

Designing a Grounded Theory Model for an Applied Interdisciplinary Tourism Psychology Curriculum in Higher Education

Parvaneh. Sarkeshikzadeh¹, Alireza. Manzari Tavakoli^{2*}, Farshid. Khosropour¹

1 Department of Psychology, Zarand Branch, Islamic Azad University, Zarand, Iran.

2 Department of Psychology, Kerman Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran.

*Correspondence: a.manzari@iauk.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

Designing and compiling an applied interdisciplinary curriculum is considered one of the necessities of the educational system. This study was conducted with the aim of designing a grounded theory model for an applied interdisciplinary tourism psychology curriculum in higher education. The present study is a qualitative research type that is fundamental in terms of purpose and has been conducted with an exploratory approach. The data collection tool is a semi-structured interview consisting of 6 questions. The statistical population for answering the interview questions is all experts and scholars in the field of psychology and tourism curriculum planning in higher education in the country, faculty and non-faculty members who are qualified to have at least 10 years of relevant work experience. The sample size was obtained by snowballing and purposive sampling, equal to 12 people. The collected data were analyzed through a coding process based on grounded theory based on the study of Strauss and Corbin (1998) in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The categories were categorized into 6 grounded theory networks including central phenomena, background conditions, causal conditions, intervening conditions, strategies and consequences. Thus, finally, 13 main categories, 37 subcategories and 161 indicators for the interdisciplinary applied curriculum model of tourism psychology in higher education were obtained. The central phenomenon includes 1 main category of the interdisciplinary curriculum of tourism psychology. Background conditions include 2 main categories of curriculum infrastructure and curriculum content. Causal conditions include 2 main categories of teaching methods and teaching evaluation. Intervening conditions include 2 main categories of internal factors and external factors. Strategies include 4 main categories of learner activities, planning and supervision, facilities and equipment and attention to curriculum levels. Also, consequences include 2 main categories of micro-consequences and macro-consequences. According to the results, an interdisciplinary curriculum of tourism psychology requires considering the factors of psychology and tourism together, and with the help of the identified strategies, an effective program can be achieved.

Keywords: Higher education, curriculum, interdisciplinary applied curriculum, tourism psychology.

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Introduction

Curriculum is one of the principal mechanisms through which higher education institutions translate their missions, disciplinary knowledge, social responsibilities, and anticipated workforce needs into structured learning experiences. It determines not only what students are expected to know but also how they learn, how their competencies are assessed, and how effectively their education prepares them to respond to

complex professional and societal challenges. In contemporary higher education, curriculum design can no longer be treated as a static process of arranging subject matter into separate courses. Rapid technological change, labor-market transformation, the expansion of knowledge, and the growing interdependence of social, psychological, cultural, and economic problems require curricula that are flexible, relevant, integrative, and capable of continuous renewal. Higher education curricula must therefore be developed through systematic processes that connect educational goals, learning content, teaching methods, assessment mechanisms, institutional resources, and stakeholder expectations. Analyses of curriculum models in Iranian higher education have likewise emphasized that coherent curriculum development requires alignment among philosophical foundations, educational objectives, content organization, implementation processes, and evaluation mechanisms (1). Reviews of university curriculum design models have further shown that no single conventional model is sufficient for the diverse functions of contemporary universities, particularly when programs must respond simultaneously to disciplinary standards, local needs, social change, and professional application (2). Accordingly, new approaches to higher education curriculum planning increasingly stress learner-centeredness, flexibility, applicability, knowledge integration, competency development, and responsiveness to emerging needs (3).

The need for curriculum renewal is particularly pronounced in fields whose knowledge base and professional environment change rapidly. A curriculum that remains unchanged while social conditions, technologies, occupations, and learner characteristics evolve gradually loses its relevance. Curriculum renewal should therefore involve more than the revision of course titles or the addition of isolated content; it requires the reconsideration of curriculum purposes, structures, learning opportunities, teaching approaches, assessment procedures, and institutional support. A model developed for curriculum renewal in higher education has emphasized needs assessment, environmental analysis, stakeholder participation, continuous evaluation, and attention to future-oriented competencies as essential components of meaningful reform (4). Innovation in higher education similarly depends on educational approaches that encourage active learning, problem solving, collaboration, creativity, and the practical application of knowledge rather than the passive transmission of information (5). Technology also has become a central dimension of curriculum policy because digital platforms, artificial intelligence, virtual learning environments, multimedia resources, and data-driven educational systems are reshaping both the content and delivery of university education. A technology-based curriculum consequently requires supportive policies, appropriate infrastructure, faculty development, ethical frameworks, digital content, and continuous evaluation of technological effectiveness (6). These developments demonstrate that curriculum design must be understood as an adaptive and strategic process rather than a one-time administrative activity.

The increasing complexity of contemporary problems has also strengthened the case for interdisciplinary education. Many real-world phenomena cannot be adequately understood from the perspective of a single academic discipline because they emerge from interactions among individual behavior, social structures, economic systems, cultural meanings, technological environments, and institutional arrangements. Interdisciplinary inquiry responds to this complexity by integrating relevant concepts, theories, data, and methods from multiple fields to generate a more comprehensive understanding of a problem. It is not merely the juxtaposition of separate disciplinary perspectives; rather, it involves identifying common ground,

reconciling differences in assumptions and terminology, and constructing an integrated framework capable of addressing a complex question (7). An interdisciplinary curriculum should therefore provide students with both disciplinary foundations and opportunities to synthesize knowledge across boundaries. It should develop integrative thinking, epistemic flexibility, critical reflection, and the capacity to transfer knowledge to unfamiliar professional contexts. Such curricula are especially important in applied domains, where graduates must interpret multidimensional problems, communicate with specialists from different backgrounds, and design solutions that reflect the interaction of human, organizational, cultural, and environmental variables.

Tourism represents one of the clearest examples of a multidimensional field requiring interdisciplinary education. Tourism is simultaneously an economic activity, a cultural encounter, a service system, a spatial behavior, a political phenomenon, and a psychological experience. It involves tourists, host communities, service employees, destination organizations, governmental institutions, cultural resources, technologies, and physical environments. Its consequences extend from employment and regional development to identity, intercultural interaction, environmental pressure, public policy, and individual well-being. The political effects of tourism, for example, may include changes in international relations, government priorities, destination image, resource allocation, and the distribution of benefits and costs across social groups (8). Tourism development is also shaped by national conditions, institutional capacity, infrastructure, cultural resources, geopolitical circumstances, and destination-specific attributes. Iran possesses substantial historical, cultural, religious, natural, and geographical assets, yet the development of its tourism industry has been constrained by structural, policy-related, economic, and international challenges (9). Understanding and managing tourism therefore require educational programs that transcend narrow vocational training and integrate knowledge from management, economics, geography, sociology, cultural studies, communication, technology, and psychology.

Tourism education has expanded in response to the growth and diversification of the tourism and hospitality sectors, but concerns remain regarding the alignment of university curricula with industry needs. Comparative assessments of hospitality-management programs have shown that curricular emphases differ across countries and that program quality depends on the balance between theoretical knowledge, managerial skills, practical training, cultural understanding, and industry engagement (10). An international analysis of curriculum requirements in hospitality and tourism programs has similarly revealed variation in core business, management, service, quantitative, and sector-specific components, indicating the absence of a universally accepted curriculum structure (11). Stakeholder-based research on undergraduate tourism education has suggested that effective curricula should be constructed through consultation with academics, industry representatives, graduates, students, and public-sector institutions so that educational content reflects both intellectual foundations and occupational realities (12). Reviews of tourism and hospitality education in Latin American countries have also identified persistent needs for curriculum modernization, stronger industry collaboration, improved faculty preparation, enhanced practical training, and greater responsiveness to local and regional contexts (13). These findings indicate that tourism curricula must be both globally informed and locally grounded.

The transition from education to employment is another major concern in tourism and hospitality programs. Employers often expect graduates to possess not only technical knowledge but also

communication skills, intercultural competence, emotional intelligence, problem-solving ability, adaptability, teamwork, customer orientation, and digital literacy. Research examining the relationship between hospitality and tourism students' perceived skills, career adaptability, and employability has shown that students who perceive themselves as possessing stronger professional competencies are better prepared to manage career transitions and view themselves as more employable (14). Industry-oriented evaluations of hospitality education have likewise emphasized that graduates' career success depends on the correspondence between classroom learning and actual workplace requirements (15). Internships are therefore regarded as a crucial bridge between academic preparation and professional practice. A bibliometric and integrative review of hospitality and tourism internship research has demonstrated that internships contribute to skill development, professional socialization, career exploration, and employability, although their effectiveness depends on supervision, task quality, organizational support, and integration with the academic curriculum (16). The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic further exposed students' uncertainty regarding tourism courses, curricula, and career prospects, highlighting the need to rebuild confidence through updated content, stronger career support, flexible learning arrangements, and closer engagement with industry (17).

Emerging technologies intensify these curriculum requirements. Tourism organizations increasingly use artificial intelligence, big-data analytics, mobile applications, virtual and augmented reality, automated service systems, digital marketing, smart-destination platforms, and online reputation-management tools. Consequently, tourism graduates must be able to understand not only how technologies operate but also how they influence tourist decision-making, service encounters, destination experience, privacy, trust, and consumer behavior. International research on the integration of emerging technologies into tourism and hospitality curricula has emphasized the importance of incorporating technological literacy, data competencies, digital ethics, practical applications, and industry-supported training into educational programs (18). Big-data-based studies of tourists' spatio-temporal behavior have additionally shown that digital traces can reveal patterns of movement, visitation, time use, congestion, and destination interaction that were difficult to identify through conventional research methods (19). A contemporary tourism curriculum must therefore prepare students to interpret technologically generated behavioral data while retaining a theoretically informed understanding of the human motives and experiences underlying those patterns.

Psychology is fundamental to such an understanding because tourism begins with human decisions and unfolds through perceptions, emotions, motivations, attitudes, expectations, interactions, memories, and evaluations. Tourism psychology examines why individuals travel, how they select destinations, what they seek from tourism experiences, how they respond to unfamiliar environments, and how their experiences shape satisfaction, loyalty, expenditure, and future behavior. The reciprocal relevance of psychology and tourism has been increasingly recognized, with scholars arguing that tourism offers psychology a rich context for examining mobility, identity, well-being, intergroup encounters, decision-making, and behavior outside conventional laboratory settings (20). Tourist experiences are constructed through a dynamic interaction between personal characteristics and destination conditions; therefore, understanding tourist psychology is essential for designing products, services, communications, and environments that are meaningful to different visitor groups (21). Regional personality traits may even influence broader patterns of tourism

development by shaping preferences, entrepreneurial behavior, social interaction, and destination-related attitudes (22). These findings illustrate that psychological variables are not peripheral to tourism but central to its operation and development.

Motivation is among the most extensively examined psychological foundations of tourism behavior. Individuals travel because of internal needs and external attractions that may include escape, relaxation, novelty, learning, prestige, social interaction, self-development, adventure, cultural exploration, and connection with nature. Research on creative tourism has demonstrated that push motivations originating within the individual and pull motivations associated with destination characteristics jointly influence visitors' behavioral intentions (23). Studies of adventure tourism have likewise shown that motivation is associated with involvement, participation intensity, and the meanings tourists assign to challenging activities (24). Motivation cannot, however, be separated from emotion and satisfaction. Destination choice is influenced by tourists' affective responses, anticipated feelings, and the satisfaction expected from available alternatives (25). An applied tourism psychology curriculum must consequently equip students to analyze motivational structures and emotional processes rather than treating tourists as homogeneous consumers responding only to price and promotion.

Tourists' behavior is also shaped by cultural values, identity, authenticity, and the relationship between the self and the destination. At heritage sites, cross-cultural awareness affects tourists' interpretations of authenticity, their satisfaction, and their adaptation to unfamiliar cultural settings (26). Cultural performances may influence prospective tourists' perceptions, consumption intentions, and willingness to engage with destination-related cultural products (27). Destination brand authenticity and self-congruence further contribute to loyalty by strengthening tourists' psychological engagement with a destination (28). At heritage destinations, visitor satisfaction and loyalty are triggered by a combination of service, cultural, emotional, and experiential factors (29). These relationships show that tourism education should address the psychological mechanisms through which cultural meanings, perceived authenticity, identity compatibility, and emotional attachment shape visitor responses.

Service encounters provide another important area in which psychological knowledge and tourism practice converge. Tourists evaluate services through expectations, perceived quality, value, responsiveness, fairness, trust, and emotional reactions. Evidence from service settings indicates that perceived service quality and value significantly influence satisfaction and subsequent behavioral intentions (30). Research involving airline passengers has also shown that customer responsiveness and service performance are closely associated with passenger satisfaction (31). These processes have direct implications for tourism and hospitality organizations because dissatisfaction can affect complaints, electronic word of mouth, brand image, and repurchase intentions. Students who understand the psychological bases of service evaluation are better positioned to design customer-centered processes, manage interpersonal encounters, identify sources of dissatisfaction, and contribute to service recovery. Tourism psychology education should thus connect theories of perception, cognition, emotion, communication, and consumer behavior with practical service-management problems.

Psychological and behavioral characteristics also influence tourists' spending decisions. Tourist expenditure is not determined solely by income or travel cost; it varies according to tourism type, motivation, personality, destination involvement, sociodemographic characteristics, length of stay, activity patterns, and

perceived value. A systematic review of expenditure across tourism typologies has demonstrated the diversity of factors affecting how much tourists spend and where expenditure occurs (32). Psychological characteristics have also been proposed as predictors of tourist expenditure, suggesting that personality, motivation, decision style, and emotional responses may improve conventional economic models of tourist spending (33). These insights are particularly relevant to destination planning, market segmentation, product design, and revenue management. They also reinforce the necessity of integrating psychology, economics, and tourism management within a coherent educational framework.

Despite the evident relevance of psychological knowledge to tourism, psychology and tourism are often taught as separate domains. Tourism curricula may contain courses on management, marketing, economics, geography, hospitality operations, or planning without providing a systematic account of tourists' psychological processes. Psychology programs, conversely, may discuss motivation, personality, cognition, emotion, culture, and social behavior without applying these concepts to travel, destinations, hospitality, or visitor experiences. This separation limits students' capacity to integrate theory with sector-specific problems. An applied interdisciplinary curriculum in tourism psychology could address this limitation by combining foundational psychological concepts with tourism behavior, destination experience, service interaction, cultural encounters, expenditure, technology use, satisfaction, loyalty, and host–guest relations. It could also promote methodological pluralism by exposing students to qualitative, quantitative, experimental, behavioral, and data-analytic approaches.

The design of such a curriculum requires an approach capable of incorporating the perspectives of experts and explaining how multiple curricular factors interact. Grounded theory is appropriate where an existing conceptual framework is insufficient and where the objective is to develop an explanatory model from participants' experiences and interpretations. It enables researchers to move systematically from initial concepts to categories and an integrated theoretical structure. Practical discussions of grounded theory have emphasized its usefulness for understanding complex professional behaviors while also noting the need for methodological rigor, reflexivity, iterative data collection, and transparent coding decisions (34). For an interdisciplinary tourism psychology curriculum, a grounded theory approach can identify the central curricular phenomenon, the conditions that shape it, the strategies required for implementation, and the outcomes expected at individual, institutional, industry, and societal levels.

The necessity of this inquiry is particularly evident in Iran, where tourism potential coexists with educational, organizational, economic, and developmental constraints. A context-sensitive curriculum must reflect the country's cultural diversity, historical resources, religious heritage, natural attractions, regional differences, institutional conditions, and tourism-development priorities. It must also account for the psychological diversity of domestic and international tourists and prepare students to address culturally specific motivations, expectations, sensitivities, and service encounters. Existing curriculum research provides important principles for renewal, technology integration, interdisciplinary design, and stakeholder participation, while tourism research identifies numerous psychological determinants of visitor behavior. Nevertheless, these bodies of knowledge have not yet been sufficiently integrated into a comprehensive applied curriculum model tailored to higher education. The manuscript's existing framework likewise positions the proposed curriculum around contextual and causal conditions, intervening factors,

implementation strategies, and micro- and macro-level consequences, underscoring the need for an integrated explanatory model rather than a simple list of courses.

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to design a grounded theory model for an applied interdisciplinary tourism psychology curriculum in higher education.

Methods and Materials

The present study was qualitative in nature, fundamental in terms of purpose, and conducted with an exploratory approach. Grounded theory was used to carry out the research process. The data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview consisting of six questions based on the networks of the grounded theory method, including the central phenomenon, contextual conditions, causal conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences.

The statistical population for responding to the interview questions included all experts and specialists in the fields of psychology curriculum planning and tourism in higher education in Iran, including faculty and non-faculty members who had at least 10 years of relevant work experience. The sample size was determined through purposive and snowball sampling and consisted of 12 participants. In terms of gender, 5 participants were female and 7 were male. In terms of education, 9 participants held a doctoral degree and 3 held a master's degree.

The interview forms were provided to the experts both in person and online in May 2025. Some interviewees responded orally, while others answered the interview questions in written form. After completion of the interview process, all interviews were transcribed by the researchers for more detailed examination. The collected data were analyzed through the coding process based on grounded theory, following the approach of Strauss and Corbin (1998), in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

In open coding, the content of all interviews was first transcribed, and then open coding was conducted using key-point coding. In this way, the data collected from the interviews were written in a Word file, and through analysis of the written text, open codes were generated. In axial coding, the codes produced in the previous stage were connected to one another by creating networks of relationships among them. This process was achieved through analysis of the data obtained from open coding. Therefore, the purpose of axial coding was to organize the relationships among concepts. In selective coding, the researcher discovers a principle and systematically relates a core category to other categories. The core category should have the following characteristics: first, it should be derived from codes that are more central in the axial coding stage; second, it should show the highest frequency in the coding process; and third, all relationships with the categories should emerge naturally. To examine validity and reliability at all stages of data collection and analysis, the specialized opinions of professors and experts were used. In addition, to increase confirmability, the researchers reviewed and compared the raw data and the resulting interpretations in several stages.

Findings and Results

In this section, the interviews conducted with experts were carefully examined, and then important concepts were extracted through open coding. Accordingly, a total of 410 open codes were extracted without

considering code overlap. After merging similar codes, 162 codes or indicators were finally obtained. Table 1 shows a portion of the interviews along with the extracted open codes.

Table 1. A Portion of the Interviews and Extracted Open Codes

A Portion of the Interviews	Extracted Open Codes
For the tourism psychology curriculum, it is necessary to pay attention to indigenous and local needs and issues, because these issues play an important role in tourists' behavior and satisfaction.	Attention to indigenous and local needs and issues
Usually, for evaluating students, it is better to assess and examine students' progress over a specific period of time.	Examining students' progress over a specific period of time
To increase students' interactions in the field of tourism psychology, social networks should also be established for students.	Establishing social networks for students

In axial coding, the categorization of categories was carried out as shown in Table 2. At this stage, the categories were classified into six grounded theory networks: central phenomenon, contextual conditions, causal conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. Finally, 13 main categories, 37 subcategories, and 161 indicators were obtained for the model of the applied interdisciplinary curriculum of tourism psychology in higher education. The central phenomenon included one main category: tourism psychology curriculum. The contextual conditions included two main categories: curriculum infrastructure and curriculum content. The causal conditions included two main categories: teaching method and teaching evaluation. The intervening conditions included two main categories: internal factors and external factors. The strategies included four main categories: learner activities, planning and supervision, facilities and equipment, and attention to curriculum levels. The consequences included two main categories: micro-level consequences and macro-level consequences.

Table 2. Axial Coding

Grounded Theory Network	Main Categories	Subcategories	Indicators
Central phenomenon	Tourism psychology curriculum	Relevance	Examining relevant strategies; relevance of content to tourism needs; addressing tourists' psychological issues; identifying tourists' psychological needs; examining factors affecting tourists' satisfaction
		Sustainability	Future-oriented curriculum; feasibility of the program under current conditions; active long-term goals
		Stability	Alignment of the curriculum with visions and goals; continuity of skill-based and knowledge-based goals; not limiting students' competencies
		Practicality	Using instructors' decisions and policies to adapt the program to the environment; accessibility of the curriculum; preparing students to face important issues in higher education; practical necessity
Contextual conditions	Curriculum infrastructure	Understanding curriculum goals	Understanding the temperaments of different regions; understanding personality characteristics; methods of motivating tourists; strengthening creative and critical thinking; creating a sense of self-meaning; creating a sense of leadership in students
		Curriculum structure	Needs-based curriculum; coherence; flexibility; perfection-oriented nature; innovation; human resource development; attention to emerging issues in today's world
		Curriculum resources	Printed and electronic books; scientific journals; organized written reports; studies conducted in tourism psychology; conference studies; interactions between professors and students; tourism education films; studying successful countries in tourism psychology
	Curriculum content	Psychological content	Examining sociological issues; identifying psychological needs; examining people's behavior; identifying ways to encourage people to travel; views and attitudes
		Tourism content	Identifying tourists' motivations; identifying tourists' choices; understanding tourists' behavior; predicting tourists' behavior; examining tourists' decisions; examining tourists' emotions in the curriculum; identifying tourists' experiences; examining the relationship between tourists and hosts; identifying tourists'

Causal conditions	Teaching method	Curriculum development method	demographic characteristics; identifying tourists' costs and income; tourists' values; attention to indigenous and local needs and issues
		Student-centered teaching	Attractiveness; diversity; novelty; comprehensiveness; integrative nature; appropriateness to tourism psychology
		Content-centered teaching	Attention to students' competencies; facilitative teaching; active participation of students in discussions; students' social interactions in the classroom
Intervening conditions	Teaching evaluation	Lecture-centered teaching	Using a time frame in teaching; covering the syllabi specified in the planned curriculum within a specific period of time; ignoring student learning
		Student evaluation	Active participation of the instructor in teaching; lack of student cooperation in teaching
	Internal factors	Educational policies	Examining students' learning; examining feedback; examining students' progress over a specific period of time
		Organizational barriers	Encouraging active students; developmental policies; decision-making for students
		Organizational culture	Lack of professors' awareness; problems related to lack of cooperation among professors; lack of management commitment; incorrect university policies
Strategies	Learner activities	Economic barriers	Lack of a culture of accepting interdisciplinary courses at the university; different cultures among university members
		Social barriers	Financial constraints; low income and lack of motivation
		Group activities	Lack of public awareness of tourism psychology; society's lack of attention to tourists' satisfaction; inappropriate behavior toward tourists in some cases
		Activities beyond final examinations	Creating interaction; activity-oriented learning; interactive learning; promoting cooperation; enhancing a sense of commitment to society; exchange of ideas
		Interactions with other institutions	Classroom work and activities; writing articles; presenting seminars
	Planning and supervision	Teaching-learning process	Interaction with cultural centers; interaction with research institutes; interaction with public libraries; effective communication with religious scholars; effective communication with specialists and experts
		Subject-specific and specialized knowledge	Emotional support; mutual interaction and communication between professor and students; change in thinking style; continuous student evaluation; use of educational materials with advanced technologies
		Skill development	Analytical knowledge; communication knowledge; managerial knowledge; observing the structure of knowledge
		Establishing rules and regulations	Development of superior skills; continuous and lifelong learning; deep learning; exploratory learning; mental focus; deepening learning; capability development; reflective learning; retaining top talents with religious, ethical, revolutionary, and personal competencies
		Curriculum organization	Adopting appropriate rules for the tourism psychology curriculum; adopting correct frameworks for the curriculum
Consequences	Micro-level consequences	Curriculum management	Self-directed nature; practical orientation; effectiveness
		Technology	Creating space for curriculum development; formulating curriculum goals by management
		Workshops and seminars	Use of educational technology; production and provision of electronic content; use of artificial intelligence; provision of equipment such as computers; smartization; establishment of social networks for students; audiovisual media; access to the internet
		Improving curriculum quality	Holding educational workshops; holding virtual meetings and conferences
		Curriculum scope	Emphasis on content; quality evaluation; curriculum revision based on shared ideals and values; participation of faculty members and managers in preparing and revising the curriculum; consultation with experts to improve curriculum quality; redesigning educational courses; observing the structure of knowledge

Macro-level consequences	Improving effectiveness in skills	improvement of individuals' abilities to perform roles in tourism-related occupations; growth and development of individuals
	Improving the performance of the tourism industry	Fostering critical thinking; fostering creativity; increasing problem-solving ability; strengthening communication skills; expanding students' knowledge and insight
	Improving macroeconomic performance	Growth and development of the tourism industry; increasing revenue generation in the tourism industry; increasing competitiveness in the tourism industry
	Reducing macroeconomic problems	Economic growth; economic development; increasing innovation at the macro level
		Reducing economic fluctuations; compensating for indirect costs due to improved performance of the tourism industry

In the selective coding stage, the model of the applied interdisciplinary curriculum of tourism psychology in higher education, or in other words, the conceptual model of the study, was designed as shown in Figure 1. It should be noted that the direction of the arrows in this conceptual model was adapted from the study by Danaeifard and Emami (2007). Therefore, according to this model, causal conditions point toward the central phenomenon. The central phenomenon, contextual conditions, and intervening conditions point toward strategies. Strategies, in turn, point toward consequences. Strategies, in turn, point toward consequences.

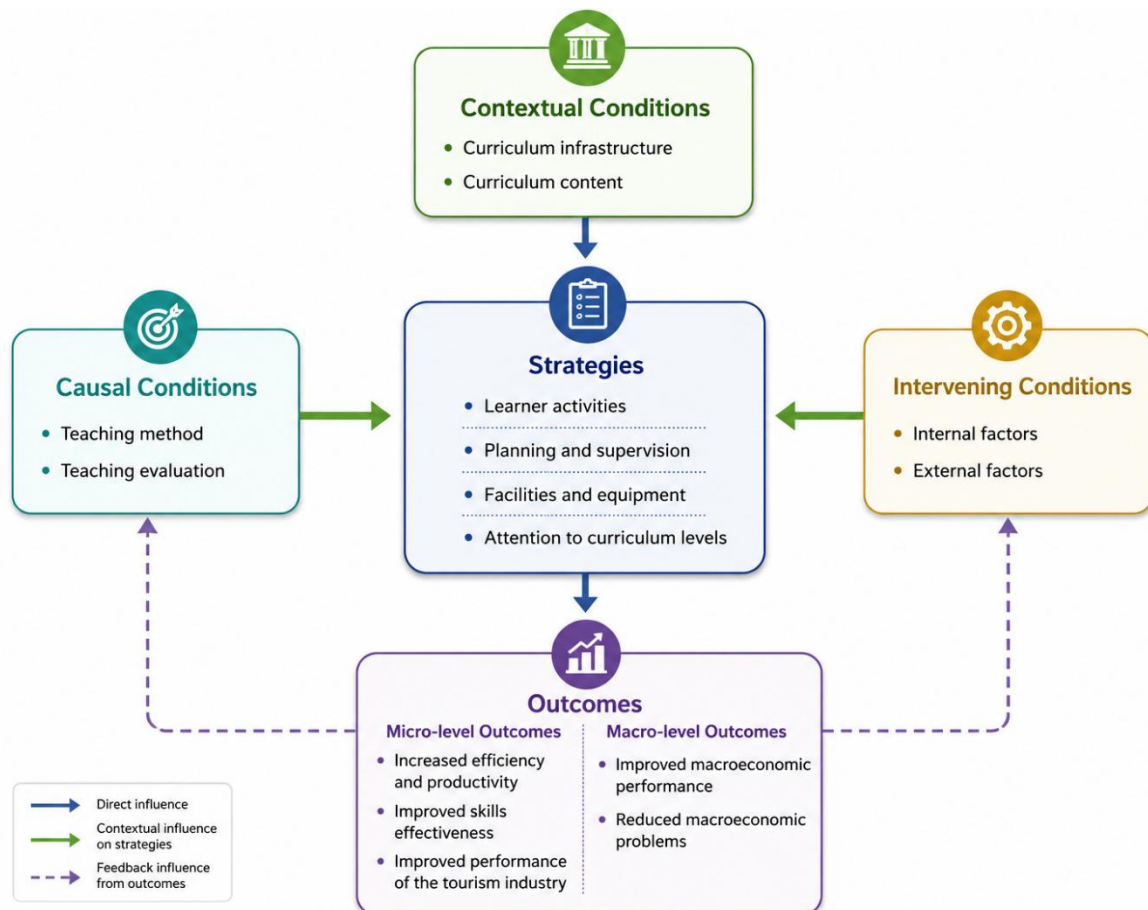


Figure 1. Model of the Applied Interdisciplinary Curriculum of Tourism Psychology in Higher Education

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study was conducted to design a grounded theory model for an applied interdisciplinary tourism psychology curriculum in higher education. Analysis of the expert interviews through open, axial, and selective coding resulted in the identification of 13 main categories, 37 subcategories, and 161 indicators organized within six components of the grounded theory paradigm: the central phenomenon, contextual conditions, causal conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. The central phenomenon was the applied interdisciplinary tourism psychology curriculum, defined through relevance, sustainability, stability, and practicality. Contextual conditions consisted of curriculum infrastructure and curriculum content; causal conditions included teaching methods and teaching evaluation; intervening conditions comprised internal and external factors; and the principal strategies included learner activities, planning and supervision, facilities and equipment, and attention to curriculum levels. The anticipated consequences were classified into micro-level outcomes, including increased efficiency, enhanced skills, and improved tourism-industry performance, and macro-level outcomes, including better macroeconomic performance and reduced economic problems. Thus, the findings present tourism psychology curriculum development as a systemic process in which curriculum content, institutional conditions, pedagogical practices, technological resources, and implementation strategies interact to generate educational, professional, industrial, and economic outcomes.

The identification of the applied interdisciplinary tourism psychology curriculum as the central phenomenon indicates that the value of such a curriculum depends primarily on its correspondence with the psychological realities of tourism and the practical needs of higher education and the tourism industry. The subcategories of relevance, sustainability, stability, and practicality show that the proposed curriculum should not be limited to the theoretical coexistence of psychology and tourism courses. Instead, the two disciplines should be integrated around authentic tourism problems, including tourist motivation, choice, emotion, satisfaction, interpersonal behavior, cultural encounters, service experiences, and behavioral intentions. This interpretation is consistent with the principle that interdisciplinary inquiry should integrate disciplinary perspectives in order to create a more comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena rather than merely placing disciplines alongside one another (7). Tourism behavior is inherently multidimensional, and its explanation requires the integration of psychological, social, cultural, economic, spatial, and managerial knowledge. The finding is also supported by arguments that psychology and tourism can mutually enrich each other because tourism provides a meaningful context for studying decision-making, identity, emotion, intercultural interaction, and well-being (20). Moreover, tourist experiences emerge from interactions between personal characteristics, situational conditions, expectations, emotions, and destination attributes, demonstrating why psychological knowledge should constitute a central rather than peripheral element of tourism education (21).

The contextual conditions identified in the study consisted of curriculum infrastructure and curriculum content. Curriculum infrastructure included understanding curriculum goals, curriculum structure, and curriculum resources, whereas curriculum content incorporated psychological content, tourism content, and appropriate methods of curriculum development. These findings suggest that an applied interdisciplinary curriculum must be supported by a clearly articulated educational philosophy, a coherent and flexible structure, appropriate human and informational resources, and content derived from both scientific

knowledge and local tourism needs. This result is consistent with analyses of Iranian higher education curriculum models, which emphasize the coordination of goals, content, instructional processes, resources, and evaluation as essential to curriculum effectiveness (1). It also agrees with reviews of university curriculum design and development models showing that curriculum decisions must reflect institutional missions, learner needs, disciplinary developments, and the social environment (2). The emphasis on needs-based structures, innovation, flexibility, and attention to emerging issues is further aligned with the curriculum-renewal model proposed by Keshavarzi and colleagues, in which environmental analysis, stakeholder needs, continuous revision, and forward-looking competencies are treated as major foundations of curriculum development (4).

The psychological content identified in the model included the recognition of psychological needs, examination of behavior, attitudes, sociological issues, and methods of encouraging travel. Tourism-related content included motivation, choice, decision-making, emotions, experiences, demographic characteristics, expenditure, values, host–guest relationships, and indigenous and local needs. The breadth of these indicators confirms that tourist behavior cannot be explained through a single psychological construct. Regional personality traits, for example, may shape tourism development by influencing preferences, social behavior, entrepreneurial tendencies, and patterns of engagement with destinations (22). Tourist motivation also plays a decisive role in participation and behavioral intention. Push and pull motivations have been shown to contribute to intentions toward creative tourism experiences (23), while motivation and involvement are closely associated with participation in adventure tourism activities (24). Emotions and satisfaction also affect destination choice, showing that tourism decisions are not exclusively rational or economic (25). Therefore, the study's emphasis on combining cognitive, emotional, motivational, cultural, and behavioral content provides a defensible foundation for a comprehensive tourism psychology curriculum.

The findings related to cultural understanding, values, authenticity, and tourists' experiences are also supported by earlier research. Cross-cultural awareness influences tourists' perceptions of authenticity, satisfaction, and acculturation in heritage destinations (26). Cultural performances can affect prospective tourists' consumption intentions and their behavioral responses toward tourism products (27). Similarly, destination brand authenticity and self-congruence strengthen tourist loyalty through greater destination-brand engagement (28). Visitor satisfaction and loyalty at heritage sites are influenced by experiential, cultural, emotional, and service-related triggers (29). These findings support the inclusion of cross-cultural psychology, identity, authenticity, attitudes, host–guest interaction, and cultural behavior within the proposed curriculum. They also indicate that curriculum content must be sensitive to local and indigenous conditions because psychological responses to destinations are shaped by cultural expectations and the social meanings attached to tourism experiences.

The causal conditions of the model were teaching methods and teaching evaluation. The study distinguished student-centered, content-centered, and lecture-centered teaching and emphasized the need to evaluate learning, feedback, student progress, and educational policies. This finding shows that curriculum effectiveness is not determined by content alone; it also depends on how content is taught and assessed. An interdisciplinary field such as tourism psychology requires active pedagogies through which students analyze cases, conduct field observations, work collaboratively, solve tourism-related problems,

and interpret visitor behavior. Innovation in higher education is most effective when new educational approaches move beyond passive knowledge transmission and support participation, creativity, collaboration, and problem solving (5). The finding is also consistent with evidence that hospitality and tourism students' perceived competencies are related to career adaptability and employability (14). Student-centered instruction can provide repeated opportunities to practice communication, analysis, teamwork, decision-making, and reflective thinking, thereby strengthening the competencies required for tourism occupations.

The emphasis on teaching evaluation indicates that assessment should be developmental and continuous rather than confined to final examinations. Because the proposed curriculum is applied, evaluation must measure students' ability to transfer psychological concepts to tourism situations. Appropriate assessment may therefore include case analysis, projects, field reports, interviews with tourists, observation of service settings, presentations, portfolios, simulations, and collaborative problem-solving assignments. This interpretation is supported by international evaluations of tourism and hospitality curricula showing that professional preparation requires a balance between academic knowledge and applied competence (10). International comparisons of curriculum requirements have also shown that tourism education must integrate managerial, analytical, service-related, and sector-specific learning outcomes (11). Moreover, stakeholder perspectives have highlighted the importance of practical relevance, professional skills, and the alignment of assessment with workplace expectations (12). Thus, the assessment system of the proposed curriculum should evaluate not merely students' retention of psychological theories but also their capacity to apply those theories to destination management, service delivery, tourist behavior, and industry development.

The intervening conditions identified in the study included internal factors, such as organizational barriers and university culture, and external factors, such as economic and social barriers. Internal barriers included limited faculty awareness, insufficient cooperation among professors, lack of managerial commitment, and inappropriate university policies. These findings indicate that interdisciplinary curriculum implementation may be resisted even when its educational value is acknowledged. Interdisciplinary programs usually require cooperation across departments, shared teaching responsibilities, flexible administrative regulations, and agreement about course ownership and resource allocation. Without an institutional culture that accepts interdisciplinary education, curriculum design may remain symbolic and fail to influence teaching practices. The finding is consistent with research on higher education curriculum renewal, which emphasizes management support, stakeholder participation, organizational readiness, and systematic implementation (4). It is also compatible with reviews of tourism education in Latin American countries that identified institutional fragmentation, inadequate faculty preparation, and weak relationships between academic programs and industry as obstacles to educational improvement (13).

The external barriers identified in the study included financial limitations, low motivation, limited public awareness of tourism psychology, and inadequate social attention to tourist satisfaction. These findings reflect the fact that tourism education is influenced by wider economic and social conditions. The development of interdisciplinary courses requires funding for technology, field activities, workshops, internships, specialist instructors, and educational resources. Financial constraints may therefore restrict

the practical dimension of the curriculum. The inclusion of economic indicators is also justified because tourists' expenditure is shaped by multiple demographic, motivational, contextual, and tourism-related factors (32). Psychological characteristics may contribute to the prediction of spending behavior alongside conventional economic variables (33). Accordingly, insufficient social recognition of tourism psychology may prevent universities and tourism institutions from appreciating its economic and managerial value. Greater public and institutional awareness is required to demonstrate that understanding tourist psychology can support destination attractiveness, customer satisfaction, effective marketing, and more efficient tourism expenditure.

Among the strategies identified in the study, learner activities occupied a prominent position. These activities included group work, learning beyond final examinations, interaction with other institutions, reciprocal professor–student communication, specialized knowledge, and the development of advanced skills. This result indicates that applied learning should form the operational core of the curriculum. Tourism psychology students must interact with authentic tourism environments, investigate behavioral problems, observe tourists and service encounters, and work with cultural centers, research institutions, public organizations, and tourism businesses. The importance of practice-based learning is consistent with the literature on internships in hospitality and tourism education. Internships can facilitate professional socialization, competence development, career exploration, and the transition from university to employment, provided that they are adequately supervised and integrated into academic learning (16). Industry-based research has also shown that successful movement from hospitality classrooms to professional careers depends on the alignment between curricular learning and employers' requirements (15). Therefore, institutional interaction and field-based activities are necessary for ensuring that graduates can apply psychological knowledge to tourism services and organizations.

Planning and supervision were also identified as major strategies, encompassing rules and regulations, curriculum organization, curriculum management, and the formulation of objectives. This finding confirms that curriculum implementation requires governance mechanisms rather than reliance on the individual motivation of professors. Clear policies are necessary to determine learning outcomes, faculty responsibilities, course sequences, interdisciplinary cooperation, quality assurance, and mechanisms of revision. The findings accord with studies emphasizing the need for stakeholder participation and systematic curriculum organization in tourism education (12). They are also consistent with analyses of tourism and hospitality education across different national contexts, which recommend continuous program review, stronger connections with industry, and improved institutional coordination (13). The rebuilding of students' confidence in tourism education after the COVID-19 disruption likewise requires transparent curriculum planning, career-oriented support, flexible educational structures, and credible connections between university programs and professional opportunities (17).

Facilities and equipment, particularly technology, electronic content, artificial intelligence, internet access, social networks, workshops, and virtual conferences, constituted another central strategy. This finding reflects the digital transformation of both higher education and tourism. Emerging technologies are changing destination marketing, tourist decision-making, service delivery, visitor tracking, and experience design. Their integration into tourism and hospitality curricula therefore requires digital competencies, technological infrastructure, faculty development, and ethical awareness (18). Technology-based curriculum

policy must also address institutional support, digital resources, implementation requirements, and continuous quality evaluation (6). Furthermore, big-data studies of tourists' spatio-temporal behavior demonstrate the value of digital information for understanding mobility, destination use, and patterns of visitor concentration (19). The proposed curriculum should consequently teach students both to use technological tools and to interpret the psychological meaning of digitally recorded tourist behavior.

The final strategic category concerned attention to curriculum levels, including quality improvement, continuous revision, faculty and managerial participation, expert consultation, and adjustment of curriculum scope to different universities. This finding suggests that the model should not be implemented as a rigid, identical program across all institutions. Universities differ in their missions, regional tourism environments, faculty expertise, infrastructure, and relationships with industry. Curriculum quality therefore depends on maintaining common interdisciplinary foundations while allowing contextual adaptation. Studies of curriculum requirements across hospitality and tourism programs have demonstrated considerable international variation, supporting the need for adaptable rather than uniform models (11). Comparative curriculum research has similarly shown that national and institutional contexts influence the balance among theoretical, managerial, practical, and cultural components (10). Continuous revision is especially important because emerging technologies, tourist preferences, employment requirements, and destination conditions change rapidly.

The consequences identified in the model included micro-level and macro-level outcomes. At the micro level, the curriculum was expected to increase efficiency and productivity, strengthen students' skills, develop personality-related capacities, improve occupational performance, and contribute to tourism-industry growth. These consequences are consistent with the relationship between students' perceived skills, career adaptability, and employability (14). They are also supported by research showing that service quality, perceived value, and customer satisfaction influence behavioral intentions (30), and that responsiveness and service performance are related to airline-passenger satisfaction (31). Graduates who understand tourist expectations, emotional responses, cultural differences, and satisfaction mechanisms may help tourism organizations improve service encounters, design more suitable experiences, and encourage favorable behavioral intentions.

At the macro level, the proposed curriculum was expected to contribute to economic growth, innovation, improved tourism performance, and the reduction of economic problems. Although education alone cannot resolve structural tourism challenges, it can strengthen the human and intellectual capacities required for destination planning, service innovation, tourist analysis, and evidence-based policymaking. The political and developmental impacts of tourism demonstrate that the sector has consequences beyond individual businesses and visitors (8). In Iran, the effective use of cultural, historical, religious, and natural resources requires trained specialists who understand both tourism systems and tourist psychology (9). Therefore, the macro-level consequences identified in this study are plausible when the curriculum is supported by appropriate institutional policies, industry collaboration, technological infrastructure, and sustained investment.

The study had several limitations. The findings were derived from interviews with 12 experts selected purposively and through snowball sampling; consequently, the model reflects the experiences and interpretations of a relatively small specialist group and cannot be assumed to represent all stakeholders in

higher education and tourism. Students, graduates, tourism employers, tourists, governmental policymakers, and representatives of local communities were not directly included. The qualitative coding process was also dependent on researchers' interpretations, despite repeated review and expert consultation. In addition, the study focused on the Iranian higher education context, and institutional, cultural, and tourism-related conditions may limit the direct transferability of the model to other countries or educational systems.

Future research should examine the proposed model using larger and more diverse samples and include faculty members, students, graduates, tourism-industry managers, policymakers, tourists, and host-community representatives. The relationships among the identified categories may be tested quantitatively through structural equation modeling, interpretive structural modeling, or partial least squares analysis. Delphi studies could be conducted to prioritize curriculum indicators and establish consensus regarding essential courses and competencies. Comparative studies across universities, provinces, and countries would also clarify which components are universal and which require contextual adaptation. Pilot implementation studies should assess the effects of the curriculum on students' psychological knowledge, professional competencies, career adaptability, employability, and performance in tourism-related settings.

In practice, universities should establish interdisciplinary committees comprising specialists in psychology, tourism, curriculum planning, educational technology, and tourism-industry management. These committees should convert the identified categories into explicit learning outcomes, course content, practical activities, and assessment criteria. The curriculum should include field projects, internships, case studies, simulations, group research, visitor-behavior analysis, and collaboration with hotels, travel agencies, cultural centers, destination-management organizations, and public tourism institutions. Faculty-development programs should prepare instructors for interdisciplinary and student-centered teaching. Universities should also provide digital infrastructure, tourism databases, artificial-intelligence tools, electronic learning materials, and opportunities for continuous curriculum review. Quality evaluation should be conducted regularly through feedback from students, graduates, employers, faculty members, and tourism stakeholders.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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