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Visitor Conduct Education in Heritage Tourism: A Model for Strengthening Visitor Responsibility

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ABSTRACT:

Background: Heritage tourism requires more than posted rules to prevent damage and encourage respect for cultural practices. **Objective:** This study develops an integrative model of visitor conduct education across the visit cycle.

Methods: A purposive review of 22 empirical and review studies was coded by intervention stage and behavioural mechanism; complementary Vietnamese research was used to consider contextual relevance.

Results: Evidence links interpretation, guiding, message design, experience and social norms with visitor conduct or its predictors, while neutralisation and contagion may sustain misconduct. The proposed visit-cycle responsibility model connects pre-visit, on-site and post-visit interventions to four building mechanisms - understanding, connection, norms and enabling conditions - and one countering mechanism, disengagement and contagion. Six testable propositions identify potential evaluation pathways.

Conclusion: The model provides a framework for designing site-specific conduct education, not empirical proof that its interventions work in Vietnam. Behavioural observation and community-informed field testing remain necessary.

KEYWORDS: heritage tourism, visitor conduct education, responsible behavior, heritage interpretation, social norms; moral disengagement, Vietnam.

1. INTRODUCTION

Heritage sites depend on visitors for cultural exchange and public support, but they are also vulnerable to touching, graffiti, litter, unsafe climbing and inappropriate conduct during sacred practices. These actions may be individually small yet cumulatively damaging. The ICOMOS International Charter for Cultural Heritage Tourism recognises that conservation, interpretation and visitor management are shared responsibilities rather than tasks that can be separated from tourism operations (ICOMOS, 2022). For heritage managers, the policy problem is not merely to announce rules but to make responsible behaviour understandable and practicable throughout a visit.

Vietnam adopted a national Code of Civilised Conduct in Tourism under Decision No. 718/QD-BVHTTDL in 2017. It identifies expected behaviour toward hosts, religious practices and the physical environment (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2017). Such prescriptions define a behavioural standard, but they do not specify which communication, group or site conditions make compliance likely. A rule against touching a fragile surface, for example, competes with crowd movement, photo-taking habits and the visible actions of other visitors. Visitor education consequently has to connect content, social expectations and facilities.

Research has investigated interpretation, responsible tourism and tourist misconduct through partly separate approaches. The theory of planned behaviour explains intentions through attitudes, subjective norms and perceived control (Ajzen, 1991). Norm-based accounts emphasise personal obligation and awareness of consequences (Schwartz, 1977; Stern, 2000). Interpretation studies examine how meaningful messages and guiding shape understanding (Ham, 2013); misconduct research considers how tourists rationalise violations or copy others (Su et al., 2022). These strands are rarely assembled into an explicit process extending from preparation through the visit to subsequent reflection.

This article asks three questions: RQ1, what do the reviewed studies establish about interventions and responsible conduct? RQ2, which mechanisms build or weaken a sense of visitor responsibility? RQ3, how can these mechanisms inform coordinated education before, during and after heritage visits? Visitor conduct education is defined as intentional communication and learning intended to influence conduct toward heritage, host communities and fellow visitors. The contribution is an integrative, testable visit-cycle model, not a claim that its effectiveness has already been demonstrated in Vietnam.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. From behavioural intention to responsibility

The theory of planned behaviour treats intention as the nearest cognitive antecedent of an action, whereas norm activation explains felt obligation through awareness of consequences and acceptance of responsibility (Ajzen, 1991; Schwartz, 1977). Stern (2000) links values, beliefs and personal

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norms in a broader account of environmentally significant conduct. At heritage sites, however, intention and actual behaviour must be distinguished. The same visitor may profess respect for a monument yet disregard a boundary when others are doing so. Survey measures of intention can illuminate mechanisms but do not substitute for observations of touching, littering or other site-specific acts (Wu, Font, & Liu, 2021b).

2.2. Interpretation, experience and place attachment

Mindful interpretation invites visitors to make personal connections rather than passively receive facts (Moscardo, 1996). Ham (2013) argues that a theme changes attitudes when visitors actively think about its meaning. Studies of cultural heritage experiences also link attachment, identification and perceived destination responsibility with pro-social or environmentally responsible outcomes (Buonincontri et al., 2017; Cheng & Chen, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2022). These relationships justify attending to emotional meaning alongside information. They do not show that every attractive narrative changes observable behaviour.

Recent Vietnamese evidence strengthens the case for context-specific interpretation. Ha et al. (2026) report positive links among interpretation quality, personal norms and responsible visitor conduct at the Imperial Citadel of Hue. Nguyen and Nguyen (2026) associate participatory storytelling with heritage experience and perceived value, not directly with compliance. Phuong and Lam (2025) show why community feedback matters in heritage communication in Hanoi. The latter two studies support communication design and community review rather than direct claims of reduced misconduct.

Interpretation should also distinguish an audience's recognition of a site from its ability to act responsibly within it. A visitor may understand the history of a temple yet be unsure whether a particular courtyard remains open during worship. A multilingual explanation, an accessible route and a respectful instruction from a guide serve different but complementary functions. The relevant learning objective is therefore behaviour-specific: the visitor recognises the risk, knows the approved action and can perform it in the actual setting. This specification makes it possible to study heritage responsibility without collapsing every desirable attitude into one general score.

2.3. Norms, neutralisation and social influence

A descriptive norm tells people what others do; an injunctive norm conveys what behaviour is approved. Messages emphasising widespread misconduct may inadvertently make that misconduct appear normal (Cialdini, 2003). Sykes and Matza (1957) explain how people neutralise guilt by denying injury or transferring blame; Bandura (1999) describes moral disengagement as a process that suppresses self-sanctions. Tourism research shows that perceived anonymity, weak expected disapproval and observed violations can weaken restraint (Wan et al., 2021; Zhang & Cao, 2023). Consequently, education must counter excuses while providing credible models of responsible conduct.

2.4. Research gap

Existing studies illuminate messages, experience, norms and deviance, but they often examine a single contact point or a single behavioural outcome. Most experimental studies concern parks or wildlife tourism, while cultural heritage raises distinct obligations involving fragile fabric, ritual practice and community rights. The unresolved task is to connect behavioural mechanisms to the stages of a visit, specify what managers can operationalise, and distinguish observed effects from conceptual propositions.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Integrative documentary design

An integrative review was used to synthesise empirical and review evidence from different designs rather than statistically pool incompatible effect estimates (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). The original review corpus consists of 22 peer-reviewed studies on guiding, interpretation, messages, visitor experience and misconduct. Searches in November 2026 combined heritage, museum, protected-area and tourism terms with responsibility, visitor misconduct, interpretation, signs, norms and moral disengagement. Publisher records, repositories and reference lists were used for bibliographic checks. Selection was purposive, not a comprehensive systematic search.

3.2. Source inclusion and coding

Core studies were retained when they examined visitor conduct or relevant intentions, tested a controllable intervention or analysed a plausible behavioural mechanism, and supplied traceable bibliographic details. Studies from natural settings were included because much of the experimental evidence concerns signs, guiding and conservation behaviour there. Their transferability to cultural heritage was not assumed. Complementary studies of Hue interpretation, Vietnamese storytelling, local heritage awareness, place identity and community communication informed contextual discussion outside the fixed 22-study corpus (Ha et al., 2026; Nguyen, 2025; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2026; Phuong & Lam, 2025; Vu & Nguyen, 2026).

Each core source was coded by study setting, design, principal behavioural finding and the stage at which its mechanism could operate: before, during or after the visit. A second coding pass distinguished understanding, emotional connection, personal/social norms, enabling conditions, and disengagement or contagion. Directly observed actions were distinguished from intentions or self-reports. The review analysed published material only; it involved no new visitor sample, experiment, interviews or field observations.

Coding was interpretive rather than a formal risk-of-bias assessment. The matrix records what each publication can substantiate, without assigning a quality score or treating all effect estimates as comparable. Where a study reported a mediating relationship, this was recorded as a proposed or modelled pathway rather than converted into a direct impact of an intervention. Where a publication discussed a field experiment conducted elsewhere, its status as a secondary report was retained. This procedure allows the synthesis to identify converging mechanisms while preserving uncertainty about causality and generalisability across different kinds of heritage site.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Evidence profile across 22 core sources

The corpus includes experimental and quasi-experimental evidence, survey-based modelling and reviews. Its original classification comprises seven experimental or quasi-experimental items, thirteen surveys and two reviews, although some publications summarise rather than conduct an

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experiment. Only a small subset directly observed conduct; many estimated associations with intention or self-reported behaviour. Table 1 retains all 22 studies in compressed form so that the provenance of the synthesis remains visible.

Table 1. Overview of the 22 core studies

Study	Setting and method	Main finding relevant to education
Alazaizeh et al. (2019)	Petra; survey, n = 390	Guide performance linked to sustainable conduct through experience.
Alzghoul et al. (2024)	Petra/Serengeti; multi-group survey	Heritage type moderated guide-related pathways.
Jamaliah et al. (2024)	Tanzania parks; survey, n = 396	Interpretive guiding worked through visitor experience.
Powell & Ham (2008)	Galapagos; before/after surveys	Knowledge, attitude and intentions increased after tours.
Jacobs & Harms (2014)	Whale watching; field experiment	Emotional interpretation strengthened conservation intentions.
Cialdini (2003)	US park; reported field experiment	High-prevalence theft messages risked increasing theft.
Brown et al. (2010)	Australian park; field experiment	Belief-targeted messages increased litter pick-up.
Yang (2024)	Outdoor recreation; field observation	Warning signs deterred damage; rule-breaking spread.
Marion & Reid (2007)	US protected areas; review	Education effects often lacked resource-condition measures.
Ballantyne et al. (2011)	Wildlife tourism; longitudinal survey	Commitment and reflection predicted longer-term learning.
Wu et al. (2021b)	China; three-wave study	Holiday intention did not reliably transfer home.
Cheng & Chen (2022)	China heritage; survey, n = 588	Cultural attachment mediated responsible behaviour.
Zhang et al. (2022)	China heritage; survey, n = 573	Reputation/identification mediated citizenship behaviour.
Fenitra et al. (2022)	Indonesia; survey, n = 346	Knowledge-belief-norm paths varied by destination.
Vu et al. (2026)	Northern Vietnam; survey, n = 318	Group norms, experience and awareness mattered.
Nguyen et al. (2024)	Hue; survey, n = 200	Responsibility related to intention and tour selection.
Su et al. (2022)	Tourism; survey and scenarios	Deviance contagion involved moral disengagement.
Wan et al. (2021)	Tourism; scenario experiments	Lower social closeness/disapproval encouraged misconduct.
Li & Chen (2017)	Tourism; survey/quasi-experiment	Power/vanity orientations related to deviance.
Zhang & Cao (2023)	Natural heritage; survey, n = 387	Neutralisation supported continued misconduct.
Wu et al. (2021a)	China nature reserve; n = 285	Moral obligation raised, disengagement lowered intention.
Bhati & Pearce (2016)	Tourism settings; integrative review	Prevention needs more than reactive enforcement.

The contrasts are consequential. The sign experiments and observations concern specific acts, while destination surveys usually test relationships between constructs. The latter cannot warrant causal claims about reduced graffiti or touching. Equally, an intervention that works for litter in a park may require different wording, local consultation and safeguards at a temple or archaeological site.

4.2. Mechanisms that strengthen or weaken conduct

Four mutually reinforcing mechanisms can be inferred. Understanding concerns the value of the site and the concrete consequences of an action; a statement about cumulative abrasion may be more useful than a generic appeal to respect. Connection involves emotional interpretation, meaningful experience and attachment (Jacobs & Harms, 2014; Cheng & Chen, 2022). Norm combines personal obligation with visible, credible cues about approved behaviour (Cialdini, 2003; Vu et al., 2026). Enabling concerns the practical means of compliance: legible routes, barriers,

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bins, quiet areas, guidance and staff presence. Evidence on on-site facilities and information supports treating such conditions as part of conduct education rather than independent infrastructure (Wu, Font, & Liu, 2021b).

The countering mechanism is disengagement and contagion. Visitors may minimise the damage caused by one touch, infer permission from another person breaking a rule, or feel unaccountable among strangers. Scenario studies link such processes to misconduct (Su et al., 2022; Wan et al., 2021; Zhang & Cao, 2023). An effective message must avoid advertising the prevalence of offences; it should answer common excuses and demonstrate how responsible action is expected, feasible and socially supported. The mechanisms are analytically distinguishable but may act together during a single visit.

An illustrative scenario shows the proposed interaction. At a narrow entrance to a painted shrine, an explanatory panel can establish why pigments are vulnerable; a community voice can connect the rule to continuing religious care; an orderly queue and guide behaviour can establish the approved norm; and a barrier can make accidental contact less likely. If one person touches a wall, prompt and proportionate staff intervention may prevent others from interpreting the action as acceptable. This scenario is a design illustration, not an observed programme or evidence that the combined intervention will outperform its individual elements.

4.3. Timing and the visit-cycle model

Three intervention windows follow from the evidence. Before arrival, a booking message or group briefing can make rules and reasons salient; pre-visit commitment has been associated with longer-term learning (Ballantyne et al., 2011). On site, interpretive media, guides, signs, layout and visible staff address conduct at the moment of choice (Brown et al., 2010; Yang, 2024). After departure, prompts for reflection and opportunities to support conservation may help sustain attention, although intentions formed during tourism may dissipate (Wu, Font, & Liu, 2021b). None of these stages alone is sufficient.

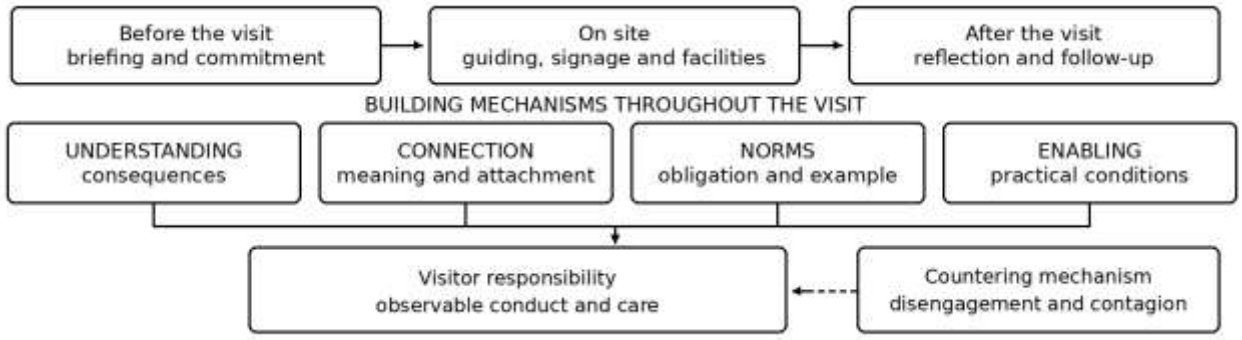

Figure 1. Visit-cycle responsibility model for heritage visitor conduct education
Source: Author-developed conceptual synthesis of the cited evidence.

The model places the three stages above four building mechanisms and a countering mechanism. Responsibility is an intended outcome expressed in observable behaviour, not an automatic consequence of information exposure. Context moderates the pathways: heritage type, crowding, visitor group, religious conventions and enforcement capacity. Table 2 translates the model into examples of site-level practice.

Table 2. Visitor-conduct education actions across the visit cycle

Mechanism	Before the visit	On site	After the visit
Understanding	Introduce site-specific rules and reasons.	Explain cumulative damage and sensitive practices.	Share conservation outcomes and lessons.
Connection	Introduce histories and community voices.	Use emotional, accurate interpretation.	Offer reflection and supported engagement.
Norm	Seek leader or group commitments.	Model approved actions and visible standards.	Invite visitors to share responsible norms.
Enabling	Explain access, clothing and restrictions.	Provide routes, barriers, bins and staff.	Offer channels to report damage.
Countering deviance	Address common excuses in advance.	Correct violations promptly; avoid normalising them.	Explain cumulative harm and repair costs.

4.4. Six propositions for empirical assessment

The framework yields six hypotheses that require prospective testing rather than acceptance as established effects. They specify how comparison conditions could be designed while preserving the distinction between behavioural intentions and observed acts.

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Table 3. Testable propositions derived from the framework

Proposition	Testable expectation
P1	Interpretation combining heritage knowledge and emotional connection outperforms information-only content for responsible conduct.
P2	Injunctive-norm messages and positive examples outperform messages emphasising widespread violations.
P3	Messages that directly counter neutralising excuses outperform generic conservation appeals for targeted misconduct.
P4	Visible guides or staff who model conduct reduce rule-breaking contagion, especially in crowded groups.
P5	Pre-visit commitments plus post-visit reflection improve persistence compared with on-site information alone.
P6	P1-P5 vary across tangible monuments, sacred sites and living traditions, requiring context-specific measures.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Connecting interpretation and misconduct research

The contribution of the model is to connect two questions usually examined apart: how responsibility is cultivated and how it is overridden. An engaging narrative may create attachment, but a crowded site with unclear barriers still invites inadvertent or opportunistic harm. Conversely, enforcement alone can suppress a prohibited act without helping visitors understand why the rule matters. The evidence therefore supports integrated interpretation, social-norm communication and practical facilitation. It does not establish a universal intervention package or a single optimal message across all heritage places.

This approach also avoids equating environmental behaviour with all cultural-heritage obligations. Not touching a fragile painted surface, keeping silence during worship and following a designated archaeological route differ in consequences and social meaning. Responses should be designed with site custodians and community representatives when their practices are affected. The Vietnamese study of community feedback in heritage communication supports participatory review, but it did not test misconduct reduction (Phuong & Lam, 2025). Research on heritage-conservation awareness among Hanoi residents (Nguyen, 2025) and on community identity, memory and place attachment (Vu & Nguyen, 2026) likewise illuminates local participation, not the behaviour of visiting tourists. Storytelling research informs visitor engagement without establishing a causal effect on compliance (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2026).

5.2. Implications for Vietnamese heritage management

The national tourism conduct code can be operationalised as a sequence of actions rather than only displayed as a list. A site can prioritise two or three risky behaviours, identify the relevant belief or excuse, and assign corresponding messages to booking information, guide briefings, physical signs and post-visit follow-up. At the Imperial Citadel of Hue, evidence linking interpretation quality, personal norms and responsible behaviour makes this integration particularly relevant, although that survey does not independently validate the present visit-cycle model (Ha et al., 2026).

Implementation should be observable. For a no-touch rule, managers could record visitor contacts per exposure period, compare clearly defined sign conditions and document crowding and staff presence. For a sacred setting, observations could concern noise or entry to restricted areas, supplemented by consultation about appropriate measurement. Guide training should include norm framing, responses to common excuses and accurate cultural explanation. A reporting protocol would identify which observed changes are plausibly related to the intervention and which reflect seasonality, visitor composition or enforcement.

Evaluation should also be proportionate to the risk and to visitors' privacy. A simple observation form can distinguish an intentional breach from uncertainty about a route, record whether a visitor received a briefing, and note the number of opportunities to offend. Counts taken during a festival should not be compared uncritically with counts from a quiet weekday: crowd density, visitor mix, weather and security presence may influence the outcome. Before installing cameras or collecting identifiable visitor feedback, site managers must establish lawful purposes and retention practices. Written feedback from custodians can be used to check that clearer rules have not displaced the dignity of living practices. These considerations turn the model into an evaluable management proposal rather than a persuasive message alone.

5.3. Evidence limitations and next steps

The review is purposive and may omit eligible studies. Much of the causal evidence is drawn from natural or wildlife contexts, whereas many heritage studies use self-reports and intentions. The 22-study evidence matrix is descriptive rather than an effect-size synthesis; differences in populations, outcomes and measures prevent pooled estimates. Evidence from Vietnam is limited within the original corpus, and the additional Vietnamese publications address related constructs rather than evaluate the proposed model. Its six propositions remain untested.

A useful next step is a site-based comparison using stable observation protocols, an ethically appropriate baseline, clearly specified message variants, and documentation of crowding and staff presence. Visitors could also be followed after the visit, while group-specific findings should be interpreted cautiously. Where living cultural practices are involved, outcome definitions and communication materials should be reviewed with relevant communities before deployment. Such work would determine whether the model is practicable and whether it changes observed responsibility without sacrificing interpretive accuracy.

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6. CONCLUSION

The review links evidence on interpretation, guiding, signage, norms, attachment and tourist misconduct to a single framework for visitor conduct education. Across 22 core studies, outcomes differed by intervention, site type and method; direct behaviour observations were less common than survey measures. Responsible conduct can be supported through understanding, connection, norms and enabling conditions, while disengagement and contagion may weaken the link between obligation and action.

The proposed model coordinates pre-visit preparation, on-site design and post-visit reflection and defines six propositions for testing. Its value is an explicit account of where education operates and what it seeks to change. It remains a conceptual synthesis. Heritage managers in Vietnam can use it to design measurable, culturally appropriate interventions, but claims of effectiveness require field evaluation at specific sites.

DECLARATIONS

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