



Future research on visitors' attitudes to tourism destinations

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ABSTRACT

Research on visitor attitudes to tourism destinations is an established area of scholarly attention. This research note provides a critical commentary of the theoretical trends in visitor attitude studies based on a systematic review of 162 journal articles in top tier journals between 1977 and 2019. This short communication contributes to tourism research and scholarship by demonstrating that prior research on visitor attitude is predominantly descriptive and lacks theoretical engagement, with the gap between atheoretical and theoretical articles expanding proportionally over time. Scholars should consider the application of active theory from parent (sub) disciplines such as social psychology and cognitive psychology to provide future research on visitor attitudes to tourism destinations with much needed depth, substance and theoretical maturity.

1. Introduction

Since the inception and proliferation of bibliometric work, review papers have examined the theories, concepts and methods used in sub-fields of tourism research, such as resident attitudes (e.g. Deery, Jago, & Fredline, 2012; Hadinejad, Moyle, Scott, Kralj & Nunkoo, 2019; Nunkoo, Smith, & Ramkissoon, 2013). However, a substantive review that presents the status of theoretical trends in studies on visitor attitude towards tourism destinations is heretofore absent. Attitudinal research has received increasing interest among tourism scholars as tourist attitude is a key factor in destination choice and consequent behaviour during the travel experience (Aye, Au, & Law, 2013). Therefore, a review of visitor attitude studies can stimulate further scholarly discourse on theory from sub-disciplines of psychology as crucial fields of knowledge to develop tourism research (Weiler, Torland, Moyle, & Hadinejad, 2018).

Periodic monitoring of academic journal content is essential in recognising trends and insights garnered through critical assessment of the advancement of knowledge within a field of research over time (Van Doren & Heit, 1973) as well as highlighting the areas that require further attention (Xiao & Smith, 2006). Through such assessments of a field that researchers can avoid expanding research “in volume but static in

content” (Carter, Baxter, & Hockings, 2001, p. 265). In this regard, a critical review of visitor attitudes has the ability to provide a balanced perspective on knowledge surrounding the application of attitudinal theory in tourism. This research note addresses calls to review studies on attitudes in tourism and explore the application of contemporary theories and frameworks (Gao, Mattila, & Lee, 2016; Wang, 2016). Consequently, the aim of this study is to provide a critical commentary on theoretical trends in visitor attitudes to tourism destinations (1977–2019).

Articles on visitors' attitudes towards tourism destinations published in Annals of Tourism Research (ATR), Journal of Travel Research (JTR), Journal of Sustainable Tourism (JOST), and Tourism Management (TM) were considered. The four highest-ranked journals as measured by the quality and impact factor (Baum, Kralj, Robinson, & Solnet, 2016; McKercher, 2005; Ryan, 2005) are considered best-practice when assessing the “state of play” in research outputs for gauging academic progress and latent trends within a field of study, especially when undertaking substantive reviews of broad bodies of knowledge in tourism. In addition, this is a common method in tourism studies while reviewing a broad topic and is a continuation of an existing method in other review articles (e.g. Baum et al., 2016; Hunt, Gao, & Xue, 2014). All the same, the authors acknowledge the quality of other journals which are also

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highly ranked in the field (Ruhanen, Weiler, Moyle, & McLennan, 2015). It is also acknowledged that research on visitor attitude is published in other journals within and outside tourism related journals (e.g. Fakharyan, Jalilvand, Elyasi, & Mohammadi, 2012; Jalilvand, Samiei, Dini, & Manzari, 2012). However, for the purpose of this manuscript, the selection of the four highest ranked journals deemed appropriate and sufficiently capture the scholarly breadth and depth of visitor attitude research (Nunkoo et al., 2013). This research note provides a comprehensive overview of previous theories applied in studies on visitor attitudes to tourism destinations, with subsequent direction for future application of theory from parent (sub)disciplines.

2. Methods

The method applied in this research note adapts approaches utilised in previous review articles in the tourism literature (e.g. Hadinejad, Nunkoo, MoyleScott, & Kralj, 2019; Nunkoo et al., 2013). Importantly, it must be emphasised; this note presents an outcome of an ongoing process of a systematic review of previous studies on visitor attitudes in tourism. To develop the database which was utilised to explore the theoretical approaches in visitor attitudes studies across a 42-year period (1977–2019), three stages were administered.

Stage One leveraged the methods applied in conceptually related bibliometric research. Following this process, ATR, JOST, TM, and JTR were searched for published research articles on “visitors’ attitudes towards tourism destinations” to create a dataset for analysis (Hadinejad et al., 2019). To ensure that any relevant paper was included, search terms such as visitor*, tourist*, traveller*, guest*, tourism*, leisure*, hospitality*, travel*, recreation*, attitude*, perce*, understanding*, view*, perspective*, reaction* were used in each of the four journals. Searches were limited to full-length peer-reviewed journal articles and book reviews, research notes, reports, editors’ notes, and commentaries were eliminated (Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, & Arcodia, 2017). Applying search terms yielded 1998 articles in the four selected journals.

In Stage two, the dataset was refined through screening the papers for eligibility, derived from an explicit focus on visitors’ attitudes to tourism destinations such as a particular city or country. This information was derived from reviewing the title, keywords and abstract to identify articles to make a final determination. After reviewing the title, keywords and abstract, 313 articles were identified as relevant (1685 papers were eliminated). Papers eliminated in the second Stage included search terms such as tourist or travel in the abstract, but the focus of the article was not on visitor attitude to a destination (e.g. Berdychevsky, Gibson, & Bell, 2016; Walker et al., 2013). Another reason for removing papers in the second stage was no identification of the place or destination in the article like general tourist attractions or virtual destinations (e.g. Herbert, 1996; Tavakoli & Mura, 2015). Lastly, a number of articles explored tourists’ attitudes towards residents and stakeholders of a city or country, not the destination itself which resulted in being removed from the database (e.g. Breitsohl & Garrod, 2016; Simpson, Simpson, & Cruz-Milán, 2016).

Manuscripts that were borderline were put into a separate spreadsheet and the entire article was read by an independent researcher to determine if the core focus of the piece was on visitor attitudes to tourism destinations. At this stage, 151 articles were removed from the database as they included a conceptually related rather than explicit focus on visitor attitudes to tourism destinations, such as attitudes towards service quality, attitudes to overcrowding and attitudes to a festival, amongst others (e.g. Jurado, Damian, & Fernández-Morales, 2013; Kee-Fu & Ap, 2007; Yu & Ko, 2012). After applying screening criteria (visitors’ attitudes towards a particular destination), 162 articles were deemed relevant. All articles were exported to Endnote software for data processing and analysis.

Third, articles were coded utilising the quantitative content analysis to identify theoretical trends in existing research. Content analysis has been widely applied in tourism research (e.g. Choi, Lehto, & Morrison,

2007; Malloy & Fennell, 1998). Content analysis was applied to determine theories in previous studies. Following approaches utilised by Ruhanen et al. (2015), articles that applied more than one theory or were comparative case studies across two destinations, were dual coded. In addition, publications were categorised as theoretical (papers which utilised a particular theory), or atheoretical (papers without a specific theory) (Nunkoo et al., 2013).

3. Results

3.1. Theoretical approaches

The depth of engagement with a theory is an indication of the maturity of a subfield of research (Canosa, Moyle, Moyle, & Weiler, 2018). The prevalence of theory across the 42-year period is illustrated in Fig. 1. Atheoretical papers dominate the field between 1977 and 2019. Fig. 1 also indicates that there is a constant growth in the application of theories to explore visitors’ attitudes; however, the gap between theoretical and atheoretical articles is expanding proportionally.

As demonstrated in Table 1 below, the majority of articles (69%) did not make use of a priori conceptualisation or explicit theory to explore visitors’ attitudes towards tourism destinations. In contrast, 31% of studies provided explicit reference to a theoretical framework to study visitors’ attitudes to tourism destinations. Theories presented only once were aggregated and presented under “other” in the table below. The Theory of Planned Behaviour and the Contact Model were the most commonly applied frameworks in the existing studies, combined accounting for 20% of manuscripts which applied a theory (See Table 1 below).

The Theory of Planned Behaviour was predominantly applied to study attitude as a determinant of behavioural intentions for destination selection (Jordan, Bynum, Boley, Knollenberg, & Kline, 2018; Lam & Hsu, 2006; Quintal, Lee, & Soutar, 2010). Prior research on the Contact Model assesses attitude change, with an emphasis on understanding the mutual attitudes and relationships of interacting members (Durko & Petrick, 2016; Pizam, Fleischer, & Mansfeld, 2002; Pizam, Uriely, & Reichel, 2000).

Protection Motivation Theory, Multi-Attribute Model, and Expectancy-Value Theory were also applied on more than one occasion. Papers had a tendency to apply a single theory (e.g. Schroeder & Pennington-Gray, 2015; Zhang, Gursoy, & Xu, 2017), with multiple theoretical bases to investigate visitors’ attitudes also evident (e.g. Chung, Lee, Kim, & Koo, 2018; Loda, Coleman, & Backman, 2010).

4. Discussion

Future studies on visitor attitudes to tourism destinations should consider a deeper engagement with current theoretical discourse in parent disciplines such as psychology to set future research agenda to transition from atheoretical to theoretically informed (Weiler, Moyle, & McLennan, 2012). To provide the field with an opportunity for deeper engagement with contemporary theory, scholars could explore the efficacy of theory from subdisciplines of psychology, such as positive psychology, social psychology, and cognitive psychology, outlining potential application to visitors’ attitudes to tourism destinations and attitudinal studies in tourism more broadly (Hadinejad et al., 2019; Weiler et al., 2018). Exploring contemporary debates on attitudinal theories from social psychology including, though not limited to, Cognitive Response Theory, Heuristic Systematic Model, and the Self-Validation Hypothesis (Petty & Briñol, 2008) has the potential to stimulate scholarly discourse on how advances in parent disciplines can be leveraged in studies on visitor attitudes to tourism destinations.

Critical engagement with theoretical debates in parent (sub)disciplines will assist the tourism field to overcome the criticism against the existing theories, specifically criticisms focussed on inability to address the affective aspect of attitude formation (McCabe, Li, & Chen, 2016;

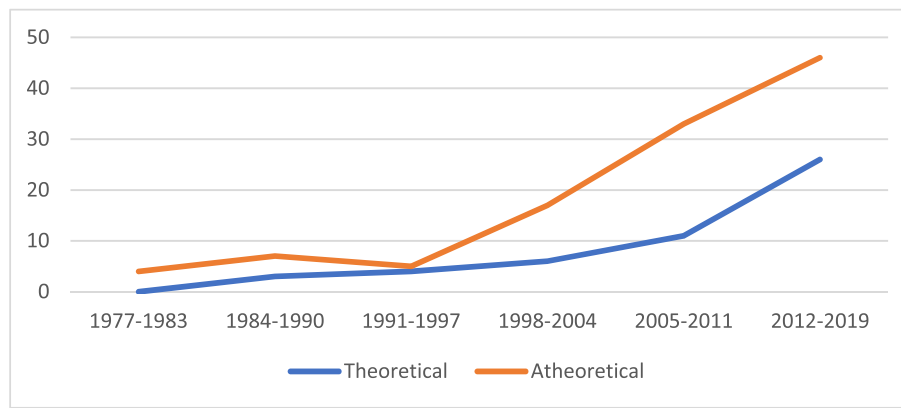


Fig. 1. Theoretical vs. atheoretical framework 1977–2019 (N = 162).

Table 1
Theoretical framework (N = 162).

	All Journals (n = 162) Freq. (%)	JTR (n = 77) Freq. (%)	TM (n = 60) Freq. (%)	ATR (n = 19) Freq. (%)	JOST (n = 6) Freq. (%)
Theoretical	50 (31%)	23 (30%)	21 (35%)	5(26%)	1(16.7%)
Atheoretical	112(69%) (n = 59) ^a	54 (70%) (n = 32) ^a	39 (65%) (n = 22) ^a	14 (74%) (n = 5) ^a	5(83.3%) (n = 1) ^a
Theory of planned behaviour	6 (10%)	3	3	0	0
Contact model	6 (10%)	3	2	1	0
Protection motivation theory	4 (6.9%)	2	1	1	0
Multi-attribute model	3 (5.1%)	2	1	0	0
Expectancy-value theory	3 (5.1%)	3	0	0	0
Elaboration Likelihood Model	2 (3.4%)	1	1	0	0
Emotional Solidarity	2 (3.4%)	1	1	0	0
Other	33 (56.1%)	17	13	3	1

^a Some theoretical articles utilised more than one theory.

Miller, Rathouse, Scarles, Holmes, & Tribe, 2010). Cognitive Response Theory considers the role of the valence of thoughts (favourable or unfavourable thoughts) on attitude (Petty & Briñol, 2008). The Heuristic Systematic Model discusses the amount and valence of thinking as determinants of attitude and highlight the cognitive and affective aspects of attitude formation (Dillard, Meijnders, Dillard, & Pfau, 2002, pp. 309–327). Potential application of the Self-Validation Hypothesis will also add a metacognitive aspect of attitudinal research in tourism knowledge (Petty, Briñol, & Tormala, 2002). Petty et al. (2002) introduced the Self-Validation Hypothesis with an emphasis on the role of thought confidence or the metacognitive aspect of attitude formation considered to play a significant role in destination choice. Tourism scholarly enquiry can benefit from the self-validation hypothesis through analysing visitors’ attitudes towards advertisements of destinations in the pre-travel stage and explain their behavioural intentions. Understanding visitor attitudes to tourism destinations at different stages of a trip, pre-, on-site- and post-travel can be further developed through engagement with recent advances in Cognitive Appraisal Theory.

5. Conclusion

This short communication draws on a database of 162 journal articles on visitors’ attitudes towards tourism destinations across a 42-year period. This research identified that the number of atheoretical articles exceeded theoretically informed research, with the gap expanding proportionally over time, indicating a lack of theoretical maturity. Conversely, research in conceptually related fields such as residents’ attitudes towards tourism development has indicated that there is a decrease in the number of atheoretical articles (Hadinejad et al., 2019). This research note revealed that the Theory of Planned Behaviour and the Contact Model, while not dominant, were the most commonly applied theoretical framework to explore visitors’ attitudes towards tourism destinations. A core contribution of this research is not only the identification and critical analysis of dominant theories, but direction for future scholars seeking to advance conceptual understanding through much needed theoretical maturity in studies on visitor attitudes to tourism destinations. This manuscript encourages future scholars to engage with contemporary theories such as Cognitive Response Theory, Heuristic Systematic Model, Self-Validation Hypothesis, and Cognitive Response Theory to push tourism research and scholarship on visitor attitudes forward. The focus of this short communication was on the four top-tier journals in tourism which is common in the field but excludes other potential studies in other tourism-related outlets. Subsequent research can also make a fruitful contribution to tourism by comparing the dominant theories of attitude in tourism with foundation disciplines such as psychology, sociology and anthropology.

Credit author contribution statement

Arghavan Hadinejad: Project administration. Data Curation. Seyedahmad Taghaviannoghan: Project administration. Data Curation. Brent D. Moyle: Writing. Noel Scott: Writing. Anna Kralj: Writing - review & editing.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2020.104215>.

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