EXPLORING MONUMENTS AND HERITAGE SITES: A BEHAVIOURAL PERSPECTIVE ON UPPER SECONDARY STUDENTS IN THE MEKONG DELTA, VIETNAM

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Abstract: *Monuments, historic sites and living traditions are among the richest learning resources available to upper secondary students in the Mekong Delta, yet research rarely examines what leads students to explore them. This article presents a qualitative thematic review of 15 international and Vietnamese sources, analysed through the theory of planned behaviour and self-determination theory, to explain students' heritage-exploration behaviour and to identify how schools can support it. The synthesis indicates that students value heritage highly but meet it infrequently: in Ben Tre, the only Delta province with direct survey evidence in the corpus, site visits were the least frequent heritage activity, even though most students judged access to heritage necessary. Five behavioural factors recur across the literature: perceived value and attitude, social expectations led by teachers, perceived control over time, cost, information and safety, autonomous motivation, and the balance between value transmission and critical inquiry. From these, the article proposes a conceptual model with five propositions and derives implications for Mekong Delta schools, including interactive digital maps and student handbooks that lower practical barriers while preserving critical inquiry. The model is a conceptual proposal that requires empirical testing with students in the Delta.*

Keywords: *heritage exploration behaviour; upper secondary students; monuments and heritage sites; experiential learning; Mekong Delta*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Upper secondary education asks students to read the past through evidence while consolidating civic identity and cultural belonging, and monuments, historic sites and living traditions sit where these aims meet. Heritage education is now a recognised research field (Fontal & Ibáñez-Etxeberria, 2016) that kept diversifying through 2022 (Fontal et al., 2023), but it mostly asks what teachers should do rather than what leads students to explore heritage themselves. In Vietnam, the 2018 General Education Programme made experiential activities mandatory (Nguyen et al., 2024), yet in a Ben Tre survey of 370 students, 57.6% accessed local history through heritage only sometimes and 25.7% rarely, although 88.6% judged such access necessary or very necessary; site visits were the least frequent activity (Ho et al., 2024). Direct survey evidence for the Mekong Delta comes from this single province. This article therefore asks what factors shape upper secondary students' exploration of monuments and heritage sites in the Mekong Delta, and how schools can support it.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Heritage exploration as a behaviour

In this article, heritage-exploration behaviour denotes the active, self-directed actions through which students seek information about heritage, visit monuments and sites, ask questions, record and share what they find, and take part in safeguarding it, in and beyond lessons. The definition is operational, and it rests on a view of heritage as evidence to be located, questioned and interpreted. Pinto and Ibáñez-Etxeberria (2018) argue that heritage pedagogy should challenge students' preconceptions and teach them to examine the provenance and significance of sources, because contextualised interpretation is essential to historical understanding. Chaparro-Sainz et al. (2022) similarly locate the educational value of heritage in students' awareness of the relationship between past and present, provided that teaching gives them an active and critical role. Exploration, on this reading, is not a leisure visit but an inquiry practice.

2.2 Behavioural theories

Two theories help explain why students explore or do not. The theory of planned behaviour holds that behaviour is predicted by intention, which is shaped by attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). In schools, subjective norms are likely to come from teachers, parents and peers, while

perceived control is tied to practical conditions such as time, transport costs, information about sites and safety. Self-determination theory adds a motivational dimension: behaviour driven by autonomous motivation, rooted in the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, tends to be more sustained than behaviour driven by external demands such as grades or compulsory tasks (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Together, the theories shift the question from whether students explore heritage to why, with what quality of motivation, and under what practical constraints.

2.3 International evidence on routes to engagement

International studies show how varied the routes to engagement can be. In Trabzon, Turkey, a programme for 30 students in grades 5 to 8 combined seminars, drama, workshops and trips, and used pretests and posttests to conclude that heritage should be taught through varied methods (Islamoglu et al., 2022). Technology offers another route: Ibáñez-Etxeberria et al. (2020) evaluated virtual environments and augmented reality (AR) applied to heritage education. School museums are a third: Zakharova and Frolova (2025) compare 26 students working in a Ho Chi Minh museum at a Russian school with 43 controls and examine its potential contribution to socialisation and character development. On the epistemic side, Pinto and Ibáñez-Etxeberria (2018) found that most secondary students in northern Portugal treated a heritage site as a source of facts about a fixed past, while a smaller group questioned and hypothesised. Finally, bibliometric work identifies teacher training as one of the principal lines of heritage education research (Fontal & Ibáñez-Etxeberria, 2016), and Chaparro-Sainz et al. (2022) found that Spanish trainee history teachers valued heritage but preferred resources linked to their own undergraduate studies.

2.4 Vietnamese evidence

Vietnamese research has so far concentrated on teaching measures rather than on student behaviour. Duong and Do (2019) discuss heritage and heritage education for upper secondary students, and the forms they report, including films, videos, games and field trips, are summarised by Huynh et al. (2023). Luu (2024) emphasises fieldwork lessons at heritage sites among the forms of using cultural heritage in upper secondary teaching. Nguyen et al. (2024) report AR-supported experiential activities on Vietnamese cultural heritage in teaching national history. Pham and Nhu (2026) combine document analysis, school surveys and fieldwork in Ho Chi Minh City and report difficulty in integrating historical and cultural sites into lessons that develop students' qualities and competencies. At university level, Huynh et al. (2023) related heritage-education outcomes, including Vovinam martial arts and traditional musical instruments, to students' patriotism and nationalism.

2.5 Research gap

Three gaps follow. First, most studies take the teacher and the teaching measure as the unit of analysis, and few describe what students do on their own initiative. Second, the quantitative evidence is largely descriptive and self-reported, with little modelling of how attitudes, norms, control and motivation combine. Third, the Mekong Delta is represented by a single province, so region-specific conditions remain underexplored.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

The study is a qualitative, purposive thematic review that follows the logic of narrative synthesis rather than a formal systematic review. Its aim is to interpret patterns across a deliberately selected corpus through a behavioural coding frame, not to estimate effect sizes or to claim exhaustive coverage. The conceptual model in Section 4.3 is an interpretive product of this synthesis.

3.2 Corpus

Sources were identified in November 2026 through publisher platforms indexed by Crossref, Vietnam Journals Online (VJOL) and journal websites, using English and Vietnamese keyword combinations such as heritage education, cultural heritage and history teaching, experiential learning, di sản văn hóa and dạy học Lịch sử. Sources were retained when they (a) addressed cultural heritage in school, upper secondary or teacher-education contexts or provided a behavioural theory used to interpret such contexts; (b) appeared in a scholarly or professional journal; and (c) offered a verifiable DOI or stable URL. Fifteen sources met these criteria: two theoretical works, seven international heritage-education studies and six Vietnamese or

Vietnam-based studies. Policy information was taken from the way it is reported in these sources rather than from primary legal texts.

3.3 Analytic procedure

Abstracts and, where accessible, full texts were read closely. A deductive coding frame drawn from the theory of planned behaviour and self-determination theory (attitude, subjective norms, perceived control, motivation, intention and behaviour) was applied first; inductive codes for pedagogical approach, evidence of outcomes and stated barriers were added during reading. Codes were then clustered into five behavioural factors through iterative comparison. To limit over-interpretation, each claim in Section 4 is tied to what the cited source reports, and interpretations that go beyond the sources are explicitly flagged. Because the review used published material only, no ethical approval was required.

3.4 Trustworthiness and limits of the design

The corpus is small and purposive, includes only sources with accessible metadata, and for some sources relied on abstract-level information, so nuances of method may be understated. None of the heritage studies reviewed measured exploration behaviour with the constructs used here; the behavioural reading is therefore an interpretation of what they report, and its conclusions are propositions, not findings.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 What the evidence shows about exploration behaviour

Perceived value and attitude. Students' attitudes toward heritage appear favourable. In Ben Tre, 40.5% of 370 students judged access to local history through heritage very necessary and 48.1% necessary (Ho et al., 2024), and the same authors frame such access as a means of nurturing love of homeland, national pride and responsibility for preserving cultural values. Huynh et al. (2023) similarly report links between heritage-education outcomes and patriotism among university students. Favourable attitudes alone, however, do not appear to translate into frequent exploration.

Practice and perceived control. The Ben Tre survey shows a gap between valuing and meeting heritage: school heritage activities averaged 2.49 (rarely), site visits were least frequent (M = 2.08) and subject integration most frequent (M = 3.00) (Ho et al., 2024). In planned-behaviour terms, this pattern is consistent with a perceived-control problem, since the most direct form of exploration is the one most dependent on time, transport, supervision and safety. These barriers are an inference from the pattern, not a finding of the survey, and they need testing in Delta schools, where distances, waterways and seasonal conditions may make them more salient.

Social expectations and the teacher. Teachers are the likeliest source of subjective norms in a school setting, and the corpus consistently points to their preparation as decisive. Chaparro-Sainz et al. (2022) call for adapting teaching approaches among trainee teachers; Fontal and Ibáñez-Etxeberria (2016) identify teacher training as a principal research line; and Pham and Nhu (2026) report difficulty in integrating sites into lessons. Evidence that expectations can be shifted comes from the Ben Tre quasi-experiment: after five measures (site visits, multimedia competitions, staged performances, extracurricular games and subject integration), the experimental group of 45 students rated both importance (M = 2.84 vs. 2.27) and implementation (M = 2.68 vs. 2.22) higher than the control group, whose ratings did not change significantly (Ho et al., 2024).

Motivation. None of the studies measured motivation in self-determination terms, but several designs give students active roles that plausibly support autonomy, competence and relatedness: drama, workshops and trips in Trabzon (Islamoglu et al., 2022), a school museum (Zakharova & Frolova, 2025), AR-supported experiential activities (Ibáñez-Etxeberria et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2024) and fieldwork at sites (Luu, 2024). By contrast, visits organised only to confirm what the textbook says are likely to rely on external motivation. This interpretation requires direct testing.

Critical inquiry. The quality of exploration matters as much as its frequency. In Portugal, most students treated a site as a source of facts about a fixed past and only a few questioned it (Pinto & Ibáñez-Etxeberria, 2018), which suggests that exploration without inquiry tasks can reproduce a single narrative. Table 1 summarises the factors and their implications.

Table 1. Behavioural factors in heritage exploration: evidence and implications

Behavioural factor	Evidence in the corpus	Implication for Mekong Delta schools
Perceived value and attitude	Most Ben Tre students judged heritage access necessary (Ho et al., 2024); heritage education linked to patriotism (Huynh et al., 2023)	Build on existing goodwill; do not assume attitude alone drives exploration
Perceived control	Site visits least frequent (M = 2.08) (Ho et al., 2024)	Reduce barriers of information, time, cost and safety through maps and guides
Social expectations	Teacher preparation decisive (Chaparro-Sainz et al., 2022; Pham & Nhu, 2026); measures raised ratings (Ho et al., 2024)	Train teachers; coordinate school, family and community expectations
Motivation	Active roles in drama, museums, AR and fieldwork (Islamoglu et al., 2022; Zakharova & Frolova, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2024)	Offer choice, competence-building tasks and collaboration
Critical inquiry	Students often treat sites as fixed facts (Pinto & Ibáñez-Etxeberria, 2018)	Attach questioning tasks and multiple narratives to each site

4.2 A conceptual model of heritage-exploration behaviour

Combining the two theories with the corpus, we propose that heritage-exploration behaviour is predicted by the intention to explore; that intention is shaped by attitude, subjective norms, perceived control and autonomous motivation; and that attitude, in turn, depends on perceived heritage value. School-based heritage experience is expected to moderate the link between intention and behaviour. Five propositions follow. P1: Perceived heritage value strengthens attitude toward exploration. P2: Teacher, family and peer expectations strengthen intention. P3: Higher perceived control over time, cost, information and safety strengthens both intention and behaviour. P4: Autonomous motivation strengthens intention more than controlled motivation does. P5: Inquiry-based school experiences strengthen the translation of intention into behaviour and improve its quality. These propositions are theoretical and have not been tested.

4.3 Discussion and implications for the Mekong Delta

First, the behavioural lens complements the pedagogical one. Pedagogical studies ask which method works; the behavioural reading asks why students would choose to explore at all. Both are needed, because even a well-designed lesson fails if students cannot reach the site or see no reason to go. The Delta setting sharpens this point: heritage is abundant and close, which should lower the cost of exploration, but dispersion and water-based geography may raise it. Second, reducing practical barriers is a direct route to raising perceived control. Interactive digital maps that locate nearby heritage, give verified information, opening arrangements and conduct rules, and attach a short inquiry task to each site could address the information and safety components of control. Student handbooks linked to curriculum topics could do the same in print form and support teachers who find integration difficult (Pham & Nhu, 2026). Digital tools can also extend access through AR to sites that are distant or fragile (Ibáñez-Etxeberria et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2024), but they should complement direct encounters with nearby heritage rather than replace them, given uneven devices and connectivity. Details of vulnerable sites should be shared only with the agreement of the managing bodies. Third, norms and motivation are shaped by how schools organise heritage learning. The Ben Tre results suggest that modest measures such as competitions, performances and extracurricular games can change students' perceptions (Ho et al., 2024), which im-

plies that schools need not wait for large budgets. Pre-service and in-service training that builds heritage-based lesson design (Chaparro-Sainz et al., 2022; Fontal & Ibáñez-Etxeberria, 2016) would strengthen the teacher's role as a source of positive norms. Fourth, civic and critical aims should be designed together. Vietnamese studies stress love of homeland and national pride (Ho et al., 2024; Huynh et al., 2023), whereas international work stresses questioning inherited narratives (Pinto & Ibáñez-Etxeberria, 2018). The two are complementary when exploration tasks ask who built a monument, why it was preserved and whose stories its interpretation omits, so that pride becomes informed pride.

V. CONCLUSION

This review reframed heritage education in the Mekong Delta around a question that is usually left implicit: what leads upper secondary students to explore monuments and heritage sites. The evidence available suggests that students value heritage but meet it rarely, that practical barriers and teacher capacity are likely to be decisive, and that designs giving students active, inquiry-oriented roles are more likely to support sustained engagement. The proposed model, with its five propositions, offers a structure for testing these ideas. The article's limits are clear. It rests on a small, purposive corpus, on direct survey evidence from only one Delta province, and on an interpretation of studies that did not measure exploration behaviour directly. Future research should survey students across several Delta provinces, test the model with structured equation modelling or comparable methods, and evaluate tools such as digital maps and handbooks in school-based trials that track changes in attitude, motivation and actual exploration.

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