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Original Research Article

The Epistemic Status of Tourism Studies: Discipline, Interdiscipline, or Postdiscipline?

An Analytical Review of the Theoretical Literature*

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Abstract | This study critically synthesizes the theoretical literature on the epistemic status of tourism studies to locate the field along the disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and postdisciplinary spectrum. Using a qualitative, semi-systematic review, it examines fifteen key works published between 1997 and 2023, guided by Kuhn's concept of the paradigm, Becher and Trowler's social criteria of disciplinehood, and Klein's continuum from multidisciplinarity to transdisciplinarity. Three streams emerge: the first, stressing the absence of a shared paradigm, regards tourism as an "indiscipline"; the second treats it as a complex, inherently interdisciplinary object; the third, judging interdisciplinarity insufficient, defends a postdisciplinary position. The synthesis yields a twofold conclusion. Knowledge production can be read as movement toward an independent discipline, yet without paradigmatic consensus this movement is incomplete, while part of the literature rejects such a destination altogether. These are two descriptions of one situation: operationally, tourism studies remains predominantly interdisciplinary, whereas epistemologically it inclines toward a postdisciplinary (deconstructive) and transdisciplinary (constructive) position.

Keywords| *Tourism studies; Epistemology; Interdisciplinarity; Postdisciplinarity; Transdisciplinarity; Philosophy of science*

Introduction| In recent decades, tourism has grown from a marginal activity into one of the largest sectors of the global economy and one of the most heavily researched fields of academic inquiry. This quantitative and institutional growth -of faculties, specialized journals, scholarly associations, and doctoral programs worldwide- has been accompanied by an unresolved theoretical question: what kind of knowledge is knowledge about tourism, and where does it stand within the system of scientific knowledge? Unlike classical disciplines such as physics or economics, whose epistemic identity is largely settled, tourism studies has from the outset been entangled in doubt about its own disciplinary status (Echtner & Jamal, 1997; Tribe, 1997).

This doubt is not accidental but arises from the nature of the subject. Tourism is simultaneously an economic, social, cultural, political, spatial, and environmental phenomenon, so no single traditional discipline can explain its complexity (Darbellay & Stock, 2012). Tourism schools, moreover, pursue two conflicting missions: training skilled personnel for the industry (practical, skills-based knowledge, or know-how) and producing theoretical and critical knowledge about the phenomenon's social and cultural consequences (know-that), a tension that Tribe (1997) identifies as the root of the field's "indiscipline."

The epistemic identity of tourism studies is not merely an abstract or nominal matter; it bears directly on the ontology of the subject, the choice of research methodology, journal publication policy, and curriculum design.

Despite its importance, the existing literature has largely formed around works that each seek to establish a single position rather than systematically comparing rival alternatives; to date, no work has weighed these three tendencies side by side and in critical relation to one another. The present study therefore asks, through an analytical-critical method, which epistemic position tourism studies occupies.

Methodology

Because the aim is to analyze and synthesize existing theoretical positions on the epistemic identity of tourism studies, the study is qualitative and based on an analytical review of the theoretical literature. It follows a semi-systematic, integrative, synthesis-oriented review design. This

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choice reflects the subject -the epistemological controversy over whether tourism is a discipline- which has been raised in a dispersed, interdisciplinary field, and an aim that is not exhaustive enumeration of all works but critical synthesis of the main streams of thought. Snyder (2019) regards precisely such cases as instances of the integrative review: when the aim is to critique and combine existing perspectives in order to build a new conceptual framework rather than merely describe research trends over time.

Sources were gathered through targeted searches in Google Scholar and the sources indexed in it, using the keyword combinations "tourism AND discipline," "tourism AND interdisciplinary," "tourism AND post-disciplinary," and "epistemology of tourism studies," and by examining the reference lists of key articles for further relevant works. Articles were selected if they were published in reputable journals of the field and frequently cited in subsequent literature. Multi-voiced coverage of the controversy was also ensured: works both opposing and supporting each position were included, rather than only those repeating a single position, so that the synthesis would be protected from one-sidedness.

The selected texts were analyzed through conceptual thematic analysis in three steps. First, the key concepts of each source (discipline, field/research object, discursive arena, postdisciplinarity, and the like) were extracted. Second, on the basis of semantic similarity and opposition, they were classified into three main themes: (a) critics of disciplinehood, (b) advocates of interdisciplinarity, and (c) advocates of a discursive–postdisciplinary approach. Finally, the logical relations and intratextual disputes among these themes were identified and formulated as an analytical synthesis.

Theoretical Framework

Analyzing the epistemic status of tourism studies requires basic concepts defined independently of the tourism literature, to serve as an analytical basis for reading it. This section introduces three: discipline, the spectrum from multidisciplinarity to transdisciplinarity, and postdisciplinarity.

• What is a discipline?

The classical criterion for a "scientific discipline" is found in Kuhn's (1962) theory of scientific revolutions: a mature discipline is organized around a shared paradigm -an agreed-upon set of legitimate questions, valid methods, and evaluation criteria- around which the scientific community holds relative consensus.

Becher & Trowler (2001) complement this cognitive criterion with a social dimension. They describe disciplines not merely as sets of theoretical propositions but as "tribes" with their own culture, specialized language, norms of evaluation, and institutional territory. Being a discipline thus involves not only epistemic coherence but also the social cohesion of a scientific community: occupational boundaries, dedicated journals, citation networks, and a shared professional identity.

• From multidisciplinarity to transdisciplinarity: Klein's spectrum

A field that meets neither criterion is placed, not necessarily as "unscientific," but somewhere along the spectrum of interaction among disciplines. In the most detailed formulation available, Klein (1990) distinguishes three levels:

- **Multidisciplinary:** Disciplines address a shared subject side by side, without merging their conceptual or methodological boundaries; the result is the arithmetic sum of separate perspectives, not an integrated whole.
- **Interdisciplinary:** Concepts, data, or methods from several disciplines are actively combined to answer a question that none could answer alone; disciplinary boundaries are still recognized but become permeable.
- **Transdisciplinary:** Research moves entirely beyond existing disciplinary frameworks and builds a new conceptual and methodological framework belonging to no parent discipline. Transdisciplinarity can thus be understood as an attempt to arrive at a new, integrated discipline, though this "new discipline" is still in transition and its full consolidation -in the Kuhnian sense, a stable, institutionalized consensus over time- has not been achieved.

• Postdisciplinarity: A boundary that crosses Klein's spectrum

The term "postdisciplinarity," rooted in Sayer's (2000) critique of "disciplinary parochialism/imperialism" in sociology, goes beyond Klein's spectrum. Whereas transdisciplinarity still seeks a new, coherent conceptual framework, postdisciplinarity fundamentally questions the necessity of any single framework. Ateljevic et al. (2007) likewise introduce postdisciplinary scholarship not as a particular method but as a reflexive and critical epistemological stance[1], in which even the boundary between knowing and being known, between researcher and object of research, is fluid. Postdisciplinarity is therefore an essentially negative (deconstructive) position: it says what is not sufficient, not which positive framework should replace it.

Descriptive Findings

Table 1 gives a descriptive overview of the fifteen works that constitute the base documents of this study.

Analytical Findings

• A historical trajectory, not a momentary episode

The documents examined span twenty-six years of intellectual development in the field, from 1997 to 2023. Their significance lies not only in this span but in the pattern of movement: the debate has not been a momentary, short-lived discussion but has unfolded in five discernible waves, each reinforcing or challenging the previous one.

Table 1. Descriptive findings on the documents examined. Source: Author.

No.	Author(s)/ Year	Journal/ Publisher	Type of contribution to the debate	Finding
1	Tribe (1997)	Annals of Tourism Research	Initial formulation of the problem	Presents a two-field model (practical/skills-based knowledge vs. theoretical/analytical knowledge)
2	Echtner & Jamal (1997)	Annals of Tourism Research	Independent, simultaneous formulation of the problem	Independent confirmation of Tribe's claim from a different angle
3	Leiper (2000)	Annals of Tourism Research	Critical, opposing response	Citing institutional indicators, claims that tourism is gradually becoming a discipline
4	Tribe (2000)	Annals of Tourism Research	Response to Leiper's critique	Explicit distinction between "institutional growth" and "paradigmatic coherence"; reaffirmation of the original position
5	Franklin & Crang (2001)	Tourist Studies	Extension of the critique from a new angle	Enters the critique from outside tourism management and from a social-science standpoint
6	Tribe (2006)	Annals of Tourism Research	Epistemological deepening of the initial position	Shifts the debate from the descriptive level to epistemology and challenges "tourism knowledge" itself
7	Coles et al. (2006)	Current Issues in Tourism	Presentation of a radical alternative position	First explicit formulation of going beyond interdisciplinarity; starting point of the third stream from the standpoint of political economy (how power and interest draw the boundaries of knowledge)
8	Ateljevic et al. (2007)	Elsevier (book introduction)	Theoretical deepening of the postdisciplinary position	Adds a reflexive/critical dimension; critical turn toward the postdisciplinary position
9	Belhassen & Caton (2009)	Annals of Tourism Research	Linguistic extension of the postdisciplinary position	Linguistic/post-foundationalist approach to the argument of the third stream
10	Tribe (2010)	Annals of Tourism Research	Empirical test of the initial position	Tests the theoretical claim with an empirical network-analysis method
11	Darbellay & Stock (2012)	Annals of Tourism Research	Presentation of a middle, alternative position	Directly challenges the Kuhnian paradigm criterion without fully rejecting the discipline-centered framework
12	Xiao et al. (2013)	Annals of Tourism Research	Reflexive synthesis by multiple authors	Multiple authors from different intellectual traditions; Tribe's presence alongside them and, in a sense, a convergence of the streams
13	Darbellay (2016)	Tourism Analysis	Shift in the author's position	Intellectual migration of a single author from the second stream to the third
14	Sharma et al. (2021)	Annals of Tourism Research	Large-scale empirical test	Analysis of 3,021 articles over a 47-year span (1973–2019); independent confirmation of Tribe's (2010) finding by large-scale citation analysis
15	Korstanje (2023)	Current Issues in Tourism	Bridging review article	Reaffirms Tribe's "indiscipline" thesis; proposes the new concept of "tourism imagination" to move beyond dominant paradigms

The first wave began in 1997 with the simultaneous, independent formulation of the problem by Tribe (1997) and by Echtner & Jamal (1997) -a sign that doubt about the disciplinary status of tourism was not one person's finding but a shared concern of part of the scientific community. The second wave took shape with Leiper's (2000) critical response and Tribe's immediate reaction; this is the only point in the documents that records a direct, face-to-face debate between two opposing views. The third wave, 2006–2009, shows the rise of the postdisciplinary approach: three independent works (Coles et al., 2006; Ateljevic et al., 2007; Belhassen & Caton, 2009) reached a common conclusion from three different angles. The fourth wave, 2010–2013, is a period of reflection and testing: Tribe's (2010) empirical evidence and then Darbellay & Stock's (2012) middle position put earlier claims to the test, until Xiao et al. (2013), with Tribe himself alongside authors from other traditions, offered a multi-voiced summation of the whole path. The fifth wave, 2016–2023, completed the debate in two ways. First, Darbellay (2016), who had authored an interdisciplinary position in 2012, migrated toward the third stream under the explicit title "From Disciplinarity to Post-disciplinarity," showing the evolution of a single author's position over time. Second, Sharma et al. (2021), through a large-scale citation analysis of more than three thousand articles published over forty-seven years in "Annals of Tourism Research", confirmed Tribe's (2010) empirical findings by an entirely different method and at far larger scale. Two years later, Korstanje (2023), in a review article entitled "Tourism Imagination," showed that the epistemological crisis remains alive: he both repeats Tribe's "indiscipline" thesis and explicitly defends the postdisciplinary approach of Coles et al. (2006) -a sign that the boundary between the first and third streams is, in the latest layer of the debate, no longer very sharp.

This wave-by-wave pattern shows that, unlike many

ephemeral theoretical discussions, the debate over the epistemic identity of tourism has been a living, continuous conversation in which each generation of authors engages the previous one, not a fixed idea merely repeated.

• The institutional concentration of the debate

Of the fifteen works, ten (two-thirds), were published in a single journal, "Annals of Tourism Research". This concentration is not accidental; the journal has in effect become the main arena, institutional home, and platform for this identity debate. From the direct confrontation between Tribe and Leiper in 2000, through the summation of the fourth wave in 2013 (Xiao et al., 2013), to the most recent empirical study in 2021 (Sharma et al., 2021), all took place in its pages. The debate has thus been not a scattered, marginal disagreement but a concern pursued continuously in the field's most reputable and influential publication, which attests to its seriousness and authenticity within the tourism scholarly community.

• The manifestation of the three streams of thought

The fifteen works can be analyzed in terms of three main streams of thought, through the lens of the study's theoretical framework (the paradigmatic and social criteria of Kuhn and of Becher and Trowler, and Klein's spectrum):

- Stream one: Critics of disciplinehood

The core of this stream was established by Tribe (1997). He argues that tourism studies lacks a shared paradigm because it has placed two different epistemic entities under one name -practical, skills-based/business-oriented knowledge (such as how to manage a hotel) and theoretical–analytical/critical knowledge (such as examining changes in the identity of a village's residents as a result of tourism)- each with its own logic, audience, and criteria of validity. By Becher & Trowler's (2001) social criterion as well, this means the absence of a single scientific "tribe" with a shared professional identity.

Echtner & Jamal (1997), simultaneously with and independently of Tribe, reached a similar conclusion: tourism has its own research domain but lacks theoretical coherence, and needs to move toward holistic, integrated, and interpretive theorizing.

Leiper (2000) responded explicitly, relying on institutional indicators such as the growth of departments, journals, and doctoral programs to argue that tourism is on the path to becoming a "discipline" -an argument that in effect substitutes a purely social criterion (the quantitative growth of institutions) for the paradigmatic one. Tribe (2000) highlighted precisely this point: institutional growth is a necessary but not sufficient condition for becoming a discipline; without paradigmatic coherence, quantitative growth indicates only the expansion of a disorderly field, not the formation of a discipline.

Franklin & Crang (2001), from a different angle and a social-science standpoint, reached the same conclusion. They argued that prevailing tourism theories are insufficient for understanding the fluid, postmodern complexity of the tourist experience and require fundamental reconstruction, locating the root of this insufficiency in the template-driven research of tourism studies -the tendency to follow a fixed research template and repeat the same approach across numerous case studies instead of genuine, diverse theorizing, which has led to theoretical stagnation. The significance of this work is that it critiques tourism from outside tourism management, showing that this epistemic doubt is not merely an intra-disciplinary self-critique.

Tribe (2006) deepened the critique at the epistemological level, showing that even the concept of "tourism knowledge" is contested. His question was no longer merely "Is tourism a discipline?" but whether what is today called "valid tourism knowledge" is itself the product of particular choices and power relations over time, rather than a pre-given, self-evident reality. He formulated this in the model of the "knowledge force-field," in which five factors -person, rules, position, ends, and ideology- simultaneously determine what is recognized as valid tourism knowledge.

The empirical high point of this stream is Tribe (2010). Using social network analysis and actor–network theory, he showed that the "tourism academy" is composed of dispersed networks and parallel territories, not a unified scientific community. Eleven years later, Sharma et al. (2021) confirmed this finding by an entirely different method and at far larger scale: a citation analysis of more than three thousand articles published over forty-seven years in "Annals of Tourism Research" led them to conclude that tourism research has grown gradually, both from within the field and by borrowing from external disciplines, rather than along a single, unified path. This is independent evidence that reconfirms, at big-data scale, the same dispersed, non-paradigmatic picture drawn by Tribe (2010).

- Stream two: Interdisciplinarity

In contrast to the stream that denies disciplinehood, Darbellay & Stock (2012) proposed a different framework. Asking whether tourism studies constitutes a paradigmatic or an epistemic order[2], they argued that Kuhn's paradigm criterion is fundamentally unsuitable for assessing tourism, since it should be understood not as a potential discipline but, from the outset, as a complex research object that must move toward genuine interdisciplinarity -precisely the second level of Klein's (1990) spectrum: the active combination of concepts and methods from several disciplines to answer a question no single discipline can answer. The difference from the first stream is that they regard the absence of a single paradigm as a constitutive feature of every interdisciplinary research object; what Tribe calls "indiscipline" and the celebration of diversity, they present as "non-paradigmatic convergence," in effect a kind of alternative order. Their claim is prescriptive, not descriptive: they explicitly write that tourism has so

far been studied in a field that is largely multidisciplinary rather than genuinely interdisciplinary, and regard this as a weakness. Their argument is an invitation to move toward interdisciplinarity, not a description of the present state of affairs. Four years later, this invitation was realized in Darbellay's (2016) own intellectual career: in a work explicitly titled "From Disciplinarity to Post-disciplinarity", he no longer settled for interdisciplinarity as a final destination and reconsidered his position, a step that moves him from the second stream to the third in this classification and shows that the boundary between the two can shift over time even within a single author's thought.

- Stream three: Postdisciplinarity

The most radical position was formulated by Coles et al. (2006): even interdisciplinarity (Klein's second level) is insufficient because it still recognizes the boundaries of the originating disciplines. Drawing on political economy, they defended a complete move to a postdisciplinary approach -fluidity, combination, and the coexistence of divergent approaches, beyond any discipline-centered spectrum. Ateljevic et al. (2007) deepened this position with the concepts of the "critical turn" and postdisciplinary scholarship; for them, postdisciplinarity is not merely a research method but a reflexive epistemological stance that also treats the boundary between researcher and object of research as fluid.

Belhassen & Caton (2009) completed this line of thought with a linguistic, post-foundationalist approach, describing tourism studies as a "discursive site with multiple disciplinary roots" in which knowledge is produced not through neutral observation but through social and linguistic processes. Even the question "Is tourism a discipline or not?" is thus the product of a particular language game, not a neutral question resolvable by Kuhnian criteria. The words scholars use to describe tourism (such as "authentic experience" or "destination") do not merely describe reality but, in the moment of use, construct it. The concept of "discipline" itself, on which this entire debate rests, is therefore a linguistic and historical construct, not a neutral, universal criterion by which tourism can be measured directly.

Notably, Korstanje (2023) shows that the boundary between the first and third streams is in practice not very sharp: he repeats Tribe's "indiscipline" thesis while defending the postdisciplinary approach of Coles et al. (2006), and proposes "tourism imagination,"[3] derived from C. Wright Mills's "sociological imagination," as a bridge between diagnosing the problem (first stream) and a reflexive solution (third stream). This contemporary convergence is itself evidence of a trend running through this synthesis: over time, the boundaries among the three streams have become more fluid.

Table 2 compares the three main streams, alongside a minority position opposing them, across eight axes.

Discussion

The main aim of this study was to answer a simple but challenging question: in terms of the kind of knowledge it produces, what exactly is tourism studies? Is it an independent scientific discipline like sociology or economics? A field in which several disciplines work together? A field on the path to building a new, integrated discipline? Or should the concept of "discipline" be set aside and the field viewed differently?

The synthesis yields one clear result and one more complex one. The clear result: none of the fifteen works regards tourism as a scientific discipline in the Kuhnian sense. None accepts that tourism, like physics or economics, has a shared research method, a uniform specialized language, and a stable theoretical consensus. These criteria come from two classical theorists: Kuhn (1962), for whom a mature discipline must be formed around a "paradigm" -an agreed-upon set of valid questions and methods- and Becher and Trowler (2001), who add that being a discipline also requires a shared social and professional identity (language, culture, occupational boundaries). By both criteria, tourism lacks these characteristics. The more complex result concerns what tourism is, if not a discipline.

In light of the three streams and Table 2, it can be argued that the third stream has greater explanatory power. First, it is the only position that accommodates both Tribe's (2010) empirical evidence on the networked dispersion of the tourism academy and the linguistic, discursive nature of knowledge to which Belhassen & Caton (2009) point. Second, it is more consistent with the historical trend in the sources: the movement from mere critique in 1997 toward reflexive, multi-voiced approaches from 2006 onward shows the field itself gradually distancing itself from discipline-centered framing. Third, the reflexive work of Xiao et al. (2013), in which Tribe himself participated, moves toward a more multi-voiced formulation of tourism knowledge.

However, precisely because it consciously rejects discipline-centered evaluation criteria (paradigm, institutional boundaries), the postdisciplinary position is hard to test empirically: when we say "everything is fluid and hybrid," how do we distinguish a researcher who consciously adopts a postdisciplinary approach from one whose work is merely scattered and disorderly, without theoretical awareness? This critique is also consistent with Tribe's (2000) argument for specific rules of knowledge production.

A more important piece of empirical evidence also comes from Tribe (2010). In his field study with 67 academic participants in tourism (interviews, e-mail surveys, and biographical narratives), he found that although his "indiscipline" thesis (no paradigm, no discipline) was strongly confirmed, the actual application of postdisciplinary approaches in the research practice

Table 2. Comparison of the streams of thought on the epistemic status of tourism studies. Source: Author.

Axis	Minority position: Disciplinehood	Stream One: Critics of disciplinehood	Stream Two: Interdisciplinary	Stream Three: Postdisciplinary
Representative works	Leiper (2000) The only voice of this position among the documents examined in this study, written in response to Tribe (1997)	Tribe (1997, 2000, 2006, 2010), Echtner & Jamal (1997), Franklin & Crang (2001), Sharma et al. (2021)	Darbellay & Stock (2012)	Coles et al. (2006), Ateljevic et al. (2007), Belhassen & Caton (2009), Darbellay (2016), Korstanje (2023)
Central question	Is institutional growth (departments, journals, doctoral programs) a sign of becoming a discipline?	Does tourism meet the criteria of a mature scientific discipline?	If tourism is not a discipline, then what kind of research object is it?	Should one look for an alternative to "discipline" at all, or should the search itself be abandoned?
Central claim	The quantitative growth of tourism institutions should be taken as a sign of its gradual becoming a discipline.	Tourism lacks a shared paradigm; it has forcibly gathered two incompatible logics of knowledge (skills/business-oriented and analytical/critical) under one name; this heterogeneity is a structural feature, not a temporary defect.	Tourism should not be assessed by the criterion of "disciplinehood"; it is a complex research object that inherently requires the active combination of methods and concepts from several disciplines; the absence of a single paradigm is not a failure; alternative order: "non-paradigmatic convergence."	Three independent paths arrive at one conclusion: interdisciplinarity also recognizes disciplinary boundaries and is insufficient (Coles et al., 2006); one must adopt a reflexive and critical stance (Ateljevic et al., 2007); tourism knowledge is the product of linguistic and discursive processes (Belhassen & Caton, 2009).
Position on Klein's (1990) spectrum	Mature, independent discipline	Explicit rejection of any disciplinary status; a diagnostic, not prescriptive, position	Corresponds exactly to the second level of the spectrum: interdisciplinary, recognizing the boundaries of the parent disciplines	Beyond Klein's entire spectrum: neither multidisciplinary, nor interdisciplinary, nor even transdisciplinary; conscious rejection of the very necessity of a single framework
Type of evidence	Argumentative and based on quantitative institutional indicators; lacking any independent empirical test	A combination of conceptual argument and empirical/bibliometric evidence, with interviews and actor–network theory; large-scale citation analysis	Conceptual–philosophical argument; critique of Kuhn's paradigm criterion and proposal of an alternative criterion, "episteme"	Conceptual argument, political economy of knowledge, linguistics/discourse; greater methodological diversity than the other two streams
Strengths	The only position that refers directly to observable institutional evidence	The most empirical and testable claim in the entire corpus; confirmed twice by independent methods (Tribe, 2010; Sharma et al., 2021)	A relatively transparent and measurable evaluation criterion; a conservative yet defensible and practical position	Simultaneously explains institutional fragmentation and the discursive nature of knowledge; more consistent with the dominant historical trend of the literature
Weaknesses	Conflates quantitative growth with qualitative/paradigmatic coherence; Tribe (2000, 2010) rejects this conflation.	Offers no clear structural solution.	Critique by Coles et al. (2006): its presupposition is that the boundaries of the parent disciplines are meaningful.	Hard to test empirically; the boundary between "conscious postdisciplinarity" and "disorder without awareness" remains unclear. Tribe (2010): a gap between the orientation of the theoretical literature and the actual practice of researchers
Place in the historical trend	A single event, in 2000	Starting point (1997) and empirical reconfirmation in 2010 and 2021	Midpoint and bridging position (2012); later joined the third stream through a shift in position (2016)	Intellectual peak in 2006–2009; continuing to 2023

of the tourism community was rarely reported: a gap between the orientation of the theoretical literature (toward postdisciplinarity) and researchers' actual practice (still largely multidisciplinary).

By contrast, the interdisciplinary position of Darbellay & Stock (2012) may be more conservative in explanatory terms but is more measurable methodologically, since it remains within Klein's (1990) spectrum and gives the researcher relatively clear evaluation criteria.

In other words, in the arena of practice and methodological application -when a researcher actually writes a research design- tools and models are still borrowed from interdisciplinarity, whereas at the abstract level and in epistemic horizons, the intellectual orientation of tourism researchers centers on a kind of postdisciplinary deconstruction and transdisciplinary synthesis.

Conclusion

This study critically reviewed and synthesized fifteen key works spanning 1997 to 2023. Beyond a mere review, its main contribution is a new analytical framework: first, an eight-axis comparative model (Table 2) that for the first time weighs the three streams of this debate side by side by identical criteria; second, a distinction between the operational level of tourism research (which remains interdisciplinary) and the aspirational level of the theoretical literature (which leans toward postdisciplinarity), not formulated this explicitly in any of the works examined; and third, identification of a historical pattern of gradual erosion of the boundaries among the three streams in recent works, observable only by placing fifteen works side by side over twenty-six years.

In the author's view, the controversy over the epistemic identity and genealogy of tourism must be formulated at two simultaneous levels, deconstructive and constructive. From the constructive standpoint, tourism is on the path of transdisciplinarity (an attempt to arrive at a new, integrated discipline): Sharma et al.'s (2021) large-scale analysis of more than three thousand articles shows that the field, despite its dispersion, follows an evolutionary, growing pattern of knowledge production -the same finding that was earlier read as evidence of the absence of a single paradigm and that, from this angle, is also a sign of the gradual formation of an independent field. Moreover, the fundamental message of Xiao et al. (2013) is that after four decades tourism has transformed from an applied, marginal subject into a dynamic, critical, social-science-based branch of knowledge with a high capacity for theorizing. At the same time, while adopting a deconstructive approach, this article also welcomes a postdisciplinary perspective, in the sense that the real-world problems of tourism (such as climate change, ecological crises, spatial justice, and globalization) no longer fit within the demarcated frameworks of scientific disciplines, and researchers should not bind themselves to traditional disciplinary labels.

Thus, from the deconstructive standpoint, the dominant position in the theoretical literature remains postdisciplinary: from Coles et al. (2006) to Darbellay (2016), who himself migrated to this position from interdisciplinarity, a considerable portion of theorists not only reject disciplinehood but fundamentally question the necessity of any single paradigm. This duality should not be read as confusion or contradiction in this study but as a more accurate description of the field's real, living condition: tourism is at once building something new in research practice and consciously resisting, in theory, its closure into a single framework. Accepting this duality explicitly describes the field more accurately than ignoring it for the sake of formal coherence, and it is not a weakness but an inherent structural feature of a subject that is simultaneously economic, social, cultural, spatial, and environmental. The finding has specific practical implications: at the research level, it justifies mixed and multi-method approaches; in university education, it highlights the need for flexible, non-compartmentalized curricula; and in academic publishing policy, it explains the importance of multi-subject journals such as Annals of Tourism Research, identified here as the main arena of this controversy.

Limitations of the Study

Like any purposive qualitative review, this study has limitations. The corpus, though key and highly cited, is not comprehensive and is concentrated mainly around a single journal and a limited set of authors (Tribe alone is present in five of the fifteen works); this concentration is, of course, itself a meaningful finding. The corpus extends to 2023, and the search was purposive and semi-systematic rather than comprehensive. In the same search, no independent work of comparable standing in the Persian-language literature that directly addresses this debate was found. The possibility of other relevant works, in any period or language, that were not seen here therefore cannot be ruled out.

Suggestions for Future Research

Given these limitations, two directions are proposed. First, since Sharma et al. (2021) took an important step in large-scale empirical testing, future studies could replicate this citation analysis with more works, a broader corpus of journals, and wider linguistic coverage. Second, future studies could examine the practical implications of this epistemological controversy for tourism curricula in different educational systems.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding this study.

Endnotes

1. "Reflexive-critical" refers to a researcher who both accepts that he or she is not neutral and is part of the object of study (reflexive) and consciously seeks to challenge the power structures and prevailing assumptions of the field (critical).

2. Should tourism be assessed by the criterion of a shared method and consensus (paradigm), or should one look for the hidden, background rules that determine what counts as "knowledge" in this field in the first place (episteme)?

3. That is, instead of remaining stuck in the same old frameworks, tourism researchers must employ imagination in order to escape the current impasse.

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