



From theory borrowing to theory generation: Advancing indigenous theory development in tourism studies

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ABSTRACT

Tourism research has generated substantial empirical knowledge by applying and extending theories from psychology, sociology, management, and related disciplines. While this strategy has strengthened methodological rigor, it has also positioned tourism primarily as a field of theory application rather than theory generation. This research argues that the distinctive characteristics of tourism systems—including tourists' liminal and experiential identities, the ecosystem- and hospitality-based nature of tourism enterprises, and the public and cross-sectoral functions of tourism policy—provide fertile ground for developing indigenous theory. Drawing on the social science literature on theory development, we propose a five-stage roadmap for advancing tourism-specific theory: phenomenon identification, concept formation, mechanism building, empirical refinement, and theory generalization. By shifting the emphasis from deductive validation to generative theorization, this research offers a conceptual framework for positioning tourism as a theory-generating discipline capable of contributing not only to tourism scholarship but also to the broader social sciences.

1. Introduction

Tourism research has made substantial progress by adopting and refining theories from neighboring social science disciplines, including psychology, sociology, economics, and management. Much of this progress, however, has been driven by a deductive logic of theory testing and extension, whereby established theories are reapplied, revalidated, or incrementally extended in tourism contexts (Kwortnik & Thompson, 2009). This approach has facilitated the rapid growth of tourism scholarship by enabling researchers to readily transfer well-established theoretical frameworks into tourism settings. While it has strengthened the internal rigor and cumulative validity of existing theories (Sharpley, 2022), it has also fostered a theoretical dependency that constrains the development of tourism-specific conceptual frameworks (Mura & Wijesinghe, 2023).

Tourism scholarship has nevertheless demonstrated its capacity to generate theoretical insights from phenomena observed within the tourism domain. Several influential contributions illustrate how tourism-grounded observations can be transformed into concepts, explanatory mechanisms, and broader theoretical frameworks. MacCannell's (1973) staged authenticity, for example, began with the tourist search for authentic experiences and theorized how tourism settings are organized into front and back regions, revealing how the

presentation and staging of social reality shape tourists' encounters with authenticity. Similarly, Urry's (1990) tourist gaze transformed the seemingly ordinary act of sightseeing into a theoretical concept by explaining how what tourists see, and how they see it, is socially organized through cultural expectations, representations, and institutional practices. In both cases, theorization began not by applying an established external theory to tourism but by identifying a tourism-grounded phenomenon and developing concepts and mechanisms to explain it.

A similar generative process is evident in theories addressing destination evolution and tourist motivation. The tourism area life cycle conceptualized the observed evolution of destinations as a dynamic process through which destinations move across stages of development as visitor demand, destination capacity, and structural conditions change (Butler, 2025). Travel career patterns, in turn, emerged from recurring changes in tourists' motivations across accumulated travel experiences and conceptualized motivation as dynamic rather than fixed, with the relative importance of travel motives changing as experience develops (Pearce & Lee, 2005). Although these theoretical perspectives differ substantially in their levels of analysis and explanatory purposes, they share a common generative logic: they begin with phenomena particularly salient in tourism, transform those observations into theoretical concepts, articulate processes or mechanisms, and develop explanations that extend beyond the description of a specific

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tourism context. These examples demonstrate that tourism has already shown the capacity for theory generation and provides precedents for the more systematic generative approach advocated in this research.

Even so, these contributions remain relatively limited compared with the discipline's extensive reliance on imported theories. Consequently, from the perspective of social science theory development, tourism studies continues to be viewed primarily as a field of theory application rather than theory generation. This imbalance raises a fundamental question: To what extent can tourism research generate original theoretical insights that move beyond contextual adaptations of external theories to explain the distinctive social processes inherent in tourism?

Recent debates have called for stronger theory development within tourism while recognizing its interdisciplinary and post-disciplinary nature (McCabe, 2024; Miao et al., 2022; Milazzo & Soulard, 2024). These studies emphasize homegrown or internally grounded theorizing alongside productive engagement across disciplinary boundaries. Building on these debates, we shift attention to the direction of theoretical knowledge flows by examining how tourism-grounded phenomena can be transformed into concepts and explanatory mechanisms that may subsequently travel beyond tourism. We thus conceptualize theory development as a reciprocal process in which tourism not only draws on theoretical resources from other disciplines but also generates theoretical insights that can contribute back to the broader social sciences.

The central argument of this research is that tourism, as a complex social phenomenon characterized by temporality, mobility, liminality, performativity, and multi-actor interactions (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Edensor, 2001), possesses structural conditions that cannot be fully captured by imported theories alone. Overreliance on external theoretical frameworks risks reducing tourism to a testing ground for non-tourism theories rather than recognizing it as a fertile site for theoretical innovation. Drawing on classic perspectives on theory development in the social sciences (Corley & Gioia, 2011), this study argues that tourism research should move beyond validation-oriented extensions and engage more actively in inductive concept formation grounded in tourism-specific practices, the indigenous theorization of processes unique to tourism systems, and the development of integrative frameworks that can engage with, but are not subordinate to, dominant theories in adjacent fields.

In this study, indigenous tourism theory refers to a theoretical explanation that originates from phenomena embedded in or particularly salient to tourism and develops concepts and causal mechanisms grounded in those phenomena. Importantly, “indigenous” does not imply that a theory must be exclusively applicable to tourism or disconnected from theories developed in other disciplines. Rather, it refers to the origin of theorization: whereas borrowed theories begin with an established theoretical framework and apply it to tourism, indigenous theory development begins with a tourism phenomenon that cannot be sufficiently explained by existing theoretical accounts and develops or reconceptualizes constructs and mechanisms to explain that phenomenon. In this sense, tourism-specific concepts may constitute building blocks of indigenous theory whereas theory generation refers to the broader process through which such concepts and mechanisms are developed, refined, integrated, and eventually generalized into a coherent theoretical explanation.

This research critically examines prevailing patterns of theory use in tourism research through the lens of social science theory development. Rather than evaluating individual theories, it focuses on the structural orientation of tourism scholarship toward deductive validation and the implications of this orientation for the discipline's long-term theoretical autonomy. Specifically, it seeks to (1) identify the current position of tourism theory within the broader trajectory of social science theory development; (2) highlight the unique characteristics of the tourism ecosystem and the contextual complexity of tourism phenomena; and (3) provide implications for advancing indigenous and tourism-specific theory development.

The scope of this research extends beyond hospitality and tourism

management to tourism studies as a broader interdisciplinary field. Accordingly, our discussion encompasses multiple levels of tourism phenomena, including tourist behavior, hospitality and tourism organizations, destination systems, and tourism policy and governance. This broad scope is intentional because our central concern is not theory development within a particular subfield, but the capacity of tourism as an academic field to generate concepts and theoretical mechanisms from phenomena grounded in a particular domain. This research contributes to tourism scholarship by reframing discussions of theory use from questions of methodological rigor to issues of disciplinary epistemology. It offers a conceptual roadmap for positioning tourism studies as a theory-generating discipline rather than a peripheral application domain. By articulating the necessity of indigenous theory development, it aims to stimulate critical reflection among tourism scholars and encourage more pluralistic and generative approaches to theorization. Ultimately, it seeks to contribute to the development of a differentiated theoretical ecosystem in tourism studies.

2. Current position of tourism theory development

Before discussing the current position of theory development in tourism research, it is important to distinguish among different modes of theory use and development. As summarized in Table 1, theory borrowing, adaptation, extension, integration, and indigenous theory generation differ primarily in their theoretical starting points, the role assigned to the tourism context, and their intended theoretical outcomes. Theory borrowing begins with an established theory originating outside tourism and applies it to a tourism setting, primarily testing whether established theoretical relationships hold in a new context. Theory adaptation similarly begins with an existing theory but modifies its constructs, assumptions, or relationships to better reflect the characteristics of tourism. Theory extension moves further by using the tourism context to identify new mechanisms, relationships, or boundary conditions that expand the explanatory scope of an existing theory. Theory integration combines multiple theoretical perspectives to provide a more comprehensive explanation of a tourism phenomenon (Whetten et al., 2008; Zhang, 2025).

Indigenous theory generation differs from these approaches primarily in the origin and direction of theorization. Rather than beginning with an established external theory, it starts with a phenomenon grounded in tourism and seeks to develop or reconceptualize concepts and causal mechanisms capable of explaining that phenomenon. In this study, we therefore define indigenous tourism theory as a theoretical explanation that originates from tourism-grounded phenomena and develops concepts and mechanisms that are not reducible to the

Table 1
Modes of theory use and development in tourism research.

Mode	Starting point	Role of tourism context	Theoretical outcome
Theory borrowing	Existing external theory	Context for application/testing	Validation of an existing theory
Theory adaptation	Existing external theory	Requires contextual modification	Context-adjusted constructs or relationships
Theory extension	Existing external theory	Reveals new mechanisms or boundary conditions	Expansion of an existing theory
Theory integration	Multiple existing theories	Context for theoretical synthesis	Integrated explanatory framework
Indigenous theory generation	Tourism-grounded phenomenon	Source of theorization	New or reconceptualized concepts and mechanisms forming a tourism-originated theoretical explanation

contextual application of theories imported from adjacent disciplines. Tourism-specific concepts can serve as building blocks of such theory whereas theory generation refers to the broader process through which these concepts and mechanisms are identified, refined, integrated, and eventually generalized into a coherent theoretical explanation.

Importantly, these modes should not be interpreted as a hierarchy of theoretical value. Theory borrowing, adaptation, extension, and integration are legitimate forms of theorizing and have played an essential role in advancing tourism scholarship. Indeed, the interdisciplinary nature of tourism makes engagement with theories from adjacent disciplines both inevitable and intellectually productive (Coles et al., 2006; Shin & Perdue, 2022). Theory borrowing becomes limiting only when tourism serves merely as a setting for reproducing established theoretical relationships without revealing new constructs, mechanisms, boundary conditions, or assumptions. Thus, our argument is not that tourism research should abandon borrowed theories, but that greater attention should be given to the reverse direction of knowledge production: using tourism phenomena as a source of theoretical insight. Indigenous theory generation therefore complements, rather than replaces, interdisciplinary theory borrowing.

Against this conceptual distinction, tourism research has accumulated considerable empirical knowledge through all these modes of theorizing, but a substantial proportion of theoretical development continues to begin with theories originating outside tourism. Recent systematic and bibliometric examinations of theory use in tourism research provide empirical support for this pattern. These studies show that many of the theories most frequently employed in tourism scholarship originated outside the tourism field, particularly in psychology, sociology, marketing, management, and economics (e.g., Abdollahi et al., 2023; Shin & Kang, 2023; Sigala et al., 2021; Su et al., 2025). Prominent examples include the theory of planned behavior, social exchange theory, stimulus-organism-response theory, social identity theory, self-determination theory, institutional theory, and signaling theory. Their widespread application has substantially advanced understanding of tourist behavior, organizational practices, and destination development. At the same time, this illustrates that the dominant direction of theoretical knowledge transfer has often been from social science disciplines into tourism rather than from identifying tourism phenomena as the basis for the development of new theoretical explanations.

This pattern has contributed greatly to the interdisciplinary development of tourism scholarship. However, this has come at the cost of neglecting the comparatively greater opportunities for theories that emerge from the analysis of tourism phenomena themselves. In mature disciplines, theories evolve through an iterative process of identifying novel phenomena, developing new concepts, and constructing explanatory mechanisms that eventually transcend their original contexts (Corley & Gioia, 2011). By contrast, tourism scholarship has predominantly relied on theories imported from psychology, sociology, marketing, and management, with its theoretical contributions typically taking the form of validation, replication, or boundary extension in tourism settings.

This pattern reflects more than researchers' preferences; it is rooted in the structural characteristics of the field. As an inherently interdisciplinary domain, tourism has benefited from access to a rich repertoire of established theories (Coles et al., 2006; Shin & Perdue, 2022), reducing the incentive to develop tourism-specific conceptual frameworks. Moreover, contemporary publication systems tend to reward incremental extensions of well-established theories over the more uncertain process of developing entirely new theoretical perspectives. Consequently, tourism has increasingly functioned as a context for applying existing theories rather than as a source of novel theoretical ideas.

A similar tendency is evident in construct development. Although tourism research has produced numerous new scales and measurement instruments (Kock et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2026), scholarly attention

has focused more on introducing new constructs than on systematically refining, validating, and integrating them into cumulative theoretical knowledge. Follow-up studies examining nomological validity, causal mechanisms, boundary conditions, and longitudinal robustness remain relatively limited. Consequently, many tourism-specific constructs remain isolated measurement tools instead of evolving into mature theoretical concepts that explain broader tourism phenomena (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Mura & Wijesinghe, 2023). These tendencies have contributed to a fragmented body of knowledge characterized by isolated variables, cross-sectional hypothesis testing, and incremental model extensions. Although such studies enhance methodological rigor, they rarely generate new explanatory mechanisms or conceptual frameworks capable of advancing tourism as an independent theoretical domain.

Accordingly, the next stage of tourism theory development should move beyond asking which existing theory best explains tourism and instead asking what theoretical insights tourism can contribute to the social sciences. Advancing tourism as a theory-generating discipline requires greater emphasis on inductive concept formation, tourism-specific causal mechanisms, and integrative theoretical frameworks grounded in the distinctive realities of tourism systems rather than on their adaptation to existing disciplinary paradigms. More importantly, the issue is not whether tourism researchers borrow theories from other disciplines, but whether tourism itself generates phenomena capable of stimulating theoretical innovation. As disciplines mature, unique empirical contexts often become sources of new concepts and explanatory mechanisms. The following section argues that tourism possesses precisely these characteristics, making its distinctive ecosystem fertile ground for the development of indigenous theory.

3. Understanding the unique nature of the tourism domain

Consistent with this broader disciplinary scope, we consider tourism phenomena across individual, organizational, destination, and policy levels rather than restricting theory-generating potential to a single level of analysis. The potential for tourism-originated theory does not necessarily rest on the assumption that every characteristic of tourism is unique to the field. Experiential consumption, identity construction, emotional encounters, and multi-actor value creation, for example, can also occur in other consumption and service contexts. Rather, tourism constitutes a distinctive social field in which mobility, temporariness, liminality, unfamiliarity, place dependence, hospitality, and multi-actor interactions operate simultaneously and often intensively (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Edensor, 2001). The theoretical distinctiveness of tourism may therefore lie less in any single characteristic than in the configuration of these characteristics and the mechanisms generated through their interaction. Such configurations provide opportunities to identify causal processes that may be less visible or insufficiently specified in theories developed for more stable, familiar, or transaction-based settings.

Tourist experiences illustrate how the combination of mobility, temporariness, and liminality can generate distinctive processes of identity transition. Tourism consumption is frequently experiential, hedonic, and potentially transformative, oriented toward memories, emotions, identities, and meaningful experiences rather than material ownership alone (Miao et al., 2014; Uriely, 2005). However, these characteristics themselves are not exclusive to tourism and may also characterize other experiential consumption contexts. Rather than claiming their uniqueness, we argue that they are particularly salient in tourism because they frequently occur in combination with spatial mobility, temporariness, and separation from everyday environments and social roles. What makes tourism theoretically revealing is that experiential consumption often occurs alongside physical displacement from everyday environments and temporary separation from established routines and social roles.

Tourists consequently occupy fluid identities as both consumers and

active participants in extraordinary settings characterized by leisure, playfulness, escape, and liminality (Edensor, 2001; Uriely, 2005). Spatial displacement and temporary separation from everyday routines can loosen familiar normative cues, creating opportunities to experiment with alternative roles, practices, and identities. These temporary experiences may subsequently be incorporated into tourists' self-concepts after returning to everyday life. Tourism can therefore provide a particularly salient context for theorizing an identity transition mechanism, through which mobility and liminality facilitate temporary role suspension, identity experimentation, and subsequent identity reconstruction. Such a mechanism moves beyond treating tourism simply as a setting for experiential consumption and directs theoretical attention toward how temporary displacement can reshape individuals' relationships with their everyday identities.

Second, the hospitality- and ecosystem-based nature of tourism can generate mechanisms that differ from those emphasized in conventional firm-centered service theories. Tourism experiences are rarely produced by a single organization. Rather, mobility, accommodation, food and beverage, attractions, and cultural experiences are combined into a holistic destination experience produced through interactions among multiple actors and organizations (Murphy et al., 2000; Shin & Perdue, 2022). This creates a mechanism of distributed experience production and ecosystem interdependence: although tourists often evaluate a trip or destination as an integrated experience, responsibility for producing that experience is dispersed across organizations that may be operationally independent. The performance of one actor can therefore influence evaluations of other actors and of the destination as a whole, making tourism value creation dependent not only on firm-level service performance but also on coordination and interdependence across organizational boundaries.

At the same time, tourism enterprises operate within a hospitality logic that emphasizes emotional labor, care, generosity, and human connection (Lashley, 2008). The significance of these relational elements may be amplified by tourists' temporary displacement from familiar social and physical environments. Travelers often depend on unfamiliar hosts and service providers for information, assistance, reassurance, and access to local environments. Such temporary dependence can create situational vulnerability, increasing the relational significance of care and a welcoming environment (Lashley, 2000). Hospitality operates through a vulnerability-care-trust mechanism, whereby unfamiliarity and temporary dependence heighten tourists' sensitivity to relational care, which in turn facilitates trust, emotional connection, and a sense of belonging. This perspective extends beyond viewing hospitality as an additional service attribute and instead conceptualizes it as a relational process whose effects emerge from the interaction between tourist vulnerability and host care. The "hedonic touch" of tourism and hospitality experiences can thus be understood not simply as the provision of pleasure, but as part of a broader mechanism through which emotional and relational interactions shape tourists' connections with people and places (Miao et al., 2014; Uriely, 2005).

Finally, tourism policy provides another context in which distinctive configurations can generate theoretically meaningful mechanisms. Unlike policies concerned primarily with the performance of individual industries, tourism policy frequently addresses multiple objectives simultaneously, including economic development, citizen well-being, regional revitalization, cultural preservation, diplomatic relations, and national branding (Hall, 2011; Nunkoo, 2015). Tourism also operates as a broader social force whose consequences extend to social cohesion, quality of life, and place identity (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006) while intersecting with cultural industries, creative activities, heritage, and environmental governance (Richards, 2011). These overlapping economic, social, cultural, and environmental objectives create interdependencies among public agencies, private enterprises, residents, tourists, and other stakeholders (Shin et al., 2026). Tourism governance can therefore involve a mechanism of cross-sectoral value negotiation,

in which policy outcomes depend on coordinating actors with different interests and balancing market objectives with social, cultural, and place-based values. This mechanism highlights why tourism development cannot always be understood solely through conventional industry-policy perspectives centered on economic efficiency or firm competitiveness.

These examples suggest that the theoretical distinctiveness of tourism lies less in claiming that individual tourism characteristics are entirely unique than in identifying how particular configurations of these characteristics generate explanatory mechanisms. Mobility, temporariness, and liminality can generate processes of identity transition and reconstruction; unfamiliarity and dependence can amplify hospitality-based processes of care and relational trust; fragmented service provision combined with holistic experience consumption can generate ecosystem interdependence and distributed responsibility; and the intersection of market and public objectives can generate cross-sectoral value negotiation. However, these mechanisms should not be assumed to operate exclusively in tourism. Rather, tourism provides a particularly salient empirical domain in which they can be observed, conceptualized, and theoretically refined. Once identified through tourism phenomena, such mechanisms may subsequently be examined in other experiential, organizational, and place-based contexts.

4. Advancing indigenous and tourism-specific theory development

The preceding discussion suggests that the future development of tourism scholarship does not require abandoning theory borrowing, adaptation, extension, or integration. Each represents a legitimate mode of theorizing and can contribute substantially to tourism knowledge. Our concern instead lies with the direction of theoretical development. Whereas these approaches generally begin with existing theoretical frameworks and bring them into tourism contexts, indigenous theory generation begins with tourism-grounded phenomena and seeks to develop concepts and causal mechanisms capable of explaining them. Thus, indigenous theory generation complements rather than replaces interdisciplinary theory borrowing. Imported theories will continue to provide valuable foundations; however, they should increasingly serve as starting points for conceptual innovation rather than as final explanatory frameworks.

Drawing on seminal perspectives on theory development in the social sciences (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Gioia et al., 2013; Whetten, 1989), we argue that advancing indigenous tourism theory requires moving beyond deductive validation toward a more generative process of theorization. Our framework builds on, but differs from, these established approaches in its purpose and disciplinary orientation. Whetten (1989) provides general criteria for assessing theoretical contribution by emphasizing what, how, why, and the contextual conditions of who, where, and when, while Corley and Gioia (2011) emphasize originality and utility as central dimensions of theoretical contribution. Gioia et al. (2013), in turn, provide a systematic inductive approach for developing concepts and theoretical relationships from qualitative data. These perspectives offer important general principles for theory construction and evaluation, but they do not specifically address how an interdisciplinary applied field can transition from predominantly importing theoretical explanations to generating theories from phenomena within its own domain.

The proposed framework extends these perspectives by shifting attention from how theory is constructed or evaluated to the disciplinary origin and direction of theorization. Specifically, it begins with tourism-grounded phenomena, moves through concept formation and mechanism articulation, and then emphasizes cumulative empirical refinement and eventual theoretical generalization beyond a tourism context. Thus, the framework does not seek to replace established theory-building approaches; rather, it applies and extends their generative principles to address a disciplinary-level question: how can tourism become not

only a context in which theories are tested and extended, but also a source from which theoretical concepts and mechanisms originate and potentially travel to other fields?

In addition, rather than viewing theory development as the incremental extension of existing models, tourism scholars should engage in an iterative process that begins with identifying tourism-specific phenomena, developing contextually grounded concepts, uncovering tourism-specific causal mechanisms, refining these mechanisms through cumulative empirical evidence across multiple methods and contexts, and ultimately generating theoretical insights that contribute not only to tourism scholarship but also to the broader social sciences. Based on these established theory-building principles, we propose a tourism-oriented roadmap that redirects attention toward the origin and direction of theorization. The framework consists of five interrelated stages: phenomenon identification, concept formation, mechanism building, empirical refinement, and theory generalization. Its contribution lies not in proposing an alternative general method of theory construction, but in specifying how these established principles can be mobilized to transform tourism-grounded phenomena into theoretical explanations with relevance both within and beyond tourism. (Table 2).

Theory development should begin with tourism phenomena rather than existing theories. Many of the most distinctive characteristics of tourism represent phenomena that emerge from tourism itself. Instead of immediately interpreting these phenomena through established theories from psychology or management, researchers should adopt inductive approaches—such as qualitative inquiry, ethnography, grounded theory, and longitudinal observation—to identify novel concepts and processes rooted in tourism contexts.

Second, greater attention should be devoted to reconceptualizing existing constructs from a tourism perspective. Rather than directly

transferring concepts from adjacent disciplines, researchers should critically examine whether these constructs adequately capture the distinctive characteristics of the tourism experience. The objective should not merely be to introduce new variables but to redefine existing concepts in ways that reflect the distinctive characteristics of tourism systems, including tourists' experiential, liminal, and mobile identities, the ecosystem- and hospitality-based nature of tourism enterprises, and the cross-sectoral governance and public value orientations of tourism policy.

Third, future studies should move beyond testing statistical associations to identifying tourism-specific causal mechanisms. Most existing studies explain tourism phenomena through general psychological or organizational processes, whereas relatively few examine the mechanisms that arise specifically from the tourism context itself. Developing such context-specific mechanisms would enable tourism to generate theoretical explanations that extend beyond its own disciplinary boundaries.

Finally, indigenous theory development requires cumulative evidence rather than isolated empirical findings. Theoretical advancement should be supported by an integrated research strategy that combines qualitative exploration, construct refinement, longitudinal designs, field experiments, and big-data analytics. Rather than treating these methods as competing approaches, tourism scholars should employ them sequentially to discover new concepts, establish causal mechanisms, and evaluate the generalizability of emerging theories. Such cumulative evidence is essential for transforming tourism-specific concepts into robust theoretical frameworks capable of contributing to the broader social sciences.

Importantly, the value of tourism-originated theory should not be confined to explaining tourism phenomena. As tourism-specific concepts and mechanisms become theoretically refined, they may provide explanatory insights into phenomena in adjacent disciplines. Tourism represents a particularly fertile context for theorizing processes involving temporary mobility, liminality, identity transition, host-guest relations, and multi-actor value creation (Murphy et al., 2000; Uriely, 2005). The mechanisms identified in these contexts may travel beyond tourism. For example, theoretical insights into liminal tourist identities may inform research on temporary identity transitions in festivals, digital communities, and other extraordinary consumption settings. Similarly, hospitality-based mechanisms of care, generosity, and relational connection may contribute to service and organizational research examining relational exchanges that extend beyond transactional service encounters. Destination ecosystem perspectives may also inform research on place-based innovation and multi-actor value creation in regional development and public management (Thees et al., 2020).

Accordingly, indigenous tourism theory should not imply theoretical isolation or disciplinary closure. Rather, its maturity may be demonstrated by its capacity to explain phenomena beyond the context from which it originated. Theory generation can therefore be understood as a reciprocal process: tourism draws on theories from adjacent disciplines, but tourism-specific phenomena can also generate concepts and mechanisms that enrich those disciplines. From this perspective, the long-term goal is not to replace theory borrowing, but to transform tourism from a predominantly theory-importing field into one that both generates and exports theoretical knowledge.

5. Conclusion

Tourism studies have reached a stage of disciplinary maturity at which the continued application of imported theories alone is no longer sufficient to sustain theoretical advancement. Rather than abandoning existing social science theories, tourism scholars should increasingly view them as a foundation for developing concepts and mechanisms rooted in the distinctive characteristics of tourism systems. By shifting the focus from theory borrowing to theory generation, tourism can move beyond its traditional role as a field of theory application and emerge as

Table 2
A theory-building process for indigenous tourism research.

Theory-building stage	Current tendency in tourism research	Future direction	Expected contribution
Phenomenon identification	Starting from existing theories	Begin with tourism-specific phenomena using qualitative inquiry, ethnography, and longitudinal observation	Identification of novel tourism phenomena
Concept formation	Borrowing constructs from psychology, marketing, and management	Reconceptualize existing constructs or develop tourism-specific concepts that reflect the distinctive characteristics of the tourism ecosystem	Development of indigenous concepts
Mechanism building	Testing direct relationships	Identify tourism-specific causal mechanisms (e.g., liminality, hospitality, destination ecosystems, identity transformation)	Theory explaining tourism-specific processes
Empirical refinement	Reliance on cross-sectional surveys and SEM	Integrate qualitative research, field experiments, panel studies, and big-data analytics	Stronger causal inference and generalizability
Generalization and theory contribution	Contextual validation and incremental extension	Develop theories originating in tourism that can be extended to other social science domains	Tourism as a theory-generating and theory-exporting discipline

a discipline capable of producing theoretical insights that enrich both tourism scholarship and the broader social sciences. Ultimately, the theoretical maturity of tourism studies should be reflected not only in its capacity to generate theories grounded in tourism phenomena but also in the ability of these theories to travel beyond tourism. Tourism may thereby evolve from a predominantly theory-importing field toward a more reciprocal position as both a theory-generating and theory-exporting discipline within the broader social sciences. The framework proposed in this research is intended not as a definitive model but as a starting point for stimulating broader discussion on the future direction of theory development in tourism studies.

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