role of motivation and decision-making. The study by Ezel and Arasli (2021) applied the Theory of Migration, specifically using the Push-Pull model by McMahon (1992) to understand the motivations of Nigerian educational tourists in North Cyprus. They mentioned the importance of decision-making-related research in using the push-pull framework in different countries, as each country possesses different structures. Thus, each educational tourist-sending country needs to be evaluated on its own merits. The study by Haron et al. (2023) applying the Theory of Planned Behaviour focuses on understanding how various determinant factors, such as the quality of educational experiences, influence their intention to return to these destinations. He mentioned that tourist satisfaction with educational institutions is a necessity that affects the success of educational institutions and induces revisit intention towards the edu-tourism industry.

Additionally, Zahrae Afellat and Alipour (2021) use the Arousal Theory to study the impact of boredom on the attitudes and behaviours of edutourists during the era of COVID-19. They suggested that increased boredom leads to psychological distress, which affects how edutourists perceive and engage with their educational experiences. As a result, a significant negative effect of boredom on edutourists' attitudes, as well as an insignificant positive effect on their behaviours, was determined. A constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach was used to provide insights into the lived experiences and perspectives of high school

teachers in New Zealand in relation to their organisation and participation in international high school study tours. The findings showed that teachers used logical decision-making strategies, drawing on previous experience of organising study tours, to influence the choice of future destinations and experiences.

Edutourism Development

The development of edutourism is also one of the emerging topics studied. For example, Nasir (2020) applied the Anatomy of Curriculum to study the reality of curriculum, instruction, and academic tradition development in madrasahs based on the school accreditation standards in Indonesia. He discovered that the weaknesses lie in various aspects of the school, including the application of scientific approaches, such as study tours for the students. His findings have suggested a better edutourism development strategy, specifically in the curriculum aspect of schools in Indonesia. Furthermore, Vieira (2018) explored the intersection of staged authenticity and indigenous tourism, using MacCannell's concept to analyse a project at Aldeia Bananal, Brazil. This initiative provided a unique opportunity to examine how staged authenticity shapes the experiences of both visitors and hosts within an indigenous tourism context.

Interestingly, several reviewed articles studied the development of tourism based on technological advancements. Xing and Wang (2024) applied the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) theme model to study the personalized travel interest point recommendations for adolescent users during study tours. It aims to understand how to effectively match teenage users with educational and recreational locations that align with their interests and preferences for effective edutourism development. Sukmawati et al. (2023) developed a Virtual Reality (VR) zoo experience using an Internet of Things (IoT) approach to enhance students' recognition and understanding of wild animals by going on a virtual educational tour. Applying the concept of the Multimedia Development Life Cycle, this study demonstrates the potential of technologies to create engaging and accessible educational opportunities within edutourism.

Apart from that, Lin et al. (2023) applied the C/S (Client/Server) model to explore the implementation of a dynamic safety supervision system that utilizes real-time positioning and dynamic geofencing to monitor students' locations. This system ensures that students remain within safe areas during their tours and addresses the critical concern of student safety in outdoor educational settings.

Demand and Supply

Notably, a subset of edutourism research focuses specifically on the topic of demand and supply. Mapjabil et al. (2022) applied the Hardy's Successful Tourism Route Model in his study which eventually revealed that the backpackers' tourist circuit (supply) in Kota Kinabalu is limited despite having a high number of tourist (demand). Wijayanti et al. (2017) implemented the Demand & Supply Theory and Path Analysis model in her study that examines what educational tourists specifically seek in their experiences, such as learning about arts, culture, language, history, and new technology. The study highlights the gap between the demand for language learning opportunities and the current offerings at Smart Park.

6. Theoretical Approaches Across Research Themes

Figure 6 below provides a detailed breakdown of how different theoretical approaches (atheoretical, model-based, and theoretical) are applied across key research themes within edutourism study. Figure 6 illustrates a clear distribution of research methodologies across five primary themes. The themes of "Learning" and "Impact" emerge as the most heavily researched areas, accounting for a substantial portion of all studies, regardless of their theoretical approach. Specifically, atheoretical studies are most frequently applied to the "Learning" theme (12 studies, 17.6%) and "Impact" (9 studies, 13.2%), indicating a strong emphasis on descriptive and exploratory work in these areas.

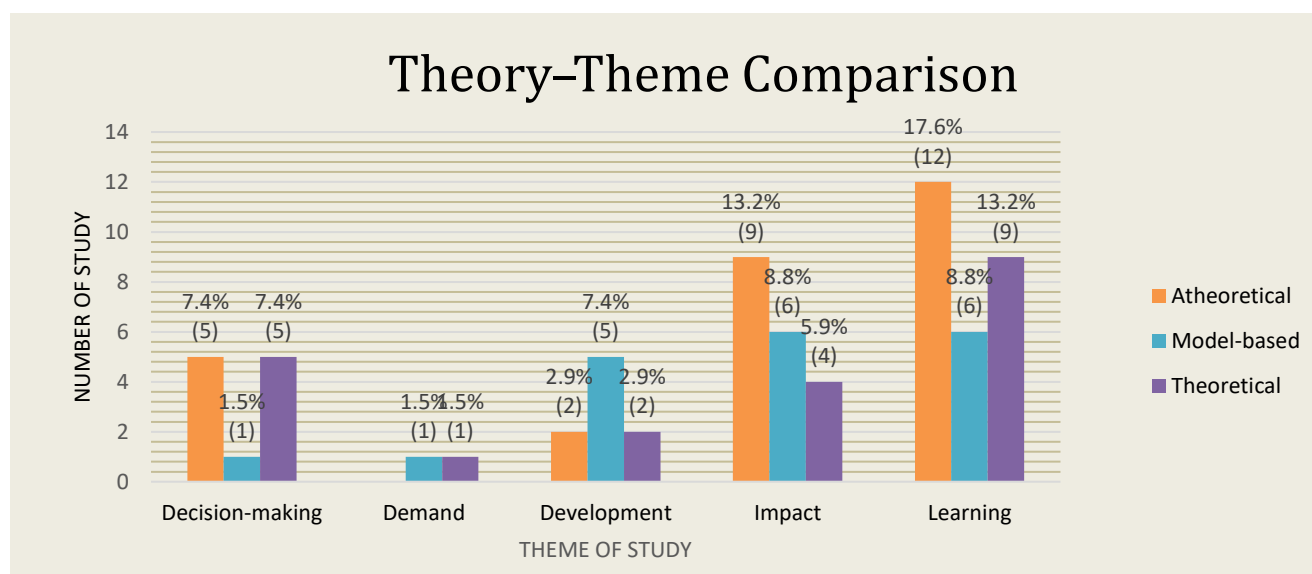


Figure 6. Theoretical approaches across research theme

In contrast, theoretical studies are also a major contributor to the "Learning" theme (9 studies, 13.2%) and play a significant role in "Decision-making" (5 studies, 7.4%) and "Impact" (6 studies, 8.8%). This suggests that researchers are using established frameworks to explore topics like motivations, learning outcomes, and socioeconomic effects. Model-based studies are most prevalent in "Learning" (6 studies, 8.8%) and "Development" (5 studies, 7.4%), highlighting their utility in building and testing specific models for program development and learning processes. The theme of "Demand" remains the least explored area, with only a handful of studies across all three theoretical categories, pointing to a potential gap in the research.

To further investigate the relationship between the thematic focus of a study and its theoretical approach, a Chi-square test was conducted. This statistical analysis aimed to determine if there was a significant association between the two categorical variables: the five key themes of study (Decision-making, Demand, Development, Impact, and Learning) and the three types of theory use (Atheoretical, Model-based, and Theoretical). The results of this analysis are presented below.

$$\chi^2(8, N = 68) = 8.37, p = 0.398, p \text{ value} > 0.05$$

The Chi-square analysis indicated no statistically significant association between a study's theme and the type of theoretical approach employed. This result suggests that the use of theoretical, atheoretical, and model-based frameworks was relatively consistent across all thematic categories, such as learning, impact, and decision-making. This suggests that, regardless of theme, the inclusion of theory in edutourism research is associated with greater scholarly impact and may enhance both the credibility and visibility of the work.

Discussion

Our analysis of edutourism research reveals a field that's growing quickly but still has a way to go in using theory consistently. We found that a large number of studies (41.17%) don't use a specific theory or model at all. This is a bit surprising since older tourism research, like the studies by Crompton (1979) and Gibson (1994), did use theories to understand why people travel to learn. Today, a few theories are very popular, especially Experiential Learning Theory. This shows that while the field is expanding, it's still in the early stages of building a strong theoretical foundation.

Even with many studies lacking a theory, our findings show a clear link between using theory and having a bigger academic impact. Our analysis found that studies with a theoretical framework get the most citations, which is much more than studies with no theory or just a model. We also used a statistical test to see if this was because theoretical studies focused on more popular topics, but we found that wasn't the case. The use of theory was pretty consistent across all research topics. This is a key point: it suggests that a study's impact is not about what topic it covers, but how it's studied.

So, why do theoretical studies have more impact? It seems the academic community values research that uses a clear, established framework. A theory gives a study more credibility and makes it easier for other researchers to build on, which is a common pattern in other fields too. This suggests that edutourism is following a similar path, where the quality and rigor of a study matter most. This is supported by past research, where Danese et al. (2018) highlighted that the implementation of theory is essential for advancing management research, as it helps provide new concepts, fresh perspectives, and robust solutions to complex issues. In some regions, however, the challenge is different. Sun and Xu (2021) noted a scarcity of empirical data-based studies in China, with most research focusing on theoretical and macro perspectives. This contrasts with our finding of many atheoretical studies, showing that the theoretical gaps in edutourism research can vary by geographical context.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review provides a crucial presentation of the theoretical landscape of edutourism research. We found that while the field is growing rapidly, a significant portion of studies still lack a formal theoretical foundation. Echoing the findings of Abu Bakar et al. (2025), who noted a tendency for some studies to reference a theory without fully integrating it into the research methodology, our review found a significant portion of edutourism research also lacks a formal theoretical or conceptual grounding. Our key contribution is the finding that, despite this, studies that do use a theoretical framework achieve a much higher scholarly impact, as measured by our weighted citation analysis. This suggests that the value of research in this field is directly tied to its theoretical rigor.

In terms of practice, our findings offer a clear guide for researchers and practitioners. For researchers, it highlights the importance of integrating theory not as a stylistic choice but as a necessity for impactful work. For practitioners, it suggests that research grounded in theory is more likely to provide credible, actionable insights.

This study is not without limitations. Our review was constrained to articles that met specific quality and content criteria, such as the use of the keyword "edutourism." Consequently, relevant studies that may have used different keywords or been published in less-indexed sources may have been excluded. Despite this, we hope that this systematic literature review raises awareness among researchers and practitioners about the range of theories being applied in edutourism research, thus helping to expand the theoretical toolbox for understanding this growing field.

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