Examining the legitimacy landscape of the right to tourism

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ABSTRACT

Discourses on the legitimacy of the right to tourism are often characterized by complexity and polarization. This study provides an in-depth examination of this discourse, grounded in institutional theory. We present a novel synthesis of key legitimacy perspectives, identifying eight distinct legitimization approaches: nested, purist, discretionary, ethical, social, vulnerability, precautionary, and multilateral. Rather than advocating for or against the right to tourism, this research focuses on understanding the diverse legitimization strategies employed to support differing positions. Furthermore, we introduce a multi-faceted legitimacy framework for assessing legitimacy judgments in tourism policymaking. This framework establishes a spectrum of legitimacy, highlighting a shift from reliance on basic legitimacy considerations toward more nuanced approaches in contemporary debates. We emphasize the importance of achieving at least intermediate levels of legitimacy to ensure long-term policy acceptance and sustainable tourism outcomes. The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers seeking to develop nuanced and legitimacy-conscious approaches to tourism governance.

1. Introduction

The discourse surrounding rights in tourism, particularly the right to tourism, is both complex and multifaceted, influenced by shifting social, political, and economic contexts. Recent events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, reignited debates on mobility (Baum & Hai, 2020; Seyfi et al., 2023), inequality (Brouder et al., 2020; Rastegar et al., 2021), and recovery (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020), drawing attention to the vulnerabilities of workers and the need for enhanced protections for travellers (Assaf & Scuderi, 2020; Baum & Hai, 2020; Lim, 2021). In the post-pandemic era, the discourse has shifted yet again. Anti-tourism protests, such as those in Barcelona (Crespi-Vallbona & López-Villanueva, 2024; Herrero, 2024), raise questions about the balance between local residents' rights and those of tourists.

This shift in perception presents a timely opportunity for reflection. As the tourism industry navigates post-pandemic recovery while facing increasing scrutiny over its impacts, the need to reassess its relationship with rights becomes more pressing. Although global crises such as conflict, economic instability, and social upheaval (Anghel & Jones, 2023) may overshadow discussions on right to tourism, examining this issue remains both an important academic endeavour and a necessary policy consideration. Engaging with the discourse on right to tourism can offer valuable insights for strengthening our understanding of rights in tourism and informing more equitable decision-making processes.

However, the discussion is challenging, not least because of the contested nature of the right to tourism, which arises from the industry's inherent contradictions. While tourism holds socially transformative potential (Breakey & Breakey, 2013; Minnaert et al., 2006), its alignment with pro-growth agendas increasingly carries negative connotations (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2021). Moreover, debates surrounding this right can be divisive due to the complex ways in which tourism affects various socio-spatial relations. Temporary visitors can be a visible source of both positive and negative change for local populations, shaping whether they are perceived as a benefit or a burden (Brollo & Celata, 2023). Within a single community, these perceptions can vary significantly depending on stakeholders' reliance on tourism and how that reliance is framed (Tremblay-Huet, 2021; Zapata & Hall, 2012).

A key factor shaping these perceptions is how tourism-related mobility is understood. Unlike labour or social migration, tourism is still primarily framed as leisure, which inherently introduces a 'consumption' aspect to the process. Tourists are often seen as "consuming a city" rather than contributing to it (Brollo & Celata, 2023), reinforcing the idea that tourism is a privilege (Bianchi et al., 2020) or even a luxury (Hindley et al., 2022). These characterizations complicate arguments for

recognizing tourism as a right, as luxuries are generally considered non-essential.

Beyond these conceptual challenges, there are also concerns about tourism's broader impact. Some argue that unrestricted tourism exacerbates socio-economic inequalities and environmental degradation (Brooks & Heaslip, 2018; Chambers & Buzinde, 2015; Gascón, 2019; Rastegar & Ruhanen, 2022). Others contend that blaming tourism is reductive, as unsustainable consumption and poor governance are systemic issues that extend beyond the industry (Cole & Eriksson, 2010; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Additionally, critics warn that an overly negative discourse risks overshadowing tourism's potential to foster cross-cultural understanding and peace (Bianchi & Stephenson, 2018). This tension between economic imperatives and societal wellbeing continues to shape discussions on tourism's legitimacy, highlighting the ongoing struggle to reconcile its social significance with its commercial nature (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; McCabe, 2019; Moon & Cho, 2023).

To further complicate matters, debates about the right to tourism cannot be separated from the broader social and geopolitical contexts within which tourism operates. Viewing tourism as an apolitical phenomenon, detached from border politics and global inequalities, may work as a philosophical exercise but holds little practical value. In reality, tourism is deeply shaped by geopolitics, influencing both access to travel and the perception of tourists themselves. The image of tourists can be highly politicized (Kock et al., 2019; Stepchenkova et al., 2019), with governments and institutions leveraging tourism for economic gain, soft power, or even exclusionary practices. This makes tourism particularly vulnerable to misuse, manipulation, and human rights violations (Baum, 2015; Baum & Hai, 2020).

Thus, discussions of the right to tourism must account not only for its social, environmental and economic contradictions but also for the political forces that shape who gets to travel, under what conditions, and with what consequences. These unresolved contradictions make the question of whether tourism should be recognized as a right an ongoing and complex debate. One potential approach to addressing the issue is to avoid taking a definitive stance for or against, and instead focus on understanding the legitimization strategies used to support differing viewpoints. This would allow for the development of a policy framework that could, at the very least, provide a foundation for more effective policymaking in this area.

Anchored in institutional theory, this work offers a novel synthesis of key perspectives on legitimacy claims within the discourse of right to tourism. By charting the evolution of the discourse over the past decades, this paper proposes eight distinct approaches to legitimation in the realm of tourism: *nested, purist, social, discretionary, vulnerability, ethical, precautionary,* and *multilateral*. By categorizing the discourse into distinct approaches, this study allows for the identification of patterns and connections in decision-making as researchers and policymakers address the question of right to tourism. These insights inform the development of a multi-dimensional legitimacy framework.

We must reiterate that this study does not aim to definitively establish whether tourism constitutes a right. Instead, it provides a neutral analysis of legitimation efforts, exploring how legitimacy can be enhanced within existing policy frameworks. Although this stance may not fully satisfy all readers, maintaining a neutral perspective fosters a more constructive and inclusive discourse on tourism legitimacy. By synthesizing diverse viewpoints, this work seeks to contribute to a more nuanced and pragmatic understanding of tourism rights, ultimately informing more balanced and effective policy development.

2. Legitimacy in the rights discourse

There are diverse perspectives on the treatment of rights in tourism, with many scholars relying on legitimacy arguments to support their positions. Legitimacy often serves as a key framework in rights discourse, shaping how arguments for or against specific rights are articulated and justified (Hilson, 2007). Given that the right to tourism can

be either promoted or restricted through policy, the extent to which these policies are accepted as fair and justified largely depends on perceptions of their legitimacy.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, legitimacy denotes conformity to law, rules, or recognized principles. In governance and policy literature, legitimacy is a cornerstone concept for both theorizing how governance and policies function and evaluating the outcomes of these endeavors (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen, 2022). In essence, legitimacy pertains to the justification of authority and is widely considered a desirable attribute from the perspective of governance (Stillman, 1974). Legitimacy lies at the very foundation of social order (Suchman, 1995; Zelditch, 2001), as it embodies the widespread belief that an authority, institution, or social arrangement is lawful, reasonable, acceptable, and just (Tyler, 2006). As such, legitimacy is not an inherent quality, but a social construct derived from the perceptions of others (Suchman, 1995). As societal values, norms, and expectations evolve, so too do assessments of legitimacy.

While there are numerous ways to understand and describe the concept of legitimacy, this work adopts a more contemporary approach, broadly defined as institutional legitimacy (Adams, 2018). This perspective, unlike more state-centric views, encompasses a broad range of institutions, including traditional and novel forms of governance, and acknowledges the diversity of institutions across various sectors. This broad view is crucial as tourism significantly interacts with and is influenced by a multitude of institutions.

This approach to legitimacy is largely grounded in institutional theory, a theoretical framework that views social reality as significantly shaped by institutions (Scott, 2005). Institutions, embedded within the social order, dictate the rules of social interaction and exert social control by making deviations from established norms costly through increased risk, heightened cognitive demands, or diminished legitimacy (Adams, 2018). Scholars studying institutional theory investigate how institutions emerge, evolve, decline, interact with each other, and are influenced by social actors. In recent decade, the body of research has significantly broadened the scope of institutional theory, encompassing a wide range of social phenomena, including tourism.

Institutional theory often frames legitimacy as a process of validation, whereby an entity or practice seeks acceptance from relevant stakeholders (Burdon & Sorour, 2020; Suchman, 1995). This validation enhances an entity's authority and significance. Conversely, a lack of legitimacy can undermine an entity's viability and effectiveness. An institutional perspective enables researchers to examine not only how legitimacy is evaluated but, crucially, how it can be strengthened within the context of policymaking. This understanding will be essential for fostering a nuanced comprehension of the study's subject.

The institutional approach to legitimacy emphasizes three critical dimensions that contribute to its evaluation: pragmatic, cognitive (including moral), and lawful aspects (Johnson, Dowd, & Ridgeway, 2006J; Suchman, 1995). While not exhaustive, these dimensions have been extensively utilized in understanding change processes, particularly in policy and policymaking contexts (Linder & Peters, 1990; Raitio, 2012). Evaluations of legitimacy may also include functional, political, and social considerations (Oliver, 1991). These factors are instrumental in framing the legitimacy of decisions and provide a comprehensive basis for assessing the legality, public acceptance, and practical feasibility of a policy. Additionally, Johnson et al. (2006) argue that the processes of legitimation should be examined at various levels, incorporating group, organizational, and societal perspectives. In the context of tourism, we can extend these levels to include local, state, and international orientations. Furthermore, legitimacy inputs and outputs can be described using descriptors such as coverage, efficacy, enforcement, inclusivity, consensus orientation, procedural fairness, and transparency (Mena & Palazzo, 2012; Muttaqin & Dharmawan, 2023). These metrics will be applied in the results and discussion sections to evaluate and articulate legitimacy in a more structured and comprehensive way.

Achieving legitimacy requires a delicate balance between multiple factors and varying perspectives. To complicate matters further, perceptions of legitimacy can shift over time. Moreover, ambiguity arises when identifying whose legitimacy claims hold weight, especially when boundaries of authority are unclear (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen, 2022). Therefore, viewing legitimacy as a spectrum is crucial. This approach acknowledges the existence of various degrees and pathways within the legitimacy landscape, a concept that gains increasing relevance in the following sections. By understanding these diverse mechanisms, we can explore how legitimacy is challenged and negotiated within the tourism industry.

3. Methodology

This study employs thematic synthesis with broader inferential analysis to map the varied approaches to legitimacy in tourism. Thematic synthesis, a widely used method in tourism research, analyzes and synthesizes qualitative data or literature to identify common themes, patterns, and insights across multiple sources (Berbekova et al., 2021; Radomskaya & Pearce, 2021). By incorporating interpretive or inferential synthesis, this approach goes beyond simply categorizing themes. It makes broader inferences about their meaning, implications, and consequences within a wider context. This method integrates diverse perspectives into a cohesive narrative, revealing both specific themes and overarching trends across the field. Its flexibility allows for the synthesis of insights from various schools of thought, making it particularly valuable in mapping out the diverse legitimacy assessments in tourism rights literature.

Leveraging the extensive coverage of Google Scholar and Scopus, a comprehensive database search was conducted across multiple academic disciplines. To capture a broader range of insights on tourism rights, the search was expanded beyond tourism to include fields such as geography, management, policy, and governance. Topics such as rights to tourism transcend any single discipline and involve complex discussions that encompass policy, human mobility, ethics, political geography, state governance, and border management. The initial search focused on scholarly publications that broadly touched upon the concept of tourism as a right, using search terms like "tourism right(s)", "right(s) to tourism", "right to travel", "travel rights" and "tourism + human rights". While there was no restriction on the publication year, the initial results overview suggested the 1980s as a starting point. This yielded 145 scholarly publications.

A thorough review of the keywords and abstracts from these 145 publications was conducted. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of this concept, additional search terms such as "social tourism," "just tourism," "tourism ethics," and "tourist mobility" were incorporated to ensure conceptual saturation. These search terms were informed by influential works by Bianchi et al. (2020), Breakey and Breakey (2013), Cole and Eriksson (2010), Gascón (2019), and Mihalič and Fennell (2015). The inclusion of additional keywords resulted in 324 journal articles and book chapters. These publications underwent full-text reading to assess their adherence to the following criteria: 1) they must contain an empirical or conceptual investigation into attitudes toward tourism; 2) they must examine arguments for tourism regulation and/or promotion; or 3) they must analyse and compare arguments for and/or against the existence and recognition of a right to tourism. After thorough screening against these criteria, 69 scholarly works were selected for the final thematic analysis. The whole process is outlined in Fig. 1.

Following thematic analysis and to further enrich the discussion, the researchers also incorporated insights from scholarship on human mobility and broader debates surrounding legitimacy, sustainability, and policy development. Consequently, this work offers a rich cross-
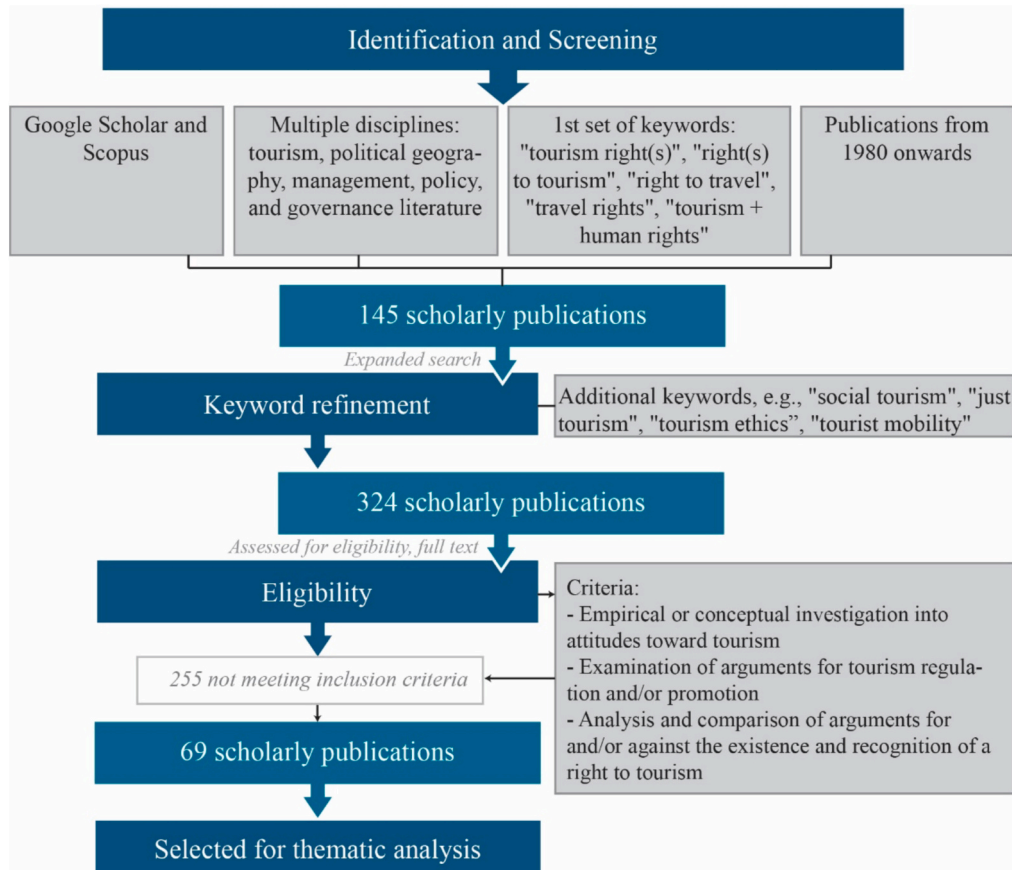

Fig. 1. Research Process.

disciplinary perspective on rights in tourism. It is important to note that the referenced articles and book chapters, while representative, are not exhaustive. In qualitative synthesis, locating every available study is not essential, as the core findings of a conceptual synthesis remain robust even with minor variations in the number of supporting publications (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009).

4. Results

The results indicate a clear upward trend in interest surrounding the right to tourism, with over 60 % of publications emerging after 2014. This aligns with Moon and Cho's (2023) observation that tourism may be poised to become the next human rights focus. Notably, until the mid-2010s, our sample shows an almost equal distribution of proponents and opponents of supporting rights status for tourism. However, in recent years, there has been a discernible increase in the number of more cautious and even opposing viewpoints (Fig. 2).

For illustrative purposes, Fig. 2 categorizes the examined publications into less and more supportive perspectives. The "less supportive" category encompasses a range of viewpoints, including those expressing caution or reservations toward recognizing tourism as a right (further elaborated in the next section). While many works take a clearer stance or tend to support one argument over the other, some adopt a more nuanced perspective. However, despite the inherent nuances in some cases, the underlying sentiments generally lean toward one side or the other, a viewpoint also supported by Gascón (2019), enabling meaningful comparisons. That said, a degree of subjectivity may be inherent in this categorization, as the researchers' interpretation of an author's argument may introduce some bias, particularly in cases where the author's stance is less clearly defined. Many of these works will be examined in the next section as we explore the eight approaches.

4.1. Eight legitimization approaches

Below, we introduce eight approaches to assessing legitimacy in tourism. These approaches emerged from our thematic analysis and provide a framework for understanding the diverse legitimization arguments encountered in the literature. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, and scholars often use variations or combinations of two or more approaches to explore the issues at hand. However, they are sufficiently distinct in their focus and guided by different fundamental factors, making it possible to distinguish between them and present them as separate theoretical perspectives. It is important to note that these approaches do not cover the entire spectrum of perspectives and are mostly shaped by macro-level observations.

These diverse approaches signify that the legitimization process in tourism is characterized by a dynamic interplay of dimensions and levels of perception, each supported by distinct arguments and schools of thought. Table 1 serves to highlight the key themes, the differences and similarities among various perspectives on tourism rights, while also highlighting the accompanying critiques for each approach.

4.1.1. Nested approach

Among the various legitimization approaches in tourism, the nested approach has emerged as particularly noteworthy. Within this line of reasoning, the right to tourism is seen as contingent upon various layers of rights and obligations. For example, citizens' rights are linked to the legal obligations of the state, which are in turn bound by international standards. This interconnection underscores the idea that the right to tourism is not standalone but part of a broader legal and social framework (Breakey & Breakey, 2013; Hazel, 2005).

The nested approach highlights the roles of both legal legitimacy (based on laws and treaties) and cognitive legitimacy (the acceptance of tourism as a right within society) in determining how tourism is positioned and validated as a right. The validation of the right to tourism is also tied to its impact on other rights, such as leisure, education, and recreation (Moore et al., 1995). By showing how tourism can enhance or restrict access to these interconnected rights, the nested approach strengthens the case for tourism as a legitimate entitlement.

By embedding tourism within the fabric of everyday life, the nested approach blurs the lines between leisure and essential needs. This integration supports the idea that tourism is a fundamental aspect of social existence, thus validating its importance as a right. Proponents of this approach argue that individuals engaged in tourism are not merely "tourists" but embody multiple roles - parents, consumers, citizens - each contributing to the legitimacy of the right to tourism. This recognition of diverse identities reinforces the validation of the right as it aligns with broader societal values (Morgan et al., 2015).

Overall, the nested approach provides a comprehensive framework for validating the right to tourism by illustrating its connections to various legal, social, and cultural dimensions. However, the interconnected dependencies outlined in the nested approach can create complexities that make it difficult to apply in practice. For example, the reliance on multiple layers of rights and legal obligations may lead to challenges in enforcement. Additionally, the interdependence of rights can lead to conflicts between different entitlements. For example, the right to tourism may clash with the rights of local communities. The nested approach tends to emphasize state and international roles, which may marginalize the voices of non-state actors, such as grassroots organisations.

4.1.2. Purist approach

The purist approach is championed by advocates known as 'tourism purists', whose vision closely aligns with the principles outlined in the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Global Code of Ethics. Proponents of this perspective tend to prioritize high-level
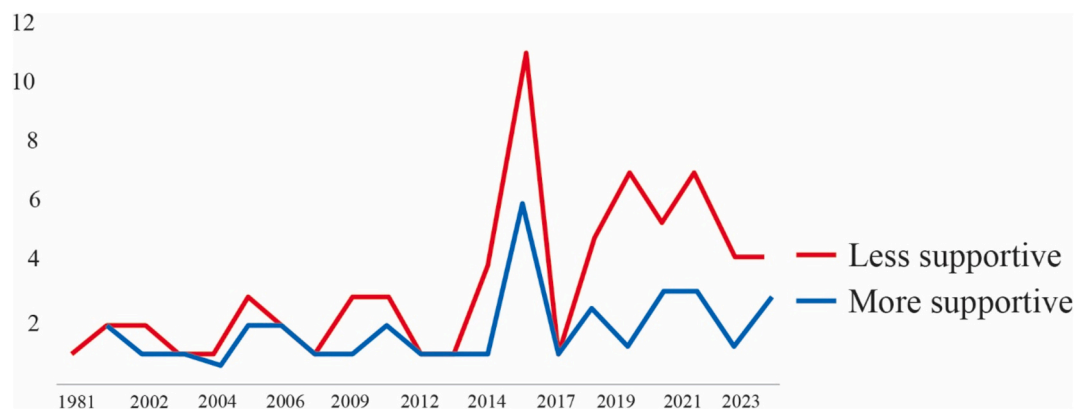

Fig. 2. Support and opposition to the 'Right to Tourism' (*N* = 69).

Table 1
Summary of eight legitimization approaches.

Approach/ theme	Emphasis	Key principles	View on legitimacy judgments	Criticisms
Nested	Interdependence of laws, policies, and norms	Defined as chain of interdependencies, where each 'right' depends on the strength and integrity of the other rights; Conceptualizes rights as nested within each other.	The right to tourism is seen as contingent upon various layers of rights and obligations.	The reliance on multiple layers of rights and legal obligations may lead to challenges in enforcement; potential to marginalize the voices of non-state actors.
Purist	Internationalism; global unity	Grounded in UNWTO Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), International Human Rights Treaties.	Tourism participation should be regarded as a human right. This approach underscores its validity by adhering to the principles enshrined in UN declarations and human rights treaties.	The purist approach tends to overlook local and state-level considerations, which can create challenges in practical application; may not adequately address the unique needs and aspirations of specific communities.
Social	Societal sentiments	Contingent on acceptance and practical benefits for people.	The right to tourism is not absolute but can evolve in tandem with societal sentiments and be strengthened by sustained public calls for its recognition.	Variable interpretations could lead to inconsistent judgment and subjective application, potentially privileging the interests of dominant groups.
Discretionary	National security, state sovereignty	Guided by state-informed legitimacy judgments and self-interested state conduct.	Endorsement by the state plays a key role in determining the legitimacy of the right to tourism.	Viewing travel as an optional right can undermine tourism, grant states disproportionate power over access to tourism, and increase the risk of abuse and political manipulation.
Vulnerability	Socio-normative vulnerability	Emphasis on moral responsibility and humanitarian values	Elevates tourist rights from optional privileges to essential protections, guaranteeing vulnerable groups the normative and cognitive legitimacy of safe and dignified travel.	Potentially neglects the diverse circumstances and levels of vulnerability among tourists; and overlooks the broader economic, practical, and legal constraints.
Ethical	Equitable future	Appeal to morality and universality	Elevates tourism to a fundamental right, leveraging cognitive arguments; promotes travel's transformative potential for all.	Overemphasis on idealism; lack of clear implementation strategies.
Precautionary	Balance and sustainability	Balance of rights and sustainable development focus	Legitimacy requires striking a balance between local voices, state governance, and global concerns, with a priority on sustainable development over unchecked growth.	Demands collaboration and consensus, which is a challenging task to accomplish; desirability of a post-growth tourism model may be contested, particularly within the industry.
Multilateral	Dialogue and cooperation	Emphasis on cooperation and multilateral agreements	Transparent agreements, shared commitment, capacity building, and dialogue unlock legitimacy.	Less powerful countries and communities may be at a disadvantage in negotiations.

normative considerations (e.g., evaluating tourism rights based on ethical or legal standards, often derived from international agreements, treaties, or global conventions) arguing that these provide a strong foundation for recognizing tourism as a universal right (Haulot, 1981; Mihalič & Fennell, 2015; Veal, 2015). For instance, Veal (2015) compellingly argues for the effectiveness of applying the international framework of universal human rights to address the question of the right to tourism. Similarly, Mihalič and Fennell (2015) argue that tourism participation should be regarded as an essential human right, framing the denial of the freedom to engage in tourism as a form of social deprivation.

The purist argument is grounded in established human rights treaties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which recognize the rights to freedom of movement and leisure. Purists emphasize that the significance of tourism is acknowledged in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and by government agencies worldwide, which they view as a compelling basis for acknowledging the legitimacy of tourism as a fundamental right. This approach places a strong emphasis on the clarifying influence of legal legitimacy above all other considerations.

4.1.3. Social approach

Some scholars challenge the purist viewpoint by arguing that the right to tourism cannot be readily equated with other fundamental societal rights (Hughes, 2018; McKercher, 2015). This alternative perspective does not necessarily reject tourism as a right but rather acknowledges its varying priority in the context of daily life. The proponents of 'social' perspective maintain that the right to tourism can be subject to varying interpretations depending on the prevailing societal

sentiments. The social approach acknowledges that there are circumstances where restricting travellers' mobility is justified, such as when travel infringes on the rights of others or when the potential negative consequences outweigh the travellers' interests (Altundal, 2022).

This perspective to some extent is reflected in the work of Light and Brown (2021), who grounded some of their views of tourism in the philosophy of Sartre. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) argued that within the constraints of their situation, people are free to choose their way of living and reap the consequences of their choices. The choice and the ability to perpetually modify one's choice is foundational to the social perspective. In other words, the social perspective highlights the potential of social pressure to modify the status of tourism and how we feel about tourism, with collective efforts acting as an important regulating force (Coles, 2015; Tremblay-Huet, 2021).

Social approach posits that societal considerations should be central when shaping perceptions and legitimacy judgments in tourism. In this context, the 'right to tourism' and its place in the hierarchy of rights are contingent on demand and the cumulative achievements in the field of tourism as perceived by those impacted by it (Altundal, 2022; Page, 2014). This approach prioritizes social acceptability and practical legitimacy, emphasizing that tourism policies should be crafted to align with and serve the prevailing public interests. However, this approach may amplify the interests of dominant groups, leading to inconsistent judgments and subjective application.

4.1.4. Discretionary approach

The discretionary approach emphasizes state sovereignty, asserting that decisions concerning entry policies and the regulation of movement should remain entirely within the unilateral authority of the state. The proponents of this perspective advocate that the state has the exclusive

right to control who enters its borders and under what conditions, without external interference (see Abizadeh, 2012). The discretionary approach is commonly grounded in the principle of self-determination, centering on the protection of national interests against potential external threats (see examples offered by Lim, 2021). It promotes stricter border controls as a way to strengthen national security against disruptive forces, often citing infrastructure limitations, public health, security, or environmental concerns as reasons for restricting travel (Altundal, 2022).

The discretionary approach is guided by state-informed legitimacy judgments and self-interested state conduct, where the determination of 'travel worthiness' is considered best entrusted to the discretion of individual states (Czaika et al., 2018). While it does not entirely dismiss international considerations, it tends to view them as flexible guidelines rather than binding mandates (Song et al., 2012). The discretionary approach remains a common reference point in tourism mobility discussions due to its ease of implementation, practicality, and alignment with state sovereignty considerations. However, its opaqueness, potential for bias and discrimination, particularly during crises, raise ethical and legal concerns (Lim, 2021). Additionally, it tends to prioritize state agendas over local considerations.

4.1.5. Vulnerability approach

This perspective views tourists as a vulnerable group and heavily relies on cognitive legitimization arguments within the tourism rights debate. This perspective argues that travel, as a state of being away from familiar supports, can create vulnerable situations for tourists (this vulnerability is explored by Michalko, 2004; Stepchenkova et al., 2019; Torabian & Mair, 2022; and Wilks et al., 2013). This vulnerability tends to be more pronounced among international travellers rather than domestic ones, as rights to international travel receive less endorsement and acceptance than rights to domestic travel (Arbulú et al., 2021; Czaika et al., 2018).

Given these considerations, some argue that tourists, as a vulnerable group, should receive increased attention and protection (Mendieta, 2020; Wilks et al., 2021; Zare & Ye, 2023). The vulnerability perspective posits that tourists have the right to expect more support from society, to be accorded the same respect and dignity as any other citizen, and to have their needs acknowledged. From this vantage point, support for vulnerable groups is seen as a means to reduce inequality among society's members, ultimately strengthening the society as a whole (Hazel, 2005; Torabian & Mair, 2022). This argument is firmly rooted in principles of moral responsibility, ethical considerations, and humanitarian values. While this perspective advocates for increased attention and protection for tourists, it does not fully explore the practical and legal constraints that such an approach could produce.

4.1.6. Ethical approach

The ethical approach, akin to the purist approach, emphasizes high-level considerations, but is grounded in strong cognitive or moral foundations rather than legal ones. It prioritizes interpersonal relationships and ethical intent above all else. Drawing on Kant's moral theory, this approach advocates for treating individuals as ends in themselves, never merely as means to an end (Ward, 2019). It tends to favour universalizable rules - principles that can be applied to everyone, regardless of background or position. Echoing Mill's assertion that freedoms not enjoyed by all are not worth defending (Hansson, 2022; Mill, 1969) and universalist claims about humanity (Morris, 2006, 2010), the ethical approach supports the idea that tourism should be regarded as a fundamental right. Proponent of this approach argue that such recognition could enhance broader accessibility of tourism (Haulot, 1981; Hazel, 2005).

The ethical approach rejects the perspective of tourism as a privilege, arguing that this view restricts leisure experiences to a select few without offering solutions for broader participation (Hall, 2010). It challenges the notion of tourism as solely a market-driven industry,

emphasizing its complexity and potential as a socially transformative force (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006; Hultsman, 1995). The ethical approach asserts that participation in tourism should be considered a public good, and therefore must be accessible to all. However, while the ethical approach seeks to dismantle the stigma of tourism as a commodity, it does not sufficiently address the systemic inequalities that prevent equitable access to tourism experiences. Simply advocating for broader accessibility does not tackle the root causes of these inequalities. This approach also falls short in providing concrete strategies or frameworks for achieving these goals. Critics could point out that the emphasis on high-level moral principles does not translate into actionable policies or practices.

4.1.7. Precautionary approach

This approach posits that true legitimacy in tourism is not a unilateral achievement, but a delicate choreography where local, state, and international considerations intertwine. It is rooted in the precautionary principle - a guiding principle in decision-making when dealing with situations of uncertainty or the possibility of harm to the public or the environment (Sandin, 1999). It underscores the importance of equilibrium, wherein the rights of tourists and those of local communities strive for a balance. The proponents of the precautionary approach argue that true equilibrium lies in fostering a right to travel that does not infringe upon the right to live (Perkumienė & Pranskūnienė, 2019). For this approach, achieving balance is crucial, for without it, granting tourism a right would only amplify inequalities and untenable growth (Gascón, 2019).

The precautionary approach emphasizes the need for a comprehensive evaluation of tourism and its effects before addressing issues of rights, advocating for greater caution in decision-making. It emphasizes the need for greater scrutiny of the impacts of rising tourist consumption on both global and local communities, fostering a consensus on its implications for humanity (e.g., Gascón, 2019; Hindley et al., 2022; Scheyvens, 2009). This approach tends to highlight concerns about unchecked growth within the industry, with many proponents calling for a shift toward sustainable tourism models that prioritize responsible development (MacKenzie & Gannon, 2019; Rastegar & Ruhanen, 2022).

By reframing tourism legitimacy as a shared endeavour, this approach advocates for a more equitable future for all stakeholders. It challenges us to embrace the post-growth tourism framework, where responsible travel and thriving communities become mutually reinforcing aspirations. A key criticism of this position is the difficulty in achieving consensus. For example, the desirability of a post-growth tourism model may be contested by businesses. Additionally, it relies on proactive engagement among diverse stakeholders and collaboration toward shared goals, which is not always attainable.

4.1.8. Multilateral approach

The multilateral approach, like the name suggests, emphasizes cooperation, dialogue, and collaboration between multiple nations, often within a framework of international agreements and institutions. It acknowledges the right to state sovereignty yet seeks to balance respect for national sovereignty with the need for regional cooperation on issues that transcend borders, such as human rights, trade, and tourism. Multilateral approach argues that states should work together to achieve common goals. Proponents of this approach argue for the importance of transparent multilateral agreements with clear rules and structures (Mylonopoulos et al., 2023). They recognize the challenges of collective decision-making and focus on identifying and addressing barriers that prevent participation in tourism activities.

Scholars like Stephenson and Hughes (2005), Higgins-Desbiolles (2006), and Page (2014) have referenced this approach, noting its potential applicability in tourism policy. From this perspective, knowledge sharing, capacity building, education and cooperation are essential to ensuring that tourism remains a positive force. However, the multilateral approach faces criticism for its selective approach to cooperation,

often struggling to engage in meaningful dialogue with countries that differ culturally, economically, or politically. This limitation raises concerns about inclusivity and global applicability.

5. Discussion

5.1. Trends and emerging perspectives

Our findings indicate a growing trend in arguments opposing the recognition of tourism as a right. However, this opposition is generally characterized by caution rather than strong resistance, with some arguments even advocating for maintaining the status quo. Nevertheless, the reality is likely more nuanced, with a spectrum of viewpoints co-existing alongside more definitive stances. This ambiguity is not least dependent on the right to tourism and its significant overlaps with other rights, highlighting the interconnectedness of rights and the ambiguity surrounding their definitions and boundaries. Even among proponents of more traditional approaches - who typically align with nested, purist, ethical, and discretionary perspectives - there is a noticeable rise in references to social, vulnerability, precautionary, and multilateral perspectives. This undeniably adds further complexity to the discussion, but also reflects broader shifts in tourism, whereby its role in the global economy and wellbeing production is becoming increasingly less defined.

For example, precautionary arguments frequently emerge from critiques focusing on the lack of sustainability in the tourism sector. This approach highlights the contradictions between tourism growth and sustainability goals. Scholars advocating for sustainable travel or even tourism degrowth tend to support the precautionary approach, emphasizing the need for responsible and reduced tourism activity to mitigate environmental harm. The vulnerability approach reflects the increasing role of cognitive factors in shaping the legitimization of tourism policies. It suggests that decision-making in tourism must be guided by ethical reasoning, evolving societal values, and a heightened focus on personal wellbeing. The proliferation of the vulnerability approach indicates that policymakers need to be more responsive to changing dynamics, particularly in how tourists, local communities, and stakeholders perceive tourism. This approach has gained prominence in the wake of events like pandemics, climate disasters, and geopolitical conflicts, which leave tourists in vulnerable positions. The vulnerability perspective also counters overtourism concerns by arguing that tourists are often victims of broader socio-political issues.

The social approach addresses a different trend. Traditionally, tourism policy discussions have tended to prioritize state and international justifications over local perspectives. The social approach bridges this gap by arguing that the quality of policy decisions is tied to the level of citizen participation. However, research suggests that citizen engagement in tourism policymaking remains low (Gursoy et al., 2017; Nunkoo et al., 2018), leading to a disconnect between public and state views on policy legitimacy (Hough et al., 2010; Jackson & Gau, 2016). The social perspective advocates for stronger communication and collaboration between local communities, state, and international actors in decisions surrounding tourism rights.

Our results also indicate that pragmatic solutions in the discourse on tourism rights remain underexplored, largely because the practical feasibility of certain policies (especially those requiring broad consensus) is often questioned. The multilateral approach offers a potential solution by fostering open dialogue and cooperation among like-minded states, promoting international collaboration while respecting state sovereignty. This approach highlights regional collaborations as more achievable and practical than universal frameworks for tourism rights.

Legitimacy in tourism is a fluid and contested concept, yet both supporters and critics of tourism rights recognize the need to reinforce it. Our exploration of different legitimacy approaches underscores the necessity of a framework that evaluates legitimacy while accounting for local realities, state support, and international standards. To this end, we introduce a framework for assessing and enhancing the legitimacy of tourism policy decisions - one that does not explicitly reference the eight approaches yet can describe and situate them within a broader legitimacy spectrum.

5.2. Multi-perception legitimacy framework

Fig. 3 outlines a conceptual framework for describing and evaluating legitimacy judgments in tourism policy. While not exhaustive, the proposed multi-dimensional legitimacy framework highlights the journey toward achieving stronger legitimacy in tourism policy initiatives that focus on rights to tourism. It encompasses two key aspects: levels (local, state, international) and dimensions (lawful, cognitive, pragmatic); and input/output attributes such as stable, complex, comprehensive, inclusive, fair, transparent, lengthy, and resource-intensive – all informed by the results of the thematic synthesis.

In essence, this framework illustrates a progression from basic to advanced legitimacy judgments, with any position between the initial and final milestones representing a transitional state. This framework can be applied to assess how any of the identified legitimation efforts, individually or in combination, can contribute to the legitimacy of a tourism-related policy. While the ultimate goal of policymaking, in our view, should be to achieve advanced legitimacy, in reality, many policies affecting tourism rights exhibit lower levels of legitimacy and may not be stable over time. Furthermore, the perceived legitimacy of these policies can fluctuate significantly due to the influence of various internal and external factors.

For example, a policy based on legitimacy judgments that primarily consider a limited set of elements, such as two levels and one dimension or two dimensions and one level, can be categorized as relatively basic. While such policies may require fewer resources and appear simpler to achieve, they may also exhibit inherent limitations. Specifically, their reliance on a narrower set of considerations can result in less stable policies that are more susceptible to challenges and may lose endorsement over time. As a result, basic legitimation efforts are often employed in the context of short-term policies. For example, temporary restrictions on tourist movement, especially when politically motivated, are often grounded in basic legitimacy.

From the perspective of our eight approaches, if applied in isolation to inform a given policy, the purist and discretionary approaches are more likely to result in policies that can be classified as based on basic legitimacy arguments. Specifically, the purist approach, with its emphasis on international legal frameworks and cognitive considerations, may prioritize universal principles over local realities and diverse perspectives. Similarly, the discretionary approach, grounded in state-level cognitive and practical concerns, may prioritize national interests over broader ethical considerations and the needs of vulnerable groups. To an extent, the ethical, vulnerability, and perhaps even nested approaches, if applied in isolation, might also contribute to policies that primarily rely on basic legitimacy arguments.

The intermediate state falls between basic and advanced legitimacy judgments, involving more complex consultations with various actors to ensure both comprehensiveness and acceptance. This approach strikes a balance between input and output, as it is, for example, more complex but also more transparent and inclusive compared to basic efforts. By incorporating more diverse perspectives, it enables the generation of more sophisticated justifications for policy decisions. As a result, policies grounded in intermediate legitimacy have the potential to be more stable in the medium term though not as easy to implement. The social and precautionary approaches within the discourse on tourism rights have the potential to inform policies grounded in intermediate levels of legitimacy. However, while these approaches are more considerate and inclusive, they are often viewed as less practical due to their variable stance on tourism rights. Their complexity, driven by the need for extensive consultations and input from diverse stakeholders, can make
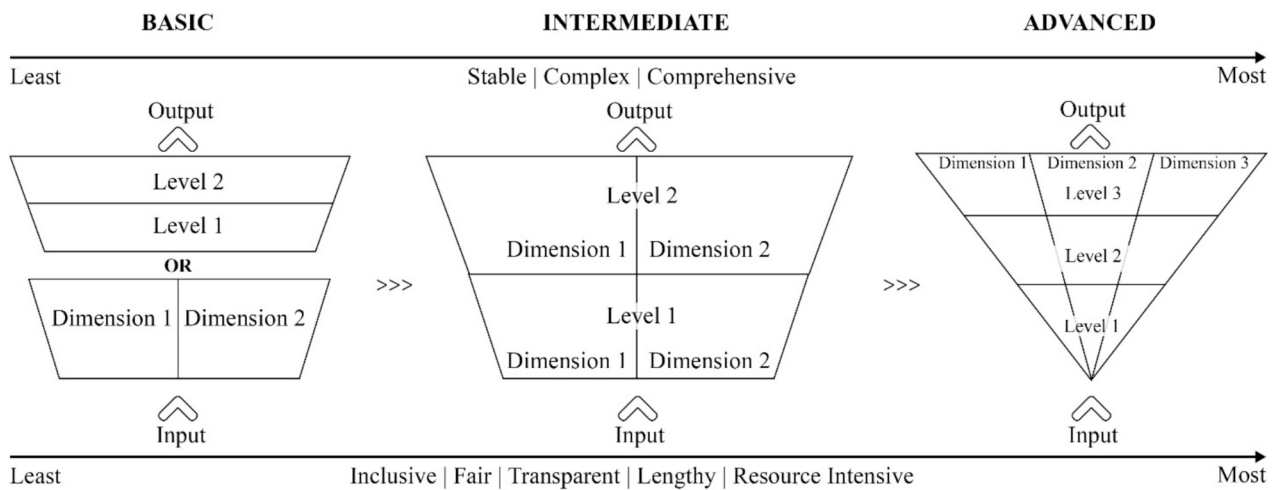
Fig. 3. Multi-perception legitimacy framework.

them difficult to implement in practice, especially when there is a need for clear, actionable policies. As such, they often struggle with real-world applicability despite offering more nuanced and comprehensive legitimacy judgments.

Advanced legitimacy efforts encompass all three levels and dimensions, requiring significantly more resources due to their complexity. Ideally, these efforts would provide the most robust foundation for tourism policy decision-making. While challenging to achieve, advanced legitimacy represents the highest standard, offering maximum potential for comprehensive and stable policymaking in tourism. However, due to the practical challenges associated with such extensive approaches, current research and policy discussions tend to focus on basic to intermediate levels of legitimacy. As the discourse on tourism rights evolves, we may eventually see more examples of advanced legitimacy approaches being applied.

It is important to note that while the proposed framework serves as a tool for assessing and delineating the legitimacy of policy initiatives, it does not prescribe which combinations of levels and dimensions are most important at the basic to intermediate levels. The reasoning is that there are compelling arguments for various combinations, depending on the specific attributes and requirements of local contexts, industries, and state governance. For example, some scholars emphasize the necessity of public-state level involvement in legitimizing tourism policies (MacKenzie & Gannon, 2019; Zapata & Hall, 2012). Others, like Abizadeh (2008, 2012) and Bekkers et al. (2016), advocate for incorporating international considerations, particularly to justify restrictive state policies. Despite differing opinions, these scholars generally agree that as the restrictiveness of a policy increases, efforts toward more advanced legitimization should be pursued. Additionally, some proponents argue that applying a three-dimensional approach to legitimacy judgments can help justify policy decisions (Adamenko et al., 2021; Price, 2022). From this perspective, as long as all dimensions are considered at least one level, the policy can assert its basic legitimacy. This flexibility allows for legitimacy to be established in diverse contexts, depending on the specific policy and stakeholders involved.

6. Conclusion

The eight legitimization approaches synthesized in this study offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the various ways legitimacy judgments are formed in tourism. These diverse perspectives, informed by multiple theoretical vantage points, shed light on key trends in tourism policy discourse, such as the increasing emphasis on local voices and the prominent role of the cognitive dimension in shaping legitimacy within tourism policymaking. Our synthesis helps

illuminate how evolving societal values, stakeholder perceptions, and ethical and practical considerations are increasingly shaping the trajectory of tourism policy.

The proposed multi-perception legitimacy framework revealed that most existing legitimization efforts primarily focus on basic levels of legitimacy, often due to practical considerations such as easier implementation. However, newer approaches, such as social and precautionary, tend to exhibit a higher degree of comprehensiveness in their reasoning.

Despite the variety of legitimation approaches, there is a growing consensus among scholars that legitimacy requirements should become stricter as the impact of a policy increases. While the authors do not endorse any specific approach, they argue that all decision-makers should aim for more advanced legitimization. Future research should focus on identifying compelling evidence to support different combinations of levels and dimensions that can enhance the legitimacy of decision-making in tourism.

This work underscores the dynamic nature of legitimacy, indicating that policies can both gain and lose legitimacy, which may explain the lack of consensus on rights to tourism. However, this does not preclude the possibility of achieving such a consensus. The journey toward this goal would be arduous and would require advanced legitimacy judgments. Additionally, even a seemingly stable consensus can be influenced by external forces and changing perceptions of tourism. Nevertheless, examining this complex process of legitimizing perspectives on tourism rights could pave the way for more effective policy endeavors in the future.

Lastly, it is important to clarify that the proposed framework was never intended as a definitive tool for resolving policy debates. Instead, it should be regarded as a descriptive tool for policy initiatives and a guide for strengthening these initiatives by encouraging the consideration of additional dimensions and levels of legitimacy.

6.1. Theoretical and practical implications

This work transcends the limitations of the current rights discourse, which predominantly revolves around the binary argument of "right" or "no right". Instead, it provides a roadmap toward enhanced legitimacy for policymakers, regardless of their stance on the right to tourism. By emphasizing the importance of strong legitimacy for long-term sustainability, this approach lays the foundation for new policies, setting a new direction for the rights debate in tourism. Our findings underscore the need to examine legitimacy in tourism and encourage tourism scholars to delve deeper into legitimacy judgments within the field, potentially adopting perspectives beyond institutional frameworks.

By analyzing and comparing different types of legitimization reasoning, this work offers valuable practical implications. For policymakers, this nuanced analysis identifies new avenues for research and exploration within the complex landscape of tourism rights. Specifically, the proposed framework offers a valuable tool for explaining policy instability and dynamic shifts within the right to tourism policy domain. For example, in the context of basic legitimacy, it explains how the omission of broader considerations will inevitably lead to inherent tensions that demand a re-evaluation of decisions as new factors and considerations emerge. Consequently, the legitimacy status attained through basic legitimation efforts is inherently temporary.

The framework also offers potential for conflict resolution in policymaking. For example, in scenarios where policy initiatives conflict, evaluating the legitimacy of contrasting initiatives using the framework can provide valuable insights for both initiative advocates, enabling them to identify areas where their justifications may fall short. For policymakers, this allows them to determine how to strengthen the policy to enhance its legitimacy.

This work reinforces the message that legitimacy requirements should be more stringent for policies with greater impact. It urges policymakers to actively pursue more advanced legitimacy when crafting impactful tourism policies, thereby ensuring enduring endorsement and acceptance for their initiatives. The research advocates for meeting at least intermediate legitimacy requirements before considering such policies actionable. While this does not simplify implementation, the researchers believe that the long-term benefits of rigorous and nuanced legitimization outweigh the complexities and resource demands it entails.

This work is not without limitations. Although efforts were made to achieve comprehensive coverage of the current rights discourse, some perspectives were inevitably overlooked. Additionally, the eight approaches were devised based on the researchers' interpretations of diverse opinions, which involve subjective reasoning that is not infallible. Despite attempts to minimize bias, some may have unintentionally crept in. However, we encourage future scholars to refine these approaches or, even better, to introduce new ones.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Valeriya Radomskaya: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Abhishek Singh Bhati:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Conceptualization.

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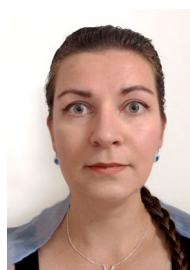
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