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Theoretical Framework Examples: Five Samples From Completed Theses

Derek Jansen, MBA
Grad Coach

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Abstract

Students are routinely asked to state a theoretical framework. This article presents five theoretical framework examples quoted from completed doctoral and master's theses in business, applied linguistics, education and English, each cited to its printed page so that the framework can be followed into the study it shaped. The five show several forms a framework can take: theories that supply measurable variables; a theory chosen by tracing how a field arrived at it; a philosophy of science, a method of analysis and a substantive theory combined, each with a stated role; a framework named and its central claim stated in two sentences under its own heading, then applied; and a lens that directs attention rather than predicting relationships between variables. For each, the article sets out what the theory claims and what it allowed the study to ask, and it closes with the features the five share. It is intended for students and early-career researchers writing a proposal or thesis, and for the educators who teach research design.

Keywords: theoretical framework examples; theoretical framework example; example of theoretical framework in research; theoretical framework sample; theoretical framework; research design; research methods; open educational resource

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1. Introduction

A theoretical framework is the existing theory that a study borrows to make sense of what it finds. Grant and Osanloo (2014) describe it as derived from a theory that others have already tested and that the scholarly literature generally accepts. Following Merriam (2001, as cited in Grant & Osanloo, 2014), they also call it "the researcher's lens with which to view the world" (p. 16). Because the framework decides which questions can be asked and which findings will count as an answer, the choice matters. Grant and Osanloo report hearing doctoral students express confusion and frustration over choosing one (p. 12).

A framework that is chosen well can still fail if it is not used. The same authors describe students who "briefly make mention of a theoretical framework at the start of the dissertation and never return to it throughout the rest of the document" (p. 12). Following Torraco (1997, as cited in Grant & Osanloo, 2014), they argue that the framework should guide the study throughout (p. 21).

The examples in this article are quoted from completed theses rather than written to illustrate a definition. Each thesis is openly licensed and can be read in full, so the framework can be followed from the section where it is named into the analysis where it does its work. Sections 2 to 6 present one example each: theories that supply variables (Section 2), a theory justified by its lineage (Section 3), three theories used together (Section 4), a framework introduced in two sentences (Section 5) and a lens rather than a model (Section 6). Section 7 draws together what the five have in common.

2. Theories That Supply the Variables

One common form of theoretical framework is a model that names a small number of variables and predicts how they relate. One of the best-known models of this kind in adoption research is the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which was first published in journal form in 1989. It holds that people accept a technology largely on the basis of two beliefs: that it is useful and that it is easy to use (Davis, 1989). In the full model (Figure 1; Davis et al., 1989), external variables shape both beliefs, and ease of use also shapes usefulness. Both beliefs shape the attitude toward using the system, which leads to the intention to use it and then to actual use. Usefulness also acts on intention directly.

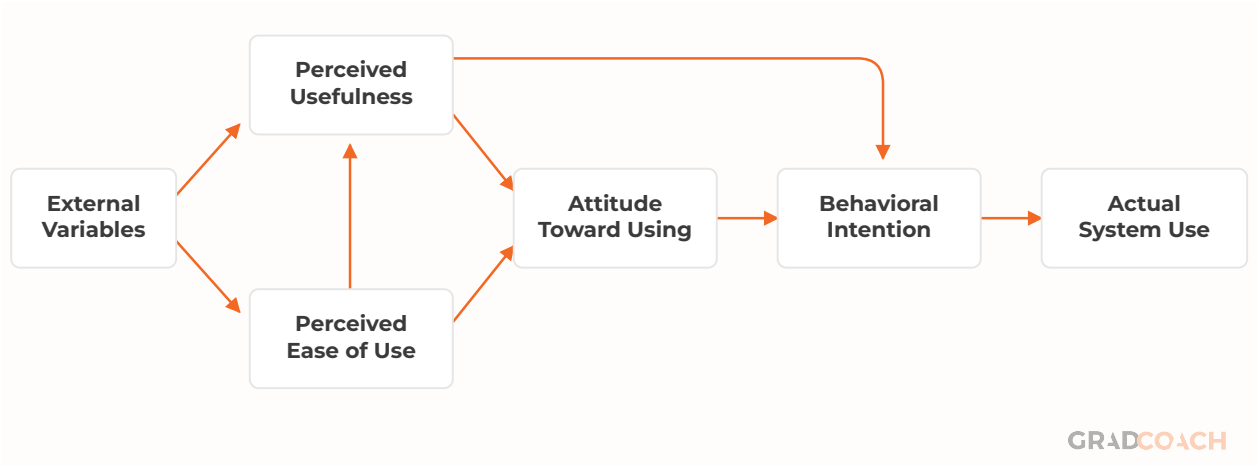

Figure 1. The Technology Acceptance Model (after Davis et al., 1989), a model Luong reviews and challenges.

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A doctoral thesis by Luong (2025) at Lincoln International Business School, on whether online shoppers in Vietnam will use collection-and-delivery points (CDPs) instead of home delivery, shows how such a model enters a study. Its bibliometric review of research on CDPs describes one cluster, on consumer attitudes, as anchored in consumer behavior theories, listing among them:

> Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) – Examines how perceived usefulness and ease of use influence adoption.
>
> Luong (2025, p. 35)

The thesis did not, however, adopt TAM. Its first study was built on two other theories. Innovation diffusion theory explains how innovations spread through a population by way of attributes such as relative advantage, compatibility and complexity (Rogers, 1983, as cited in Luong, 2025, p. 55). The heuristic-systematic model distinguishes fast, intuitive processing of information from deliberate, analytical processing (Chaiken, 1980, 1987, as cited in Luong, 2025, p. 55). The methodology section of that study states where each variable came from, and refers to the heuristic-systematic model as the Systematic-Heuristic Theory:

> The independent variables were derived from two theoretical frameworks. Seven variables—price value (PVA), reduced need to wait (RNW), convenience (CON), compatibility (CPT), complexity (CPL), trialability (TRI), and observability (OBS)—were based on the Innovation Diffusion Theory. Meanwhile, subjective experience (SBE) and social influence (SOI) were rooted in the Systematic-Heuristic Theory.
>
> Luong (2025, p. 79)

The passage shows what a framework of this kind provides. The two theories supply variables that have already been defined, measured and compared in earlier studies, so the thesis does not have to argue from the beginning that compatibility or social influence matters. They also tell the study what to measure: each independent variable can be traced to one of the two theories. Three of them (price value, reduced need to wait and convenience) are the thesis's breakdown of what innovation diffusion theory calls relative advantage (Luong, 2025, pp. 69–70).

The thesis then uses TAM as a point of comparison, arguing that its findings on trust challenge models such as TAM, "which emphasize rational decision-making" (Luong, 2025, p. 153). A framework that is stated precisely also makes clear which theories a study did not adopt.

The difference between a framework that does this work and one that does not is often visible in a single sentence. Box 1 sets a common draft sentence beside a stronger version.

Box 1. A weak and a stronger framework statement, written for this article.

Weak: This study is underpinned by theories of technology adoption.

Stronger: This study applies the Technology Acceptance Model, which explains adoption through perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Both constructs are operationalized in Section 3.4.

The first sentence names a field of research. The second names a theory, states its central claim and commits the study to measuring what the theory names.

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3. A Theory Justified by Its Lineage

A framework does not only supply variables. It can also supply a distinction, such as the distinction between kinds of motivation below, and it can be justified by showing how a field arrived at it. A master's thesis by Osumi (2019) in the School of Languages and Cultures at Purdue University, on why students at a Midwestern university in the United States learn Japanese, traces the history of research on second-language (L2) motivation before naming the framework it uses. One step in that history is self-determination theory:

> With the influence of Crookes and Schmidt, L2 motivational researchers began to adopt Deci and Ryan's (1985, 2002) self-determination theory, which conceptualized various types of intrinsic and extrinsic motives and had been one of the most influential approaches in motivational psychology.
>
> Osumi (2019, p. 20)

A central claim of self-determination theory is that motivation is not a single quantity that a person has more or less of, but comes in kinds that are "theoretically, experientially, and functionally distinct" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 72). Intrinsic motivation is doing an activity for the satisfaction of the activity itself; extrinsic motivation is doing it to attain an outcome separate from it (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71). The theory also proposes three innate psychological needs (competence, autonomy and relatedness), "which when satisfied yield enhanced self-motivation and mental health and when thwarted lead to diminished motivation and well-being" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68; Figure 2).

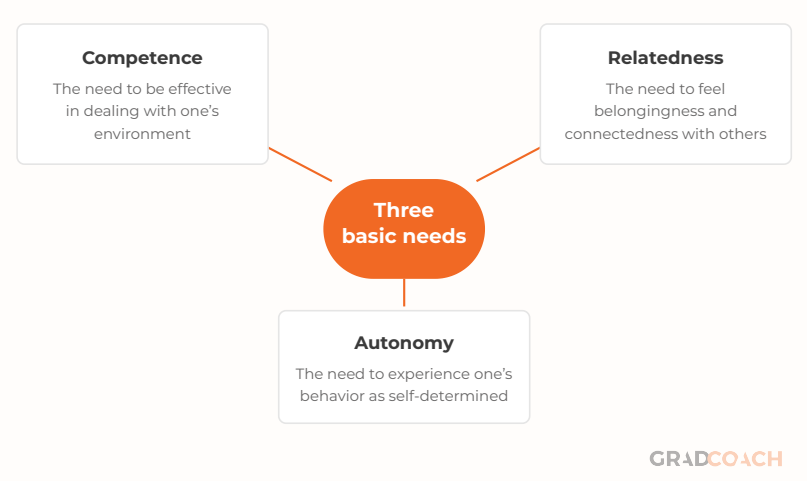

Figure 2. Three needs in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000); competence and autonomy paraphrased.

The history extends further back. Research on second-language motivation began with Gardner and Lambert, two social psychologists working in Canada (Osumi, 2019, p. 19). Gardner's notion of "integrativeness," the wish to grow closer to the community that speaks a language, had become vague as society became global, especially for learners of English (p. 22). Osumi's account continues to the framework that was proposed to solve this problem, and that the study adopts:

> To overcome this problem, Dörnyei (2005, 2009) proposed a new framework of L2 motivation, getting a hint from "Possible Self Theory" by psychologists Markus and Nurius (1986): the "L2 Motivational Self System (L2 MSS)."
>
> Osumi (2019, p. 22)

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The L2 Motivational Self System has three components: the learner's ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self and the L2 learning experience (Osumi, 2019, p. 22). The ideal L2 self motivates through the learner's wish to close the gap between their actual self and the self they would ideally be (Dörnyei, 2005, as cited in Osumi, 2019, p. 22). It includes integrative motives, along with internalized instrumental ones (Osumi, 2019, p. 22); instrumental motives are practical ones, such as the prospect of a better job or higher social status (p. 20). The ought-to L2 self consists of the attributes learners believe they ought to possess, such as duties and obligations, in order to avoid negative outcomes (Dörnyei, 2005, as cited in Osumi, 2019, p. 22). The thesis then surveyed learners on eleven motivational factors, including the L2 Motivational Self System (p. 9), and asked whether those factors differed by student characteristics such as course level and length of study (p. 18). Without a framework, a question about why people learn Japanese tends to produce a list of the reasons students give; the framework turns that list into a structure that can be compared across groups of learners.

The way the framework is introduced matters as much as the choice. The thesis does not simply assert that its theory is relevant; it shows where the theory came from and what problem in earlier theories it was proposed to solve. That account tells an examiner why this theory was chosen rather than another. A justification often offered instead, that a theory is widely used in the field, is an argument from popularity. It says nothing about whether the theory fits the study.

4. Three Theories Used Together

Students sometimes assume that a framework must rest on a single theory and that combining several is a weakness. A doctoral thesis by John (2023) at Lincoln International Business School, on the reform of corporate governance in Nigeria through the National Code of Corporate Governance (NCCG), shows what a defensible combination looks like:

> By combining critical realism, the Morphogenetic Approach, and institutional theory, the thesis aims to identify and explain the mechanisms that have influenced the NCCG project in Nigeria.
>
> John (2023, p. 10)

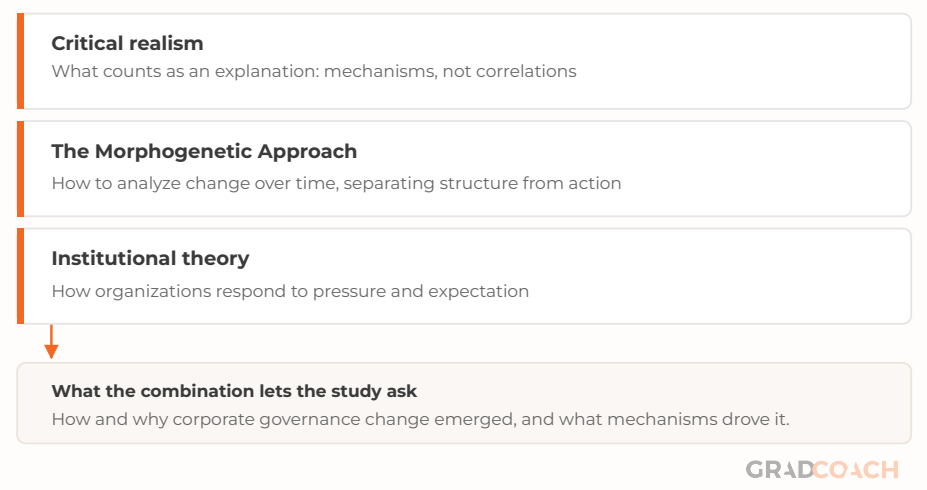

Figure 3. The role each theory plays in John's (2023) framework.

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Completed theses often combine theories; Luong's, in Section 2, combines two. What makes a combination legitimate is that each theory can be given a distinct role, and here the three do different jobs (Figure 3). Strictly speaking, they also sit at different levels. Critical realism is the study's philosophical underpinning (John, 2023, p. 141), the Morphogenetic Approach is its analytical technique for studying change (p. 85), and institutional theory is its substantive theory. This difference in level is one reason their roles do not overlap. Critical realism directs the study to the causal mechanisms beneath social phenomena, "going beyond mere descriptions and correlations" (John, 2023, p. 7). The Morphogenetic Approach, which John attributes to Margaret Archer (p. 10), is a framework for "investigating the structuring of social systems over time" (p. 85). It treats structure and culture on the one hand and agency (people and their actions) on the other as separate entities, and examines their interaction (p. 85). Agency in this sense is unrelated to the agency theory mentioned below. Institutional theory sheds light on "the role of norms, values, and beliefs in shaping corporate governance systems" and on how institutions influence the implementation and adoption of reforms (John, 2023, p. 8).

Because of that combination, the thesis can ask a question about process: "How and why corporate governance change emerge [sic] in Nigeria and what are the key mechanisms underlying the evolutionary process?" (John, 2023, p. 11). A study without such a framework would more likely ask which factors were associated with reform. The framework is what makes a question about how and why answerable.

The test of a combination is whether the role of each theory can be stated in a single clause. A draft that draws on institutional theory, stakeholder theory, agency theory and critical realism without assigning each a role has four theories and no division of labor, which suggests indecision, not breadth. If the role of a theory cannot be stated, the study probably has more theories than it needs; if two theories do the same job, one of them can usually be removed.

5. A Framework Introduced in Two Sentences

A framework section can be brief and still be complete. A doctoral dissertation by Huang (2019) in the Department of Agricultural Sciences Education and Communication at Purdue University, on undergraduates' perceptions of culturally responsive teaching, opens its framework section as follows:

> Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) guided this study. Albert Bandura developed social cognitive theory in 1986 and described that human behaviors are the product of combinational influences from personal, behavioral and environmental levels.
>
> Huang (2019, p. 37), under the heading "2.4 Theoretical Framework"

What makes the passage instructive is its brevity, not its theory. It has a heading that names the section, a sentence that names the theory and its source, and a sentence that states the theory's central claim in plain words. The section then explains the model of "triadic causation among personal, behavioral and environmental factors" (Huang, 2019, p. 37). In this three-way model, each factor influences the other two in both directions, and the influences need not be of equal strength (Bandura, 1986, 1999, as cited in Huang, 2019, p. 38; Figure 4). Huang works through each

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of the three links with an example from education and ends by applying the model to culturally responsive teaching. Section 2.4 as a whole (pp. 37–40) spends its space on explaining the model and applying it to the study, not on recounting its history.

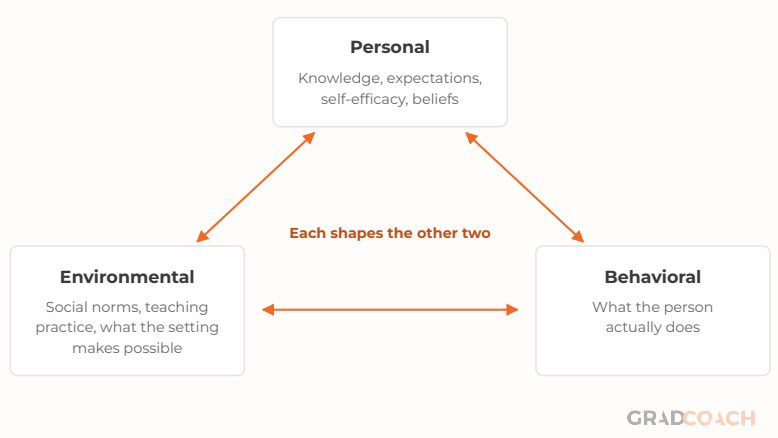

Figure 4. Triadic reciprocal causation, the model behind Huang's (2019) framework.

The model gives the study a reason to expect that an environmental factor would influence personal factors. Here the environmental factor is the teaching students receive, and the personal factors are their academic self-efficacy (their beliefs about their capability to accomplish academic tasks and reach academic goals; Huang, 2019, p. 29) and their sense of belonging. Huang states that by fostering positive relationships with students, faculty (teaching staff) help to develop students' sense of belonging and confidence (p. 40). Sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy are the dependent variables the study measures (p. 37). A short framework section of this kind needs to be easy to find, to name its theory, to explain it plainly and then to use it.

A common failure in framework sections concerns proportion, not wording: several pages tracing the history of a theory, followed by a study that never refers to it again. A shorter section that names the theory, states what it claims and identifies which constructs in the study come from it serves the study better. Length is not the measure of rigor in a framework section; use is.

6. A Lens Rather Than a Model

The frameworks in Sections 2, 3 and 5 supply variables or relationships between them. Many studies in the humanities, education and critical social science do not measure variables, and a framework built of variables and arrows does not fit them. A doctoral dissertation by Carlson (2019) in the Department of English at Purdue University, on community organizing in Appalachia, shows the alternative. It proposes a "metic" framework, that is, one inspired by *metis* (Carlson, 2019, p. 33). The dissertation defines *metis* as "the rhetorical art of cunning, the use of embodied strategies...to transform rhetorical situations" (Dolmage, 2014, p. 5, as cited in Carlson, 2019, p. 42) and states the framework as follows:

> A metic framework embraces a messy, untidy world; anticipates and searches for the unexpected; illuminates collaboration between bodies; and invites disruptions in power dynamics.
>
> Carlson (2019, p. 42)

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The framework does not tell the study what to measure, because the study is not measuring. It tells the researcher what to attend to. The dissertation states this directly: the approach "urges us to attend to: the contextual, shifting nature of knowledge; the power of unexpected actions; the importance of collaboration between rhetorical bodies; and the possibilities for disrupting entrenched power dynamics" (Carlson, 2019, p. 33). By directing attention in this way, the framework makes some readings of the data available and rules others out. The framework also returns at the end of the study, where the author writes that "Metis, or embodied, rhetorical knowing, has been a fruitful lens throughout this dissertation project" (Carlson, 2019, p. 157).

A lens of this kind does the same job as a model such as TAM, but in a different way. TAM directs a study to usefulness and ease of use; a metic framework directs it to context, unexpected action, collaboration and power. Both constrain the analysis, and constraining the analysis is what a framework is for. For the same reason, a sentence announcing that a study takes a critical approach is not yet a theoretical framework: it names a lens without using one. What turns it into a framework is a statement of what the lens makes visible in the data that another reading would miss.

7. Conclusion

The five examples take different forms. A pair of theories can supply a study's variables and tell it what to measure. A theory can be justified by tracing how the field arrived at it. Theories at different levels can be combined when each has a stated role. A framework can be named and its central claim stated in two sentences under its own heading, with the space that follows spent applying it. A lens can direct attention without predicting relationships between variables. What the five share is that each framework constrains its study: it determines which questions can be asked, what counts as an answer and what the analysis attends to.

The examples also suggest a practical test for any framework section. The framework should be stated explicitly, under a heading and in plain words; the choice should be justified by its fit with the study rather than its popularity; each theory in a combination should have a role that can be stated in a clause; and the framework should reappear in the findings and discussion. A framework that is named in the literature review and absent from the analysis has not functioned as a framework, however carefully it was chosen.

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