

Strategic leadership in the tourism industry: a systematic literature review

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Review

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Abstract

Purpose – This study presents a systematic review of strategic leadership research in the tourism industry, identifying prevailing trends, theoretical foundations, methodological approaches and critical research gaps to guide future inquiry. Of 47 records screened, 21 met the inclusion criteria.

Design/methodology/approach – Guided by the PRISMA protocol, the review systematically searched and analyzed peer-reviewed articles from the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases. To mitigate indexing lag and missed variants, we conducted a manual complementary sweep one week after the automated search, including backward/forward citation chasing and target-journal checks. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure relevance, quality and consistency of the selected literature.

Findings – The review reveals increasing scholarly attention to strategic leadership in tourism, with frequent application of the resource-based view, strategic leadership theory, and upper echelons theory. However, theoretical fragmentation remains, as frameworks such as goal contagion theory, leadership trait theory and Porter's national competitive advantage theory remain underutilized. Methodological inconsistencies also limit generalizability.

Originality/value – This review is the first PRISMA-aligned synthesis focused squarely on strategic leadership in tourism, offering a comprehensive synthesis of its theoretical and methodological landscape. The study clarifies boundary conditions, highlight blind spots (e.g. limited economics/finance and core-tourism engagement) and propose an integrative research agenda emphasizing theoretical pluralism, methodological breadth, and geographical expansion.

Keywords Strategic leadership, Tourism governance, Theoretical frameworks, Systematic literature review, Leadership development, Tourism industry

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

The global tourism industry contributed approximately 9.8% of global GDP and supported 366 million jobs worldwide in 2025, accounting for about 10.9% of global employment (WTTC, 2026), making it one of the world's most significant economic sectors. However, the industry faces increasing volatility and complexity, driven by globalization, geopolitical uncertainties, digital transformation, and escalating sustainability demands (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, revealed deep vulnerabilities in leadership preparedness and organizational resilience, prompting calls for stronger strategic governance and leadership innovation across the tourism sector (Baum & Hai, 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020).

Strategic leadership plays an important role in this dynamic and uncertain environment. It is defined as the ability to anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility, and empower others to initiate strategic change (Hitt *et al.*, 2002). In today's tourism sector, strong strategic leadership

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is seen as vital for remaining competitive, driving innovation, and supporting sustainable growth. It plays an important role in helping organizations respond to crises, manage change, and match their internal strengths with opportunities in the broader environment (Dwyer, 2023; Elbaz & Haddoud, 2017).

Despite realizing the importance of strategic leadership, its conceptualization and evidence base within tourism remains fragmented and uneven. Most existing studies rely on narrow theoretical anchors such as the Resource-Based View or Upper Echelons Theory, while integrated approaches that reflect the sector's ecosystem complexity (firms–destinations–communities–policy actors) remain underdeveloped. This theoretical fragmentation limits cumulative knowledge, weakens comparability across studies, and reduces the usability of findings for destination governance and firm strategy.

Importantly, strategic leadership in tourism does not sit outside the broader strategic management tradition. Strategic thinking in management has long been organized into competing “schools” that explain how strategy forms through design and planning, positioning, entrepreneurship/vision, learning, power, culture, environment, cognition, configuration, and more (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 2020). In this study, Mintzberg *et al.* (2020) is used as a broad strategic management framing device to contextualize and interpret the tourism strategic leadership literature, rather than as a framework explicitly adopted by the reviewed empirical studies. Yet the tourism strategic leadership literature has rarely made this connection explicit. As a result, strategic leadership studies in tourism can become siloed (e.g. focusing only on executive traits or internal resources) without clarifying how leadership aligns with classic strategy formation logics (e.g. planning vs learning vs entrepreneurial vision). Positioning tourism strategic leadership within this broader strategic management landscape strengthens theoretical clarity and improves interpretability across contexts.

Moreover, no existing PRISMA-aligned systematic literature review has comprehensively analyzed the theoretical foundations, research trends, and methodological approaches to strategic leadership in the tourism industry. This gap therefore limits both scholarly understanding and practical application. Current reviews of tourism leadership (e.g. Nunkoo, Ramkissoon, & Gursoy, 2012) have mainly focused on general leadership or destination governance, often without isolating the “strategic” element that drives competitiveness, innovation, and long-term renewal.

Why does this gap matter (“so what”)? Theoretically, without a consolidated evidence base, tourism leadership research risks repeating constructs, misaligning leadership concepts with strategy formation mechanisms, and producing fragmented explanations that do not accumulate into a coherent knowledge stream. Practically, tourism organizations and destination authorities face high-stakes decisions under shocks (pandemics, security concerns, climate events, digital disruption). If strategic leadership is not clearly mapped to strategy formation logics and measurable outcomes (e.g. resilience, recovery speed, innovation adoption, stakeholder legitimacy), decision-makers lack usable guidance for leadership selection, capability-building, and governance design. Therefore, filling this gap is essential for building decision-relevant theory and improving strategic practice in tourism systems.

This paper addresses these gaps by conducting a systematic literature review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA protocol. Drawing from Scopus and Web of Science databases, this study aims to:

- (1) Synthesize current trends in strategic leadership research within the tourism industry;
- (2) Examine the theoretical foundations underpinning this research domain;
- (3) Analyze methodological patterns and validity concerns;
- (4) Identify research gaps and propose a future research agenda that encourages theoretical integration and practical relevance.

By offering a comprehensive synthesis, this review clarifies boundary conditions and proposes an integrated scaffold for cumulative, decision-useful knowledge in tourism leadership. It is intended for scholars, tourism executives, human resource strategists, and public governance actors striving to navigate the industry's evolving strategic challenges.

2. Concepts of strategic leadership in the tourism industry

In tourism, strategic leadership is about shaping and adjusting long-term strategies to build sustainable advantages and resilience in an unpredictable industry. It is seen as having a broad potential that can bring in internal resources in line with stakeholder interests and managing external complexity. The literature points to five main dimensions-visionary leadership, adaptability, stakeholder engagement, innovation and technology integration, and crisis management. Vision provides direction, adaptability allows quick responses to shocks, stakeholder engagement builds legitimacy and collaboration, innovation fuels competitiveness and agility, and crisis management safeguards continuity when disruptions arise. Together, these dimensions create a dynamic framework that helps leaders navigate uncertainty, deliver value, and support sustainable growth. This viewpoint illustrates foundational work of [Ireland and Hitt \(1999\)](#), [Teece \(2007\)](#), and [Chathoth, Altinay, and Okumus \(2020\)](#).

To strengthen theoretical positioning, these dimensions can also be read through classic strategy formation lenses. For example, visionary leadership aligns with the entrepreneurial school, crisis learning aligns with the learning school, and stakeholder governance aligns with the cultural and power schools ([Mintzberg et al., 2020](#)). This connection helps interpret tourism strategic leadership not only as “leadership behavior” but as a driver of how strategy is actually formed, implemented, and adapted in tourism systems.

3. Methodology

To analyze research on strategic leadership in the tourism and travel industry, this paper uses a systematic review approach guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework ([Page et al., 2021](#)). Following these guidelines helps strengthen the review's transparency, accuracy, and rigor. The next sections outline the protocol and key steps taken during this review. The choice to adopt PRISMA 2020 is in line with recommendations from experts in systematic review methodology ([Ardern et al., 2022](#); [Page et al., 2021](#); [Page & Moher, 2017](#); [Shamseer et al., 2015](#)), who emphasized its value in making review processes more transparent.

3.1 Systematic review protocol

For ensuring reliability and transparency of systematic reviews thorough planning and meticulous documentation of review methods is very important. Protocols provide a framework to the researchers in order to maintain rigor and consistency throughout the process ([Page et al., 2021](#)). By following well-defined protocols, researchers can mitigate the risk of bias and ensure that their findings are based on a comprehensive and systematic examination of the literature ([Shamseer et al., 2015](#)).

If the protocols are well-defined the credibility is enhanced by making it easier for readers and stakeholders to judge the robustness of the methods used ([Page & Moher, 2017](#)). This transparency reduces the likelihood of redundant research efforts and contributes to the efficiency of knowledge synthesis in the field ([Ardern et al., 2022](#)).

In this study, a carefully designed search strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and quality assessment procedures have been applied to uphold these principles. This approach not only supports thorough examination of relevant literature but also enhances trustworthiness and practical value of the findings ([Tranfield et al., 2003](#); [Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, 2009](#)).

3.2 Search strategy

We selected Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) because of their broad, multidisciplinary coverage, high-quality metadata enabling de-duplication, and stable advanced-query operators supporting replicability. To mitigate omissions from specialized databases, we added a targeted supplement: backward/forward citation chasing and manual title/TOC checks in leading journals (e.g. *Tourism Management*, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, *International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration*, *Annals of Tourism Research*, *Journal of Travel Research*, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*).

Two stages were employed. First, an automated search was conducted using the predefined string (touris* AND strategic AND leader*) applied to Title/Abstract/Keywords in both databases. Second, a manual complementary sweep was performed one week later (13 December 2023) to address indexing lag and capture near-miss variants. This included (1) backward reference screening, (2) forward citation tracking, (3) author-profile checks for in-press items, and (4) targeted journal scans.

No a-priori date restrictions were applied, to avoid novelty or survivorship bias. Safeguards included relevance screening anchored to contemporary constructs, reporting the temporal distribution, and a sensitivity note highlighting post-2015 patterns where appropriate. Only peer-reviewed journal articles and reviews in English were included; grey literature and non-English records were excluded to ensure quality and consistency. The process adheres fully to PRISMA-2020 guidelines (Page *et al.*, 2021), as shown in the flow diagram (Figure 1).

3.3 Inclusion, quality assessment, and data extraction

Following PRISMA guidelines (Moher *et al.*, 2009), the review applied clear inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed journal articles and reviews in English, with full-text access and relevance to strategic leadership in tourism across disciplines. Excluded materials included grey literature, conference proceedings, and non-English publications. From 47 initially identified records, 21 met the criteria for inclusion.

To ensure quality, only original research and review papers were considered. Abstracts were screened for relevance, and each study underwent a structured critical appraisal using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT 2018/2022), the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) checklist, and AMSTAR-2 guidelines for systematic reviews. Two reviewers conducted the evaluations independently, with discrepancies resolved through discussion, and inter-rater reliability reported using Cohen's κ statistic. This ensured transparency and replicability of the quality assessment process. Two non-English articles were excluded to maintain consistency and clarity.

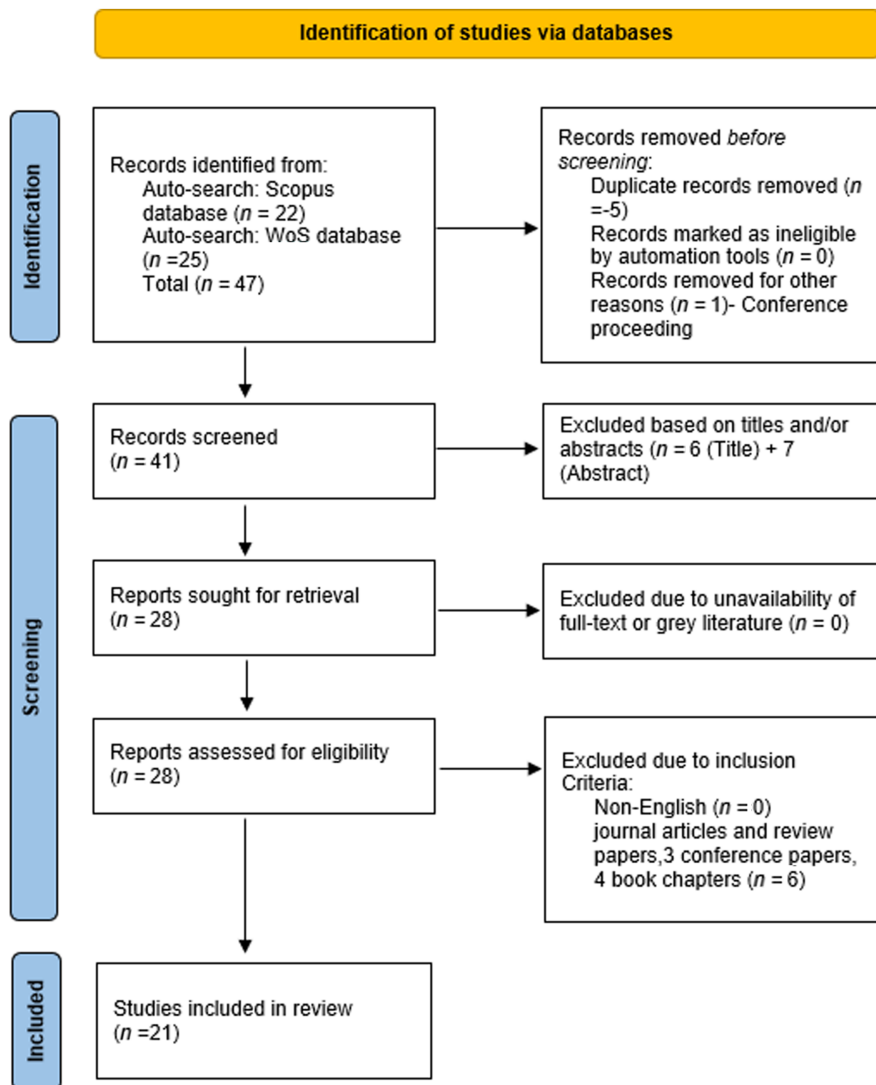
Data extraction captured bibliometric information, theoretical framework, research design, context, and outcomes. This was conducted collaboratively to ensure objectivity and rigor, with cross-checks between reviewers to minimize bias. All selected studies aligned with the research scope and formed the basis for the final synthesis and analysis.

4. The state of the strategic leadership research in the tourism industry

This section provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of strategic leadership research within the tourism industry by synthesizing existing literature in line with the objectives of the review.

4.1 Publication trends in the strategic leadership in tourism industry

4.1.1 Number of articles. Table 1 synthesized and presents the number of articles published over time across various academic disciplines from 2011 to 2024. The disciplines included are Business Management and Accounting, Social Sciences, Organizational Behavior, Economics, Econometrics and Finance, and Tourism.



Source: adapted from PRISMA 2020

Figure 1. Flow diagram of the article search and selection process

In the fields of Business Management and Accounting, there were a total of 16 publications, with the publication count fluctuating over the years. The highest number of publications, three, occurred in 2015, 2019, and 2020. Notably, there were no publications in 2011, 2018, 2021, and 2023. This steady flow of publications suggests a consistent interest in this discipline, with peak years potentially indicating significant developments or heightened focus during those times. The periods with no publications might reflect under-researched areas, suggesting a need for future research to explore emerging issues or trends in these gaps. The Social Sciences discipline displayed a total of three publications,

Table 1. Evaluation of number of articles over time across academic disciplines

Discipline	2011	2015	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
Business Management and Accounting	2		3	1	2	3	1	1	1	1	16
Social Sciences					1	1		1			3
Organizational Behavior									2		4
Economics, Econometrics and Finance						1					1
Tourism		1									1
Total	2	1	3	1	3	5	1	2	3	1	21

Source(s): Table by authors

all occurring in recent years- 2020, 2021, and 2023. No publication prior to 2020 appeared. Thus, recent interest may signal new emerging themes or societal changes influencing this discipline. The absence of publications before 2020 highlights a potential gap in research, making it valuable and timely to explore the reasons behind this recent surge in interest.

Organizational Behavior showed a total of four publications, all appearing in 2024. This suggests either a recent surge in interest or possibly a reclassification of related research. The sudden spike suggests new developments or increased recognition of the field’s importance. The absence of earlier publications points to a significant gap, and future research could investigate the factors driving the recent interest and explore historical data to understand the evolution of organizational behavior studies. In the field of Economics, Econometrics and Finance, there was only one publication in 2019. This indicates a very limited engagement with this discipline in the context of the review. Given the importance of economics and finance, this minimal number of publications represents a significant gap. There is therefore a need for more comprehensive research to understand why this field is underrepresented and how it can be integrated into broader academic discussions.

The Tourism discipline had a single publication in 2015. This minimal engagement is similar to that observed in Economics, highlighting a gap in the literature that needs to be addressed, especially considering the global economic impact of tourism. The total number of publications over the years is 21, with a varied distribution. The year 2020 saw a peak with five publications, indicating a potentially significant event or trend influencing multiple disciplines. The lowest publication years are scattered without significant clustering. This varied distribution suggests fluctuating interest and developments across the disciplines over the years.

The data also, indicates a robust interest in Business Management and Accounting, with emerging interest in Social Sciences and Organizational Behavior. The sparse data in Economics, Finance, and Tourism suggests these areas need more focus. The notable gaps in these disciplines indicate under-researched areas and require further exploration. Additionally, understanding the reasons behind the fluctuation in publication counts across all disciplines could provide insights into academic and societal trends.

4.1.2 Citation and frequency of articles. The analysis of strategic leadership publications in the tourism industry, as illustrated in [Table 2](#) and [Figure 2](#), reveals significant trends and research gaps. High-impact journals such as the International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Administration, International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, and Tourism Management dominate the field, with citation counts of 67, 64, and 61 respectively. These journals ranked Q1 and Q2, are indicative of their high academic quality and influence. Tourism Management’s A* rating by ABDC further underscores its exceptional

Table 2. Strategic leadership publications table – citation and frequency of articles per journal

Journal	Citations	SCImago ranking 2023	ABDC	AJG	Frequency/ No.of articles	%
<i>African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure</i>	27	Q3	–	–	3	14.3
<i>Tourism Management</i>	61	Q1	A*	4	2	9.5
<i>International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management</i>	64	Q1	A	3	2	9.5
<i>International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Administration</i>	67	Q2	B	1	2	9.5
<i>Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites</i>	0	Q1	–	–	1	4.7
<i>Tourism</i>	5	NA	C	–	1	4.7
<i>Corporate and Business Strategy Review</i>	15	Q4	–	–	1	4.7
<i>Economics Letters</i>	2	Q2	B	3	1	4.7
<i>Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies</i>	1	Q3	–	1	1	4.7
<i>International Journal of Organizational Leadership</i>	0	–	–	–	1	4.7
<i>International Journal of Tourism Policy</i>	4	Q4	C	–	1	4.7
<i>Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights</i>	16	Q3	C	–	1	4.7
<i>Journal of Sport and Tourism</i>	16	Q3	C	–	1	4.7
<i>Policy Design and Practice</i>	12	Q1	–	–	1	4.7
<i>Sustainability</i>	34	Q1	C	–	1	4.7
<i>Sustainability Accounting Management and Policy Journal</i>	5	Q1	B	2	1	4.7
Total					21	100

Source(s): Table by authors

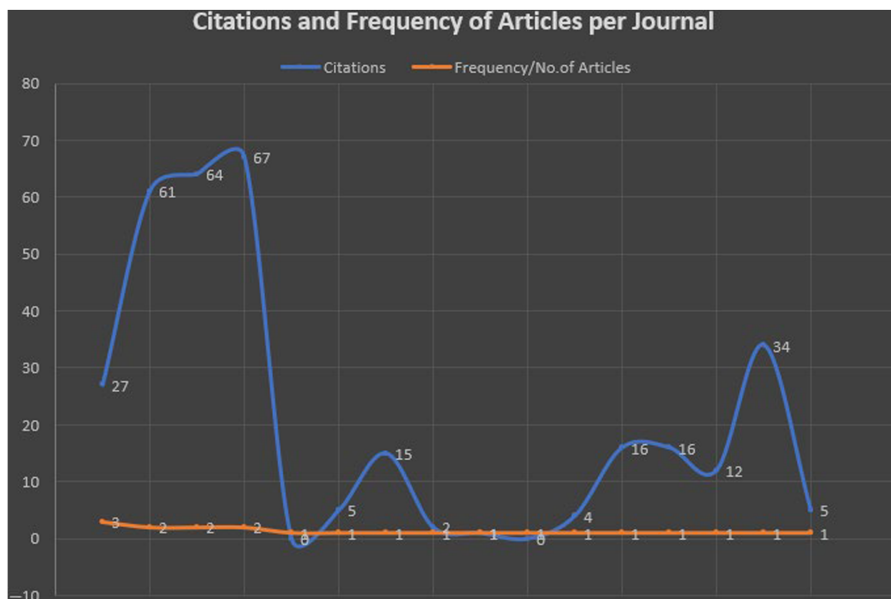


Figure 2. Strategic leadership publications graph – citation and frequency of articles per journal. Source: Courtesy of the authors

reputation. Meanwhile, Sustainability, with 34 citations from a single article, also demonstrates substantial influence, suggesting that impactful research can emerge from even a small number of contributions in highly regarded journals.

Moderately impactful journals, including the African Journal of Hospitality Tourism and Leisure (27 citations), Policy Design and Practice (12 citations), and Corporate and Business Strategy Review (15 citations), show that significant research is not confined solely to top-tier journals. However, there are numerous journals with low citation counts or no citations, such as the Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites and the International Journal of Organizational Leadership, each with zero citations, and Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies with only one citation. This disparity highlights a considerable gap, where high-quality research in these journals is not gaining the recognition it deserves, potentially due to underrepresentation or lack of visibility.

The notable disparity in citation counts points to an uneven distribution of influential research, with a few key journals dominating the field. This concentration suggests that while some journals are highly influential, others are struggling to gain traction. Addressing these gaps by encouraging broader dissemination and promoting high-quality research across a wider range of journals is essential. By improving the visibility of articles in moderately and low-cited journals, the overall impact and development of strategic leadership research in the tourism industry can be enhanced.

4.2 Narrative synthesis of theoretical foundations in strategic leadership and tourism research

The systematic analysis of theoretical frameworks reveals a fragmented yet evolving body of knowledge surrounding strategic leadership in the tourism industry. To reduce fragmentation, we explicitly connect tourism strategic leadership research to the wider strategic management tradition, including the Ten Schools of Strategy (Mintzberg *et al.*, 2020), which explains how strategy forms through competing mechanisms (e.g. planning, positioning, learning, culture, environment, configuration). In this review, Mintzberg *et al.* (2020) is used as an interpretive (meta-theoretical) lens to organize and contextualize the theories identified in the included studies, rather than as a theory empirically adopted by the reviewed articles. While tourism studies often focus on internal resources and executives, Mintzberg's framework helps interpret where tourism studies implicitly sit (e.g. entrepreneurial vision vs planning vs learning), and it also highlights what is missing (e.g. environmental and configuration explanations in destination-level turbulence).

Table 3 and the conceptual map illustrate that while scholars draw from a variety of theoretical perspectives, only a few frameworks have been consistently applied across studies. The Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991), Strategic Leadership Model (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001), and Upper Echelon Theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) are the most frequently utilized, each appearing in approximately 10.5% of the reviewed studies. These theories underscore the importance of internal organizational resources, top management influence, and leadership cognition—highlighting a prevailing focus on firm-level dynamics and internal strategic alignment in tourism research.

In contrast, 13 other theories including Dynamic Capabilities (Teece, 2018), Transformational Leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985), Systems Theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968), and Edgar Schein's Organizational Culture Theory; each appeared in just one study. Their limited use suggests a missed opportunity to explore more nuanced aspects of tourism leadership, such as adaptive capacity, systems thinking, cultural transformation, and resilience.

Figure 3 reveals a strong theoretical concentration around RBV and leadership-centric models, with alternative frameworks remaining peripheral. This siloed approach limits the field's capacity to address complex challenges like crisis recovery, digital disruption, and stakeholder governance. Underexplored theories such as Porter's Competitive Advantage,

Table 3. Overview of the theoretical foundation of strategic leadership in tourism industry research

Theory and authors	Description of the theory	Application of the theory	Studies that utilized the theory	Freq	%
Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991)	Emphasizes the role of internal resources and capabilities in achieving sustained competitive advantage	Strategic Analysis and Planning; Competitive Positioning; Resource Allocation and Investment; Mergers and Acquisitions; Organizational Learning and Innovation	Kanyanja, Muathe, and Al-Rubiae. (2023), Wan, Hsu, Wong, and Liu (2017)	2	10.50
Strategic leadership model (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001)	Provides a framework for understanding how leaders can effectively shape the strategic direction and performance of their organizations	Strategic Planning and Execution; Leadership Development; Organizational Change and Transformation; Performance Management	Elbaz and Haddoud (2017), Ghazi, Salem, Dar, and Elbaz (2024)	2	10.50
Upper Echelon Theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984)	Focuses on the influence of Top Management Team (TMT) characteristics on organizational outcomes. The theory suggests that the backgrounds, experiences, values, and personalities of top executives shape their perceptions, preferences, and decisions, ultimately impacting organizational strategy, performance, and outcomes	Strategic Leadership Development; Top Management Team (TMT) Composition and Succession Planning; Strategic Decision-Making; Organizational Culture and Values	Kanyanja <i>et al.</i> (2023), Sipe (2018)	2	10.50
Classical behavior theory of leadership (Li <i>et al.</i> , 2010)	Emphasizes the behaviors and actions of leaders rather than their traits or situational factors	Leadership Training and Development; Performance Evaluation and Feedback	Alnorawi and Jaffar (2019)	1	5.26
Dual Ladder Theory (Allen and Katz, 1991)	The theory addresses the needs of technical and professional staff who may not be interested in or suited for management positions but still seek career growth and recognition	Talent Retention; Enhanced Innovation; Balanced Organizational Structure; Diverse Career Opportunities; Performance and Productivity	Wan <i>et al.</i> (2017)	1	5.26

(continued)

Table 3. Continued

Theory and authors	Description of the theory	Application of the theory	Studies that utilized the theory	Freq	%
Dynamic capabilities (Teece, 2018)	An organization's ability to systematically and continuously renew and reconfigure its resources and capabilities to address rapidly changing environments	Strategic Management; Innovation and R&D; Change Management; Resource Allocation; Competitive Advantage; Organizational Learning	Ghazi et al. (2024)	1	5.26
Edgar Schein Theory (Schein, 1980)	The theory is based on the idea that organizational culture can be understood and analyzed at different levels	Organizational Diagnosis; Cultural Change and Transformation; Leadership Development; Enhancing Organizational Performance; Conflict Resolution	Kanyanja et al. (2023)	1	5.26
Goal contagion theory (Aarts, Gollwitzer, & Hassin, 2004)	An automatic effect of observation on goal activation or goal pursuit that is mediated by goal inference	Marketing and Advertising; Organizational Behavior; Education; Social Influence and Peer Effects	Jaich, Jastram, and Blind (2023)	1	5.26
Leadership theory (House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991)	It is primarily associated with the concept of charismatic leadership. This theory builds on earlier work by Robert House, particularly his path-goal theory, and focuses on how charismatic leaders influence their followers and organizational outcomes	Leadership Development; Organizational Change; Motivational Strategies; Crisis Management; Cultural Development	Elbaz and Haddoud (2017)	1	5.26
Leadership trait theory (Antonakis & Day, 2017)	The theory posits that certain inherent characteristics and qualities distinguish effective leaders from others	Leadership Selection and Development; Performance Evaluation; Succession Planning; Team Composition; Personal Development	Mukhezakule and Tefera (2019)	1	5.26

(continued)

Table 3. Continued

Theory and authors	Description of the theory	Application of the theory	Studies that utilized the theory	Freq	%
Organizational readiness (Lokuge, Sedera, Grover, & Dongming, 2019)	The extent to which an organization is prepared to implement change or adopt new technologies, processes, or innovations	Pre-Change Assessments; Change Implementation Plans; Leadership Development; Employee Training and Support; Monitoring and Evaluation; Communication Strategies	Ghazi <i>et al.</i> (2024)	1	5.26
Porter's National Competitive Advantage Theory (Porter, 2003)	The theory seeks to explain why certain nations or regions more competitive industries are	Industry Analysis; Government Policy Formulation; Strategic Planning for Firms; Economic Development Programs; International Business Expansion	Đurašević (2015)	1	5.26
Resilience (Masten & Tellegen, 2012)	Emphasizing the multifaceted nature of resilience and its importance in promoting positive outcomes despite challenging circumstances	Psychological Interventions; Workplace Resilience; Education and Schools; Community and Public Health Programs	Ghazi <i>et al.</i> (2024)	1	5.26
Stratified systems theory (Hunt & Ropo, 1995)	Views organizations as consisting of multiple interconnected layers or "strata," each with its own set of rules, norms, and power dynamics; emphasizes the interplay between different levels of organization and the importance of understanding how they influence behavior and outcomes	Organizational Design; Leadership and Management; Change Management; Conflict Resolution; Organizational Culture and Identity	Sipe (2018)	1	5.26

(continued)

Table 3. Continued

Theory and authors	Description of the theory	Application of the theory	Studies that utilized the theory	Freq	%
Systems Theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968)	Emphasizes the interdependence of components within a system and the emergent properties that arise from their interactions. Systems Theory provides a way of thinking about systems as wholes rather than just the sum of their parts, highlighting patterns, feedback loops, and nonlinear relationships that govern their behavior	Organizational Systems; Management and Leadership; Systems Thinking; Interdisciplinary Research	Kanyanja et al. (2023)	1	5.26
Transformational leadership theory (Taylor, Cornelius, & Colvin, 2014 ; McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002)	A leadership model that focuses on the relationship between leaders and followers and their ability to inspire and motivate positive change. Transformational leaders articulate a compelling vision, empower and develop followers, foster innovation and creativity, and promote organizational transformation	Organizational Change and Transformation; Employee Motivation and Engagement; Leadership Development; Team Building and Collaboration; Organizational Culture	Mukhezekule and Tefera (2019)	1	5.26
Total				19	100

Note(s): [Mintzberg et al. \(2020\)](#) is employed in this study as an integrative interpretive framework to contextualize and organize the reviewed theories within the broader strategic management literature. No included study explicitly applied the Ten Schools of Strategy to strategic leadership in the tourism industry; therefore, [Mintzberg et al. \(2020\)](#) is not included in the frequency counts reported in [Table 3](#)

Source(s): Table by authors

Leadership Trait Theory, and Goal Contagion offer valuable but overlooked insights into macro-level and individual leadership dynamics. Additionally, constructs like organizational readiness and resilience are insufficiently developed, despite their relevance in the post-pandemic era. Advancing the field requires theoretical pluralism and greater integration of diverse models to reflect the multifaceted realities of tourism leadership.

4.3 Research methods and contexts of strategic leadership in tourism industry research

4.3.1 Research methods. [Table 4](#) presents an overview of the research methods utilized in the studies on strategic leadership. The methods are varied but show a clear preference for certain approaches. Surveys are the most frequently used method, with 10 studies (47.6%) employing

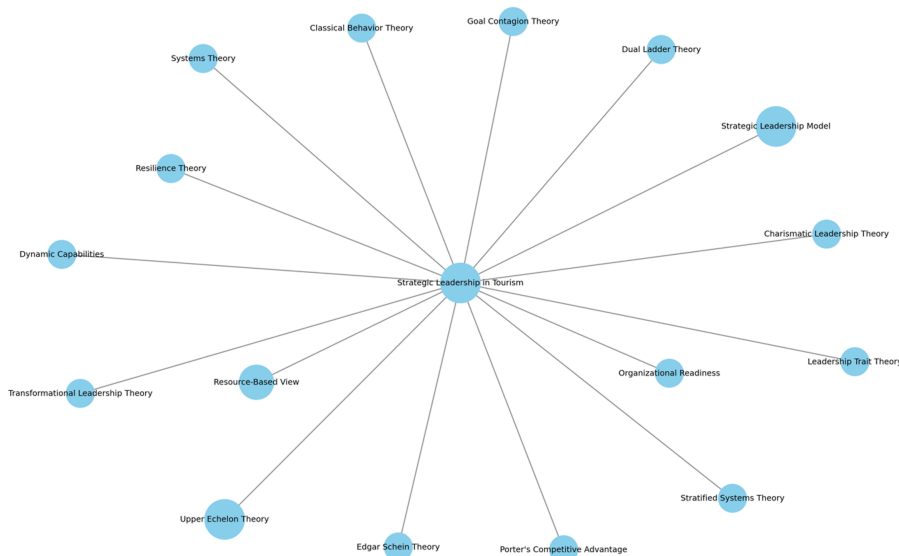


Figure 3. Conceptual map – theoretical foundations of strategic leadership in tourism. Source: Figure by authors

Table 4. Overview of the research methods of the strategic leadership in tourism industry research

Method	Authors	Frequency	Percentage
Survey	Belias <i>et al.</i> (2022), Elbaz and Haddoud (2017), Fahmi <i>et al.</i> (2020), Ghazi <i>et al.</i> (2024), Kanyanja <i>et al.</i> (2023), Khalifa (2020), Masa'Deh <i>et al.</i> (2021), Mukhezakule and Tefera (2019), Sharma <i>et al.</i> (2020), Khasawneh (2020)	10	47.6
Mixed Method (Interview + Survey (Questionnaire))	Kajornbun and Dhirathiti (2019), Noble <i>et al.</i> (2019), Sipe (2018)	3	14.3
Interview	Devine and Devine (2011), Đurašević (2015), Wan <i>et al.</i> (2017)	3	14.3
Case study	Piya <i>et al.</i> (2022), Scheepers <i>et al.</i> (2017)	2	09.5
Content analysis	Weed <i>et al.</i> (2011)	1	04.7
Survey + Quasi Experiment	Jaich <i>et al.</i> (2023)	1	04.7
Review	Ho, Lam, and Law (2023)	1	04.7
Total		21	100

Source(s): Table by authors

this approach. These studies include those by Belias, Rossidis, Lazarakis, Mantas, and Ntalakos (2022), Elbaz and Haddoud (2017), Fahmi, Khudair, and Ali Mohammed (2020), Ghazi *et al.* (2024), Kanyanja *et al.* (2023), Khalifa (2020), Masa'Deh, Obeidat, Maqableh, & Shah (2021), Mukhezakule and Tefera (2019), Sharma, Woodward, and Grillini (2020), and Khasawneh (2020). Mixed methods, combining interviews and surveys, are used in three studies (14.3%), authored by Kajornbun and Dhirathiti (2019), Noble, Charles, Keast, and Kivits (2019), and Sipe (2018). Similarly, interviews alone are also used in three studies (14.3%), by Devine and Devine (2011), Đurašević (2015), and Wan *et al.* (2017). Case studies

are utilized in two studies (9.5%), specifically those by [Piya, Shamsuzzoha, Azizuddin, Al-Hinai, and Erdebilli \(2022\)](#) and [Scheepers, White, and Kitimbo \(2017\)](#). Less frequently used methods include content analysis by [Weed, Stephens, and Bull \(2011\)](#), surveys combined with quasi-experiments by [Jaich *et al.* \(2023\)](#), and review methods by [Ho, Lam, and Law \(2023\)](#), each accounting for one study (4.7%).

Additionally, [Figure 4](#) presents the frequency and percentage distribution of different research methods used in the studies. Surveys dominate the landscape, accounting for nearly half of the research methods (47.6%). Mixed methods and interviews are equally utilized, each representing 14.3% of the methods used. Case studies are less common and used in 9.5% of the studies. Content analysis, surveys combined with quasi-experiments, and reviews are the least used methods, each comprising 4.7% of the research methods. This distribution indicates a strong preference for quantitative approaches, particularly surveys, in exploring strategic leadership within the tourism industry.

[Figure 5](#) illustrates the predominant use of survey methods among authors, reflecting their broad acceptance in strategic leadership research. While mixed methods and interviews show some methodological diversity, the minimal use of case studies and other qualitative approaches highlights a gap. This pattern reveals opportunities for greater methodological diversification and identifies potential biases in the existing research landscape.

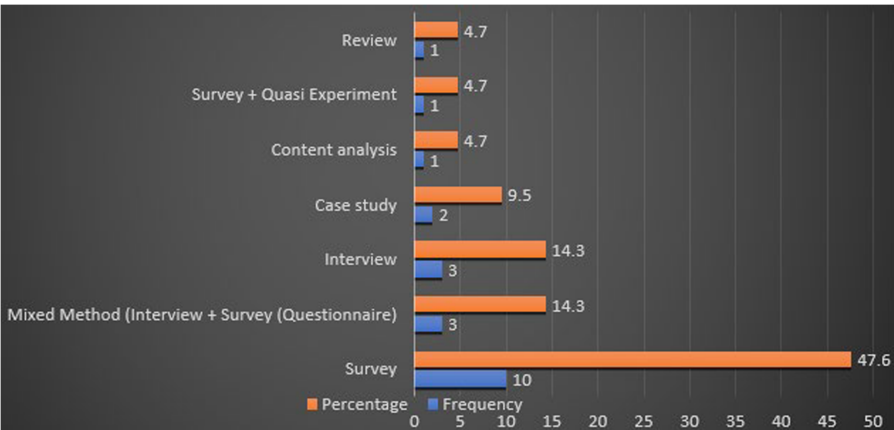


Figure 4. Frequency and percentage of research methods. Source: Courtesy of the authors

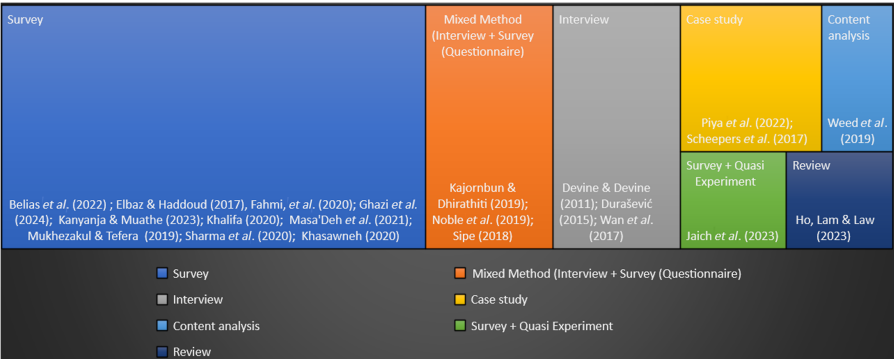


Figure 5. Research method by authors. Source: Courtesy of the authors

4.3.2 Research context. The research methods utilized in strategic leadership studies within the tourism industry are distributed across various countries, highlighting a degree of geographical diversity as presented in Table 5. Egypt is the most frequently represented country, with three studies conducted by Elbaz and Haddoud (2017), Ghazi *et al.* (2024), and Khalifa (2020). Jordan and the United Kingdom follow, each with two studies. Other countries such as Greece, Northern Ireland, Montenegro, Iraq, Germany, Thailand, Kenya, South Africa, Australia, Oman, Malawi, the United States, and Taiwan each have one study. This distribution, presented in Table 5, indicates the broad but uneven geographical spread of research in this field.

Similarly, Figure 6 provides a visual representation of the geographical distribution of the studies. The figure maps out the countries where the research has been conducted, offering a clear overview of the global reach of the studies included in this systematic review. It is evident from the figure that certain regions, particularly Egypt, Jordan, and the United Kingdom, have received more research attention compared to others.

5. Discussion of state of the art and research gaps

5.1 State of the art in publication trends on strategic leadership in the tourism industry

An analysis of publication trends from 2011 to 2024 reveals sustained and evolving scholarly interest in strategic leadership within the tourism industry. The majority of contributions are situated within the fields of Business Management and Accounting, which recorded peaks in 2015, 2019, and 2020 years that may reflect responses to global economic shifts or sector-specific leadership challenges. This aligns with the review findings of Koseoglu, Rahimi, Okumus, and Liu (2016), which identified a similar trajectory of interest in strategic themes within hospitality and tourism management.

More recent trends show emerging engagement from Social Sciences, with publications clustered in 2020, 2021, and 2023. This surge possibly reflects growing attention to human-centered leadership dynamics and social change influencing the tourism sector. Organizational Behavior exhibited a marked spike in 2024 with four publications, suggesting renewed academic focus or reclassification of related leadership research into this domain.

Table 5. Overview of the research contexts of the strategic leadership in tourism industry research

Context-country of study	Frequency	Studies that utilized the method
Greek	1	Belias <i>et al.</i> (2022)
Northern Ireland	1	Devine and Devine (2011)
Montenegro	1	Đurašević (2015)
Egypt	3	Elbaz and Haddoud (2017), Ghazi <i>et al.</i> (2024), Khalifa (2020)
Iraq	1	Fahmi <i>et al.</i> (2020)
Germany	1	Jaich <i>et al.</i> (2023)
Thailand	1	Kajornbun and Dhirathiti (2019)
Kenya	1	Kanyanja <i>et al.</i> (2023)
Jordan	2	Khasawneh (2020), Masa'Deh <i>et al.</i> (2021)
South Africa	1	Mukhezekule and Tefera (2019)
Australia	1	Noble <i>et al.</i> (2019)
Oman	1	Piya <i>et al.</i> (2022)
Malawi	1	Scheepers <i>et al.</i> (2017)
United Kingdom	2	Sharma <i>et al.</i> (2020), Weed <i>et al.</i> (2011)
United States	1	Sipe (2018)
Taiwan	1	Wan <i>et al.</i> (2017)
Total	20	

Source(s): Table by authors

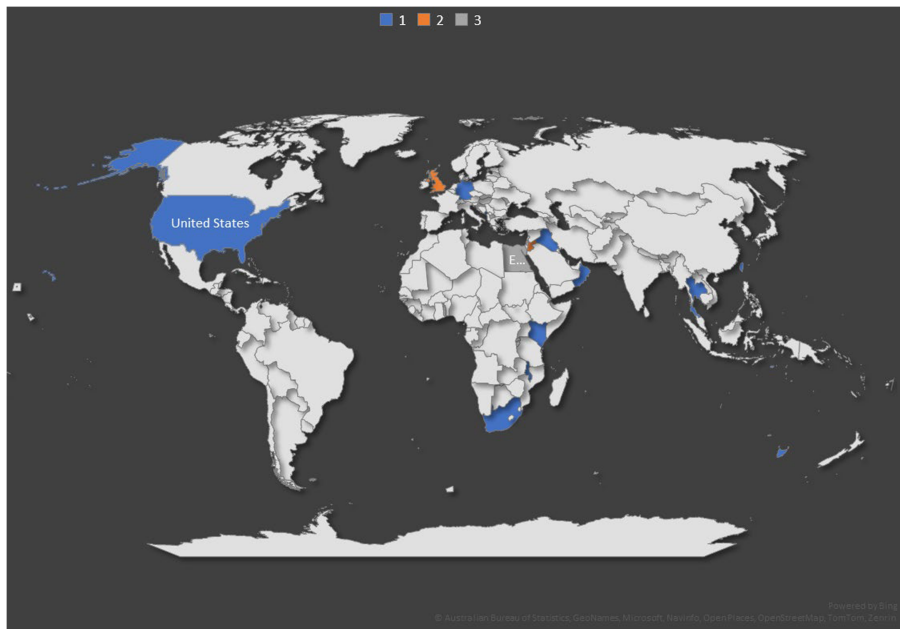


Figure 6. Geographical distribution of studies by country. Source: Courtesy of the authors

In contrast, Economics, Econometrics, and Finance showed minimal engagement, with only one study (Dogru, Bulut, & Sirakaya-Turk, 2021) and Tourism as a discipline yielded only a single contribution. These figures are surprisingly low considering the centrality of economic and sector-specific factors in tourism performance and strategic leadership practices.

The review identified missed intersections with Economics/Finance and core Tourism models (e.g. demand shocks, Revenue Per Available Room (RevPAR) dynamics, productivity, seasonality), proposing cross-disciplinary designs that tie leadership research more explicitly to performance metrics. This observation sets the stage for a deeper diagnostic in [section 5](#) below, where we outline how strategic leadership can be connected to measurable outcomes in economics, finance, and sector-specific models.

Overall, the uneven disciplinary distribution suggests that while core business domains have engaged with strategic leadership over time, broader interdisciplinary integration remains limited. The 2020 publication peak, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic, reflects the influence of external shocks in stimulating scholarly attention toward crisis leadership and organizational resilience (Dirani *et al.*, 2020).

5.2 Research gaps in publication trends

Despite growing interest, strategic leadership research in tourism reveals notable temporal and disciplinary gaps. Business Management and Accounting show missing contributions in key years, while Social Sciences and Organizational Behavior entered the discourse relatively late. The absence of engagement from Economics and Finance is particularly surprising, given tourism's economic foundations. Likewise, the Tourism discipline itself has contributed minimally to strategic leadership theory. Bridging these gaps is essential to broaden the field's scope and foster richer interdisciplinary integration.

Strategic leadership in tourism can also be fruitfully examined through the lens of economics, finance, and sector-specific performance models. Leadership during demand

shocks directly influences price elasticity, revenue management fairness, and recovery trajectories; under financial uncertainty, it shapes cost of capital, real-options decisions, and investment deferrals in destination development. Similarly, leadership plays a critical role in driving digital transformation and productivity gains, linking innovation adoption to total factor productivity (TFP). At the destination level, competitiveness can be enhanced by integrating leadership variables with index components such as infrastructure, safety, and sustainability. These intersections raise important research questions, including how crisis-communication cadences alter post-shock occupancy and ADR, and whether data-driven talent strategies can moderate the relationship between seasonality and service quality.

5.3 State of the art in theoretical foundations

The review identifies a diverse but uneven application of theoretical frameworks in tourism leadership research. Three prominent theories—the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991), the Strategic Leadership Model (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001), and the Upper Echelon Theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984)—appear in approximately 10.5% of the studies each. These theories collectively emphasize internal strategic factors, including resource orchestration, executive cognition, and leadership influence on firm outcomes. They provide a robust lens for understanding strategy formulation, competitive advantage, and leadership development in tourism organizations.

A broader set of less frequently used theories, such as Classical Behavior Theory, Dynamic Capabilities (Teece, 2007), Transformational Leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985), and Systems Theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968), each appear in only one study. Despite their lower frequency, these frameworks offer valuable perspectives on organizational change, cultural transformation, and adaptability in complex tourism environments (Northouse, 2025; Teece, 2018).

This theoretical plurality, though underdeveloped, reflects a growing awareness of the multifaceted nature of leadership in tourism, blending psychological, strategic, and systemic considerations. However, the limited application of many of these frameworks indicates room for greater theoretical integration and cross-fertilization.

While RBV, UET, and Strategic Leadership dominate, many potentially valuable frameworks remain underexplored. These include Porter's Competitive Advantage, Leadership Trait Theory, Goal Contagion, Institutional Theory, Complexity/Adaptive Leadership, Stakeholder Theory, and Service-Dominant Logic. Their inclusion can extend analysis beyond firm-internal dynamics toward external positioning, behavioral traits, and ecosystem-level interactions. To make this explicit, we introduce Table 6 mapping underused frameworks to tourism-relevant mechanisms.

Table 6. Additional theoretical lenses and tourism applications

Theory	Mechanism in tourism leadership	Potential research applications
Porter's Competitive Strategy	External positioning, rivalry, differentiation vs cost	Destination competitiveness, firm strategy alignment
Goal Contagion	Social influence and goal activation	Staff/customer alignment, marketing leadership
Trait Theory	Leadership attributes as predictors	Succession planning, talent pipelines
Complexity/Adaptive Leadership	Nonlinear responses to shocks	Pandemic recovery, climate resilience
Stakeholder Theory	Multi-actor legitimacy and co-creation	Resident trust, governance, over tourism mitigation
Service-Dominant Logic	Value co-creation across service ecosystems	Digital guest experience, co-production models

5.4 Research gaps in theoretical application

Despite promising diversity, strategic leadership research in tourism remains overly reliant on internal firm-based theories, with limited adoption of behavioral, macro-strategic, or ecosystem-focused frameworks. Underused theories like Goal Contagion, Leadership Trait, and Porter's National Advantage appear in only one study each, revealing missed opportunities for broader insight. Citation patterns reinforce this imbalance, as high-impact journals favor established models, while innovative theories often remain overlooked in lesser-ranked outlets. Addressing these gaps requires both theoretical expansion and broader dissemination across the academic publishing spectrum.

Organizational readiness reflects the collective commitment and efficacy needed to implement change, commonly assessed through indicators such as resource adequacy, training preparedness, and change commitment. Complementing this, organizational resilience captures the adaptive capacity and recovery potential of firms during disruptions, measured through redundancy, improvisation, and learning ability. In future research, both constructs hold value not only as outcomes of effective leadership but also as mediators that link leadership practices to performance, or as moderators that buffer the impact of crises on organizational effectiveness, thereby shaping long-term capability development in the tourism sector.

5.5 State of the art in methods and research contexts

The methodological landscape of strategic leadership research in tourism is dominated by quantitative surveys, accounting for 47.6% of all studies. This preference suggests an emphasis on capturing measurable leadership practices, organizational outcomes, and generalizable patterns across populations (Creswell, 2003).

While surveys provide breadth, only 14.3% of studies utilized mixed methods, and an equal proportion relied on interviews, both of which offer deeper, contextual insights. A few studies adopted case studies to explore specific leadership settings, particularly in hospitality and destination governance (Yin, 2018). However, methods such as content analysis, quasi-experiments, and systematic reviews were rarely used, each appearing in just one study. These low frequencies indicate a lack of methodological pluralism and limited use of approaches that could uncover dynamic, discursive, or causal relationships in leadership processes (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Geographically, the research spans multiple countries, with Egypt, Jordan, and the United Kingdom being most represented. While this shows some degree of global interest, it also reflects concentration in specific regions. Large areas such as Latin America, Central Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa (beyond a few countries) remain underrepresented. This raises concerns about cultural and contextual generalizability, especially considering tourism's strong regional and socio-political dimensions.

5.6 Research gaps in methods and contexts

The dominance of survey methods reflects a lack of qualitative depth in current research, limiting insight into how strategic leadership is enacted across diverse tourism contexts. Few studies employ mixed methods, longitudinal designs, or participatory approaches key for capturing change and capacity-building. Geographically, significant tourism regions like South America, much of Southeast Asia, and Africa remain underrepresented, while Egypt, Jordan, and the UK are overrepresented, indicating regional bias. Advancing the field requires methodological innovation and broader geographic inclusion to generate richer, more globally relevant insights.

6. Research contribution, implications and direction for future research

The systematic review of strategic leadership literature in the tourism industry offers a comprehensive assessment of publication trends, theoretical foundations, methodological

approaches, and research contexts from 2011 to 2024. It reveals both the richness and fragmentation of current research, highlighting critical contributions while identifying substantial gaps that call for future scholarly attention.

6.1 Research contributions

This systematic review offers a comprehensive assessment of publication trends, theoretical foundations, methodological approaches, and research contexts on strategic leadership in tourism from 2011 to 2024. First, the review maps publication patterns and shows fluctuating but sustained scholarly interest, with Business Management and Accounting contributing the largest share and noticeable peaks around major global disruptions and sector pressures.

Second, the review clarifies journal influence and citation visibility. High-impact outlets (e.g. *Tourism Management*; *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*; *International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Administration*) shape much of the field's recognized knowledge, while lower-visibility outlets may carry useful but under-diffused contributions. This matters because uneven visibility can reinforce reliance on a narrow set of dominant frameworks.

Third, the review synthesizes the theoretical landscape and shows both richness and imbalance. RBV, Upper Echelons, and the Strategic Leadership Model dominate, while many potentially powerful lenses (e.g. systems, readiness, resilience, macro-competitiveness) remain marginal. To reduce fragmentation, the review also situates tourism strategic leadership within classic strategy formation traditions, including [Mintzberg et al.'s \(2020\) Ten Schools](#). This strengthens conceptual clarity by linking leadership to how strategy forms (e.g. planning vs learning vs entrepreneurial vision) in tourism settings.

Fourth, the review highlights methodological concentration. Literature relies heavily on cross-sectional survey designs, which support breadth but limit deep contextual explanation and dynamic process understanding. The limited use of longitudinal, qualitative, experimental, and participatory designs signals clear opportunities for methodological advancement.

Fifth, the review maps research contexts and reveal geographic imbalance. Studies cluster in a small set of countries (e.g. Egypt, Jordan, UK), while major tourism regions particularly Latin America, large parts of Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and under-studied areas of Africa remain underrepresented, raising concerns about contextual generalizability.

6.2 Practical implication

The findings have clear implications for tourism executives, destination managers, and policymakers. Because tourism is exposed to frequent shocks and stakeholder pressures, leadership decisions directly affect recovery speed, trust, service continuity, and investment confidence. Tourism organizations can use dominant lenses (e.g. RBV and Upper Echelons) to design leadership development and succession systems that strengthen strategic capability portfolios (innovation capacity, resilience routines, data-driven decision practices). At the same time, the underuse of systems and stakeholder lenses suggests a practical gap: many tourism challenges are ecosystem-level (residents, regulators, investors, visitors), meaning strategic leadership should be developed not only for internal performance but also for cross-actor coordination, legitimacy, and conflict management.

For policymakers, the review suggests that leadership capability is a governance tool, not just a firm-level issue. Leadership development programs, standards, and incentives can support destination resilience, digital transformation readiness, and sustainability outcomes especially in contexts where tourism is central to national employment and revenue. Strengthening leadership capability therefore becomes a policy lever for competitiveness and crisis preparedness.

6.3 Theoretical implication

The review confirms that RBV, Strategic Leadership, and Upper Echelons provide strong explanatory value for internal alignment, executive influence, and competitive capability in tourism contexts. However, the field remains theoretically fragmented because many studies do not connect leadership constructs to a broader theory of how strategy is formed and adapted. By integrating Mintzberg *et al.*'s (2020) Ten Schools as an interpretive bridge, the review clarifies that tourism strategic leadership research implicitly spans different strategy formation mechanisms (planning, learning, entrepreneurial vision, cultural/power dynamics). This makes it easier to compare studies, interpret findings consistently, and build cumulative theory.

At the same time, the review highlights conceptual blind spots: underused lenses (e.g. stakeholder legitimacy, adaptive complexity, macro-competitiveness) could connect leadership to destination-level outcomes and ecosystem dynamics. Theoretically, this points to the value of integrative models that bridge micro-level leadership behaviors, meso-level organizational capabilities, and macro-level competitiveness and governance.

6.4 Directions for future research

Future research should prioritize methodological diversification through mixed methods, ethnography, longitudinal case studies, and quasi-experimental or action research approaches that can capture leadership as a dynamic process rather than a static snapshot. Studies should also expand theoretical integration by combining internal capability lenses (RBV/dynamic capabilities) with ecosystem and market-facing lenses (stakeholder theory, adaptive/complexity leadership, competitiveness logics) to better reflect tourism realities.

Geographically, future research should intentionally expand into underrepresented regions, especially Latin America, Central and Southeast Asia, and broader areas of Africa beyond a few countries, as well as emerging destination markets where tourism strategy is evolving rapidly. Comparative cross-regional designs can test boundary conditions, improve generalizability, and produce culturally grounded leadership insights. Finally, scholars should broaden dissemination across journal communities to reduce visibility bias and ensure that valuable theoretical innovations are not confined to narrow publication clusters.

7. Conclusion

This systematic review provides a comprehensive synthesis of strategic leadership research in the tourism industry, revealing a concentration on well-established theories namely the Resource-Based View, Strategic Leadership Model, and Upper Echelon Theory that emphasize internal organizational dynamics and executive influence. While these frameworks have advanced the field, the underutilization of behavioral, contextual, and macro-level theories signals a fragmented theoretical landscape. Methodologically, literature is dominated by quantitative surveys, with limited use of qualitative or mixed methods that could offer richer insights. Geographically, research is uneven, with certain regions overrepresented while others particularly in South America, parts of Asia, and Africa remain underexplored.

The findings carry important implications for both research and practice. For scholars, the synthesis underscores the need for theoretical pluralism, methodological breadth, and cross-regional engagement to build a cumulative science of strategic leadership in tourism. For practitioners and policymakers, the results highlight the importance of developing leadership capability portfolios that integrate resilience, agility, and contextual awareness. Practical tools such as crisis playbooks, stakeholder compacts, and data-driven talent pipelines can help organizations navigate shocks and sustain competitiveness in dynamic tourism environments.

Future research should move beyond the dominance of RBV and UET to integrate underexplored frameworks such as Porter's Competitive Strategy, Complexity/Adaptive Leadership, Stakeholder Theory, and Goal Contagion, thereby connecting leadership to

market dynamics, social legitimacy, and adaptive capacity. Building on the gaps identified in this review, scholars should also operationalize constructs such as organizational readiness and resilience, test their roles as mediators or moderators, and link them to performance outcomes across contexts. Methodologically, more qualitative, longitudinal, and mixed-methods studies are needed to capture dynamic processes, while sectoral engagement with economics and finance (e.g. demand shocks, pricing, capital under uncertainty, productivity/TFP) can ground leadership research in tangible performance indicators. Finally, future inquiry should address geographic blind spots by expanding research into underrepresented regions such as Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa, ensuring a more globally inclusive understanding of strategic leadership in tourism.

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