

Exploring Children's Well-Being Through Their Drawings

Abstract

Research on the impact of travel on child well-being has been scarce, garnering limited focus from both scholars and practitioners. This study explores children's travel activity preferences by analyzing their drawings, thereby shedding light on the factors that enhance their well-being and engagement. We analyzed a diverse collection of 214 children's drawings from three schools in Tehran, Iran, which revealed a marked preference for playful activities, nature-based experiences, and cultural explorations with family and peers. The findings suggest that children value interactive and educational experiences, which enhance their happiness and developmental outcomes through traveling. The research highlights the importance of considering children's perspectives in tourism planning and emphasizes the role of family and social interactions, as well as environmental engagement, in contributing to children's overall well-being. The study also addresses the methodological limitations inherent in interpreting children's artwork and the influence of cultural contexts on their travel preferences, providing valuable insights for future research and practical applications in family tourism.

Keywords:

Child-wellbeing, children travel, drawing, PERMA model, Iran

Introduction

Children, being an engaged social demographic, have garnered increasing interest in the field of tourism (Canosa & Graham, 2016). Poria and Timothy (2014) and Wu et al. (2019) confirm the scarcity of tourism research on and for children based on their own perspective and explain that most children-centric research have considered them as passive actors, highlighting a significant gap in the study of their specific needs and experiences (Carpenter, 2015; Rhoden et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2024). Although research and theoretical frameworks in tourism have not adequately focused on this demographic (Zhong & Peng, 2021), recent years have seen an increase in research on children.

Researchers note that collecting data from children presents challenges due to “the ethical complexity of involving them”. Additionally, children are often perceived as lacking the maturity and abstract thinking required for research, which leads to them being viewed as inadequate research participants (Rhoden et al., 2016; Canosa & Graham, 2016, p. 2019; Kerr & Price, 2016). On the other side, research on children and tourism pertains to economic motivation, recognizing children as an important consumer segment for tourism businesses and destinations. However, “the value of researching children goes beyond the commercial incentive” (Small, 2008, p. 773), and tourism experiences hold heightened significance for this marginalized group, offering the latent potential to empower them socially, culturally, physically, and psychologically.

Wu et al. (2019) discussed, in contrast to examining children's tourism experiences and the consequences of tourism on children, there is a greater focus on subjects related to the active involvement of children in familial tourism decision-making (e.g., Lehto et al., 2017; Li et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2022; Zhong & Peng, 2021; Xu et al., 2022)). When considering the impacts of travel experiences on young tourists, the issue of “children's well-being” emerges as a prominent concern. A thorough investigation of literature revealed that this area remains relatively unexplored within the field of tourism studies, despite the growing body of research on 'tourism and well-being' (Bagheri et al., 2023).

In a recent systematic review of child well-being, Cho and Yu (2020) noted that the majority of studies predominantly focus on later childhood and childhood in general, with fewer studies examining specific developmental stages. Geographically, most research has been concentrated in Europe and Central Asia, with the Middle East receiving less attention. Notably, in Iran- the country of the study- where religion and state are intertwined, females face unique restrictions on education, work, and social life. These circumstances make travel potentially more significant for their well-being, highlighting the importance of studying girls' travel preferences within this specific socio-cultural context.

Since the mid-2000s, the subjective perspective on well-being has become more significant, and most studies now employ a combination of approaches in their conceptual frameworks. However, the multifaceted concept of children's well-being encompasses various factors beyond just the educational dimension (Cho & Yu, 2020; Minkkinen, 2013). The concept of child wellbeing

terminologically rooted in "child-saving" and "child welfare" (Ben-Arieh, 2010; Raghavan & Alexandrova, 2015), has become a subject of growing interest among academics, policymakers, and practitioners (Pollock et al., 2018). Due to the sophisticated nature of well-being (Minkkinen, 2013) and its age-oriented definition, it is characterized by a multitude of conceptualizations and measures (Raghavan & Alexandrova, 2015).

Following a qualitative approach and drawing on data provided by children, the specific goals of this study is to discuss the sense of well-being in children through tourism experiences, focusing on both child-appropriate approach. In addressing the key inquiry of "what types of tourism activities/experiences increase the sense of well-being in children", the current research contributes to the existing literature in several important ways. First, this paper directly responds to recent calls for more child-centered tourism research (Canosa et al., 2022). Second, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first to focus on child well-being by investigating the multidimensional impacts of tourism experiences on this group. It goes beyond the traditional developmental perspective to also consider child-appropriate activities. This dual approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how tourism can positively affect children's well-being by addressing both their developmental needs and their unique interests and capacities as individuals. Finally, this research has the potential not only to broaden the existing literature, but to expedite advancements in the field of children's well-being and tourism. Therefore, in addition to the theoretical implications, this study also offers practical guidance for tourism policymakers, emphasizing the role of tourism experiences in fostering a sense of happiness in children, both in their current lives and as they grow into adults.

2. Literature Review

The contemporary landscape of tourism literature has been shining a spotlight on children's experiences. This younger demographic is now a vital market within the industry, emerging as active consumers and influential decision-makers (Seraphin & Yallop, 2020). Cullingford (1995, p. 126) identified children as the "tourists of the future", thereby establishing a compelling rationale for recognizing them as significant stakeholders in the tourism industry. In recent years, children have garnered more attention from both industry stakeholders and researchers alike (e.g., Israfilova & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019; Koscak et al., 2021; Séraphin & Gowreesunkar, 2020).

Despite this surge in attention, it is essential to acknowledge that research involving children in the context of tourism is still in its nascent stages (Mohammadi & Pearce, 2020). A significant body of work highlights the evolving dynamics of children's influence on family travel decisions and their role as stakeholders in the tourism sector. However, there remains a substantial gap in understanding their unique experiences, preferences, and well-being in tourism settings.

2.1. Conceptualizing Child Wellbeing

Children wellbeing is a well-studied concept in psychology studies although not in a unified way (Raghavan & Alexandrova, 2015). According to Hjalager and Flagestad (2012), wellbeing is a complex condition that encompasses the presence of good physical, mental, and spiritual health. Children wellbeing stems back in policies emerged in the 19th century in the US. Such policies expanded the concept of wellbeing for children including concepts like welfare, education and health care (Olson, 2010). Raghavan and Alexandrova (2015) define the concept in a way that when a child is learning the right skills for their age and acting like a typical child by being curious, exploring, and feeling safe, they are considered to be doing well in terms of their wellbeing.

Over time, the general concept of wellbeing has transformed. Initially, it was primarily associated with *subjective wellbeing*, focusing on aspects like happiness and hedonism (Diener, 2006). However, this notion has evolved to encompass *objective wellbeing*, which includes a broader spectrum of elements, such as meaning and eudemonic aspects (see Pomfret, 2021; Lee & Jeong, 2020; Rahmani et al., 2018). More recently, engagement and involvement have also become part of the wellbeing equation, as proposed by Seligman (2012). Seligman's PERMA model (2012) underscores the importance of positive emotions, which encompass feelings of pleasure, satisfaction, and hope. It emphasizes the significance of active engagement, where children experience a state of flow and immersion in their activities. Additionally, positive and meaningful relationships are highlighted, as well as a sense of meaningful achievement and accomplishment (Seligman, 2012). This model serves as a guide to understanding the complex relationship between different facets of children's engagement and their overall wellbeing (Laevers, 2015; Mohammadi & Fehrest, 2023). This evolution is mirrored in the concept of child wellbeing, which has shifted from an emphasis on child protection to a more comprehensive consideration of children's development and overall wellbeing (Ben-Arieh, 2010). The study of wellbeing offers three major theoretical perspectives: *hedonism*, a well-known mental state theory asserts that wellbeing is about happiness, pleasure and positive state of mind (Diener, 2006); *desire-based theories*, link wellbeing to actual fulfilment of desires not only the emotions known as subjective wellbeing (Lin, 2014; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997); and *objective list theories*, rooted in eudaimonia concept of Aristotle, links wellbeing to cognitive developments (Seligman, 2012; Pomfret, 2021).

These theories provide a robust foundation for understanding the diverse dimensions that contribute to children's wellbeing. Raghavan and Alexandrova (2015) contend that hedonism theories, may not adequately capture children's overall wellbeing due to the significant developmental processes inherent in childhood, and further suggest that desire-based theories might be somewhat adult-centric, given their reliance on cognitive development levels that may not yet be fully realized in children. The Structural Model of Child Wellbeing (SMCW) was proposed by Minkinen (2013) as a response to the outlined limitations above. This model is created to better understand and measure how well children are doing. It considers many different aspects of wellbeing and how they connect with each other. It also suggests that both objective (factual) and subjective (based on feelings) measures are important when studying child wellbeing. It acknowledges that child wellbeing is complex and depends on many factors, such as a child's

biology, their surroundings, and how society sees them. Child wellbeing is a dynamic and complex concept with different dimensions.

Based on the inadequacy of the aforementioned theories and the unique needs of children have prompted the development of the Theory of Child Wellbeing by Raghavan and Alexandrova (2015). This theory is a valuable framework for understanding the multifaceted aspects of children's overall welfare. It takes a holistic approach, recognizing that children's wellbeing is not solely reliant on happiness and desire satisfaction. It focuses on children's wellbeing in the present, considering them as they are now, rather than projecting them as future adults. According to this theory, a child's wellbeing is intertwined with their development of stage- and environment-appropriate skills. These skills not only set them up for a successful future but also enable them to engage with their surroundings in a manner suitable for their age and developmental stage (Raghavan & Alexandrova, 2015).

From a multidimensional perspective, children's wellbeing encompasses physical, psychological (mental and emotional), social, and cognitive development (Minkkinen, 2013; Moore et al., 2012, Mohammadi & Fehrest, 2023). In this comprehensive view, wellbeing for children encompasses not only their physical health and emotional state, but also their social interactions and cognitive growth. Tourism may play a role in enhancing children's wellbeing, with the potential to impact their physical health, psychological state, social interactions, and cognitive development.

2.2. Tourism and child wellbeing

The connection between tourism and wellbeing has been extensively examined and comprehended from various angles. Tourism, actively contributes to the happiness and positive emotions of traveller, influencing residents' wellbeing in tourist destinations, symbolizing improved quality of life and societal progress, and even the frequency of travel can impact someone's overall happiness (see De Bloom et al., 2010; Liu et al., 2023; Lynn et al., 2009; McCabe & Johnson, 2013; Uysal et al., 2016). The current body of literature focuses on the role of tourism in wellbeing, with limited attention given to measuring its benefits, particularly concerning children. While some studies in family tourism, adventure tourism and arts and creative activities have begun to explore the positive effects of tourism on the psychological wellbeing of children (Qiao et al., 2019; Stevens et al., 2019), there remains a gap in understanding of how tourism activities contribute to children's overall wellbeing.

Family tourism has been identified as a potential enhancer of adolescent Subjective Wellbeing (SWB), with differences in motivation observed between parents and children (Gao et al., 2021; Houge Mackenzie & Brymer, 2020; Pomfret, 2021). Additionally, research indicates that adolescent travellers experience a significant increase in SWB following family holidays (Gao & Potwarka, 2021).

Adventure recreation has emerged as a significant factor in facilitating SWB (Pomfret, 2021). The role of adventure recreation in facilitating SWB has recently received attention, prompting calls for further research to better understand the beneficial effects of activity participation (Houge Mackenzie & Brymer, 2020). In adventure activity participation, people's original activity motives often become benefits as they continue to participate. These benefits encompass enhanced self-efficacy, resilience, social confidence, self-esteem, freedom, and competence gained from confronting perceived danger and overcoming challenges (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013). Understanding these benefits and their links to hedonic and eudaimonia wellbeing (HWB and EWB) is vital.

Art and creative activities like singing, dance, music, drama, and visual arts have been shown to have a positive impact on human health and wellbeing, with benefits including stress relief, increased self-esteem, and improved socialization (Bungay & Vella-Burrows, 2013; Davies et al., 2015; Stevens et al., 2019). For example, social circus activities have been associated with improvements in mental health, enjoyment of physical activities, positive socialization, and resilience building among children (Stevens et al., 2019).

Despite the growing recognition of tourism's impact on well-being, significant challenges remain in measuring and understanding the specific effects of tourism on children's well-being. The current literature predominantly focuses on subjective well-being outcomes, often neglecting comprehensive insights into the diverse impacts of tourism on children's well-being, particularly regarding engagement, developmental appropriateness, and the influence of socio-cultural contexts. The current state of research on children's well-being reveals notable gaps. Comprehensive measures and well-designed studies are needed to explore how various tourism activities impact children's physical health, psychological state, social interactions, and cognitive development. Addressing these gaps through studies will not only advance academic understanding but also inform policies and practices that promote children's holistic well-being in tourism settings.

3. Methodology

Research on children in the tourism literature has received notably less attention and past investigations have focused more on children themselves rather than involving them directly (Barker & Weller, 2003). Several reasons have been suggested, including conceptual, ethical, and methodological factors (Poria & Timothy, 2014). Conceptually, there is a dearth of theory in children's tourism, while ethical concerns involve rigid ethical considerations, and methodological challenges arise from difficulties in conducting research with children. Due to their unique perspectives and communication styles, children may not respond well to traditional study methodologies, necessitating more specific approaches. To address this, scholars advocate for child-friendly or child-centric methodologies that involve and understand children's perceptions, ideas, and experiences, recognizing their limitations (Barker & Weller, 2003). Drawing emerges as an effective method for engaging children in research (Quaglia et al., 2015), allowing them to

express themselves and their feelings in an enjoyable manner (Arslan Cansever, 2017). It also allows children to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a creative and non-verbal manner, enabling them to communicate complex ideas that may be challenging to articulate verbally (Pitt, 2017). Furthermore, it ensures inclusivity, as a universally accessible method that can be used across diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, ensuring that children from various backgrounds can participate and contribute to research efforts (Christensen & James, 2017).

Nevertheless, it does not come without limitations. First, it possesses interpretation challenges because interpreting children's drawings can be subjective and challenging, as researchers may struggle to accurately decipher the meaning behind the visual representations, leading to potential misinterpretations or biases in the analysis (Deguara, 2019). Second, while drawing allows children to convey their experiences visually, it may not always capture the full depth or complexity of their thoughts and emotions, limiting the richness of the data collected (Christensen & James, 2017). Third, children's drawing abilities vary widely based on factors such as age, developmental stage, and prior exposure to art, which may affect the clarity and detail of their visual representations, potentially affecting the quality and consistency of the data. Finally, drawings may be influenced by cultural norms, values, and symbols, which can vary significantly across different cultural contexts (Christensen & James, 2017). Researchers must be mindful of cultural biases and interpretations when analyzing children's drawings in cross-cultural studies. Li et al. (2020) suggest asking children to explain their drawings to aid interpretation. For the purpose of this study, drawing was used to collect data on children's well-being through traveling. We explained the study's objectives to children and invited them to draw pictures depicting their favorite travel experiences or tourist destinations that bring them joy and a sense of well-being. In the pursuit of comprehensive insights, our research targeted three girls' schools spanning divergent socioeconomic landscapes within Tehran. Gender-segregated educational norms in Iran led us to focus on girls' schools, a decision fortified by two key considerations. Firstly, girls exhibit a propensity for enhanced data engagement and collaboration compared to their male counterparts. Secondly, our research team maintains close ties with these educational institutions, particularly in orchestrating children's tourism ventures. Purposefully selecting schools from varied economic strata affords us a nuanced understanding of familial influences on perspectives and methodologies, thereby enriching our analysis. The three schools were Shokuh Moghbari Girls' School, located in District 5 and the Shahraneh neighborhood, contributed 100 drawings. Kushesh Girls' School, situated in District 3, opposite Mellat Park, provided 53 drawings. And, lastly, Mohtaheri Girls' School, situated in District 17 and the Vaf-e Nader neighborhood, yielded 64 drawings. The socio-cultural context of Iranian girls presents unique considerations regarding how travel experiences can influence their well-being. Cultural norms and societal expectations may shape their travel preferences and experiences differently compared to their Western counterparts. Understanding these nuances is crucial for developing inclusive and effective tourism practices that cater to diverse cultural backgrounds. The total number of drawings collected amounted to 217, although three were deemed incomprehensible and therefore excluded from analysis.

Initially, discussions were held with the principals of the three selected schools to introduce and elucidate the objectives of the project. Following their consent, a chosen day was arranged in coordination with the schools, ensuring minimal disruption to the students' routines. Subsequently,

the project's objectives were presented to the students, accompanied by detailed explanations. Despite the potential inconvenience to the children, they were encouraged to participate in the activity. They were tasked with envisioning a tourist destination and corresponding activity, translating their desires into drawings while reflecting on the emotional resonance evoked by their chosen experiences. The aim was to understand how they view traveling and the impact of such imagined travels on their joys and well-being. Following the drawing exercise, the children were invited to provide succinct explanations elucidating the motivations behind their artistic depictions.

Following the data collection phase, the drawings were collected, and digitally archived in JPEG format for analysis. During this stage, the images were meticulously decoded, allowing for the identification of key characteristics that children deemed significant in a destination or a tourist activity. Visual content analysis was employed to delve deeper insights into the children's drawings, aiming to discern underlying messages, recurring themes, and patterns (Ertas et al., 2021). This method facilitated the extraction of meaningful insights and a comprehensive understanding of the children's artistic expressions. Visual content analysis, as described by Bell (2004), is a systematic observational approach enabling the quantification of observable content categorized into distinct themes. Given the intricate nature of children's drawings, which often intertwine beliefs, body, and emotions, decoding their artistic creations poses a formidable challenge (Deguara, 2019). Therefore, in line with the recommendations of Ertaş et al. (2021), children were encouraged to provide brief explanations of their drawings, enhancing our interpretative capacity and enriching the analysis process. Out of the 2017 drawings collected, 214 were analyzed, and three drawings were found to be meaningless and consequently excluded from the analysis process. The findings of the visual content analysis revealed five main themes, which are discussed in detail in the following sections.

4. Findings and discussions

In this section, we examine the key themes that emerged from the data, shedding light on children's preferred travel experiences. These themes are vital for understanding the broader implications of children's travel behavior and preferences. The identified themes, ranked by their importance in the data, include: Enjoyable and fun activities, Social and family bonds, Connection to nature, Self-exploration experiences, and the Contrast between international and domestic destinations. The first theme "Social and family bonds" is nurtured through three sub-themes: *family-oriented relationships*, *social spaces like restaurants*, and the *shared joy of travel experiences with friends*. The second theme "Connection to nature" embraces *outdoor activities*, *encounters with wildlife*, and *awareness of environmental issues*. Additionally, the third theme of "Enjoyable and fun activities" encompasses a mix of *playfulness and joy*, *indulgence in shopping*, and *a deep love for diverse food experiences*, including fast food and easy-to-eat items. The theme "Self-exploration experiences" is enriched by *engaging in educational environments*, *fostering a sense of discovery*, *curiosity and imagination*, and *cultivating independence*. Lastly, the theme 'International vs. domestic destinations' highlights the appeal of foreign travel versus domestic trips for children.

Each theme is discussed in detail below.

4.1. Social and family bonds

The findings of the current study reveal the large numbers of drawings depicting a variety of shared experiences of children with others. This emphasizes the significance of companionship, be it with friends or family members, in children's preferred travel experiences (Fig. 1). Notably, some drawings even feature members of the extended family, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, further emphasizing the importance of familial bonds and relationships in shaping children's travel perceptions and experiences.

The analysis of the drawings also indicates that for many participants, traveling with their siblings appears to be a source of enjoyment. A girl aged 11 portrays herself and her parents amidst a serene natural setting, expressing: *I enjoy venturing into nature and playing with my family; I am the only child*. Alongside this portrayal, she includes an image of a younger girl and expresses her wish for a sister. The participants also show their connections with their grandparents through a range of shared experiences, including enjoying nature, engaging in religious activities, and visiting their grandparents' village home.



Fig. 1. Family bonds. Sample: 2.13: A girl in the nature accompanied by her family members; Sample 3.34: A girl visiting her grandparents.

One crucial aspect of companionship revolves around friendship, which holds equal significance to familial bonds (Fig. 2). As exemplified by a 9-year-old girl's sentiment - *I love playing in a carefree setting, anywhere, but always with my friend* - the profound bonds of friendship emerge as a defining aspect of children's preferred travel experiences. The importance of shared experiences with friends is further emphasized when children depict playful and exciting adventures in various settings or even when they express their aspirations of exploring foreign destinations. Furthermore, a number of participants depict engaging in group activities that require motivation and strength such as mountain climbing with their circle of friends.



Fig. 2. Friendship. Sample 1.98: A girl with her friends climbing a mountain; Sample 1.2: A girl playing with her school friends in an amusement park.

The prevalence of drawings depicting shared experiences with family members and friends features the significance of social connections in children's travel experiences. This finding aligns with the Theory of Child Wellbeing proposed by Raghavan and Alexandrova (2015), which emphasizes the importance of supportive relationships in fostering children's wellbeing. Furthermore, the portrayal of extended family members and the expression of familial bonds resonate with research highlighting the role of family cohesion in promoting children's happiness and resilience (Gao et al., 2021; Pomfret, 2021; Tseng et al., 2023). The findings correspond to the components of the PERMA (Seligman, 2012) model related to Positive Relationships and Meaningful Engagement. Strong familial bonds and social connections contribute to children's overall wellbeing and happiness, providing them with a sense of belonging, support, and security. Additionally, the portrayal of extended family members and the expression of familial traditions and rituals enrich children's experiences, fostering a sense of cultural identity and belonging (Ben-Arieh, 2010). Furthermore, the importance of friendship and peer relationships is highlighted, as children derive joy and fulfillment from shared experiences and playful interactions with their friends.

4.2. Connection to nature

The significance of natural elements and environment is underscored by numerous drawings of the children in this study, revealing their profound appreciation for the natural world. In the majority of the drawings, participants predominantly portray themselves alone or accompanied by family members and friends amidst natural surroundings like the sea, forest, river, mountain, and even desert landscapes. However, some drawings depict unique nature-based activities, such as boating, beach play, mountain climbing, camping, and culinary experiences. While illustrating herself and her parents next to a tent, a 10-year-old girl remarks: *I wish to journey to the desert and gaze at the stars during the night*. Furthermore, in some drawings, participants distinctly portray their interest in experiences involving animals and birds (Fig. 3). In a drawing, the girl, joined by her brother and friends, embarks on a visit to an aquarium, where they get familiar a fascinating array of sea creatures.

The findings of this study also highlight that some children are concerned about the nature and cleanliness of the weather. A girl illustrates herself amidst nature, gathering trash. Also, interestingly, a 9-year-old girl highlights this sentiment: *Why would I like to travel to Canada? Because of Tehran's pollution.* This suggests that, in contrast to the pollution in their home city (Tehran), some children express a desire to travel to countries like Germany and Canada due to their reputation for clean weather conditions. In fact, children are mindful of the cleanliness of the weather and its impact on their well-being and preferences for travel destinations.



Fig. 3. Nature-based activities. Sample 1.7: A girl with her friend on a boat; Sample 3.2: Trees, animals, and a bird.

The profound appreciation for natural elements depicted in the children's drawings mirrors the growing body of literature highlighting the positive impact of nature-based experiences on children's wellbeing. Studies by Moore et al. (2012) and Cho and Yu (2020) emphasize the beneficial effects of outdoor activities on children's physical, psychological, and social development. Additionally, the awareness of environmental issues, as evidenced by children's concern for cleanliness and pollution, resonates with research emphasizing the role of eco-awareness in shaping children's travel preferences (Raghavan & Alexandrova, 2015). The portrayal of nature-based activities and appreciation for natural elements align with the components of the PERMA model (Seligman, 2012) related to Engagement, Meaning, and Accomplishment. Immersion in nature facilitates experiences of engagement and absorption, providing children with opportunities for exploration, discovery, and sensory stimulation. Furthermore, the connection to nature fosters a sense of meaning and purpose, as children develop an appreciation for the natural world and their place within it. Additionally, activities such as boating, beach play, and camping provide children with opportunities for accomplishment and mastery, as they navigate and explore their natural surroundings. These are actual elements of wellbeing according to Raghavan and Alexandrova (2015).

4.3. Enjoyable and fun activities

In this study, the analysis of the drawings indicates that children hold a strong appreciation for a range of pleasurable pursuits, including playing, shopping, and activities related to food.

Numerous drawings highlight the experiences derived from engaging in playful activities with family members, friends, pets, or even alone (Fig. 4). These interactions often occur in natural settings, such as coastal areas, rural villas, or amusement parks, indicating the vital role of engaging and playful activities for children, even amidst the travel. While drawing a rustic playground scene and a multi-floor house, a 10-year-old girl comments: *I adore visiting my grandfather's house, built by his own hands. It's a place where a floor is dedicated solely to play.* In some instances, children also expressed sentiments such as, *I like playing with my friends* or *I delight in playing with our pets*.



Fig. 4. Playful Activities. Sample 2.43: A girl having fun with a dog and her friends; Sample 3.50: Two children playing in a family-oriented environment.

The results of this research also showed that exploring the joys of shopping emerges as another delightful activity depicted in children's drawings (Fig. 5). Clothing boutiques and malls, accessory shops, and stationery stores prominently feature among the types of activities they have depicted. A girl, happily sketching herself and her friend in front of a bustling shopping mall, writes: *My friend and I are going to the mall. I love shopping centers.*

Interestingly, a few of them even take the initiative to inscribe the names of renowned brands on storefronts (in other countries), showcasing their awareness of and interest in worldwide popular fashion brands.



Fig. 5. Shopping activities. Sample 2.27: A girl entering a shopping mall; 2.21: A girl in a stationery store.

The results show that exploring culinary delights and snacking experiences form another integral part of children's fun activities (Fig. 6). Some depict scenes of dining tables in relatively formal settings, such as restaurants, showcasing their interest in shared food-related experiences with loved ones. Alternatively, these shared activities also unfold in natural settings like picnics and culinary adventures. Furthermore, some participants express their love for snacks and food by using their creative abilities to imagine a delightful "food land". For instance, a girl aged 11 remarked: *I enjoy travelling to places brimming with sweets and chocolates.*



Fig. 6. Food and snacks-related activities. Sample 3.26: A girl surrounded by a variety of candies and sweets; 1.66: A girl with her family members in a restaurant.

The depiction of pleasurable pursuits such as playing, shopping, and culinary experiences underscores the significance of engaging and playful activities for children's wellbeing during travel. This aligns with research by Seraphin and Yallop (2020) and Israfilova & Khoo-Lattimore (2019), which emphasizes the role of enjoyable experiences in enhancing children's satisfaction and happiness during tourism. Engaging in playful activities with family and friends fosters positive emotions and a sense of enjoyment, contributing to children's overall happiness and satisfaction (Seligman, 2012). Furthermore, the exploration of novel experiences and interactions with loved ones enhances children's engagement and immersion in their activities, promoting a sense of flow and fulfillment (Seligman, 2012). Additionally, shared experiences such as dining together and shopping with family members and friends foster meaningful relationships and social connections, which are essential for children's wellbeing and development (Ben-Arieh, 2010).

4.4. Self-exploration experiences

The analysis of the children's drawings revealed that experiences of self-exploration also hold a special significance in the preferred travels of children beside fun and enjoyable experience. As previously mentioned, some drawings depict girls alone in various environments such as nature, shopping, foreign countries, holy places, and in their imaginary journeys. This emphasizes the significance of fostering independence and the potential for solo travel among the participants in

the future. In some drawings, children mainly want to show their talents, like playing a musical instrument or painting, and also their imagination and dreams (Fig. 7). Almost 20 drawings demonstrate the children's interests in places where they can experience something comparable to their curiosity and imaginations, such as food land, palyland, and mysterious stories and phenomena. A drawing shows the girl with a magic broom, accompanied by the comment (in English): *I love to go to the Harry Potter world in the U.S.A.*

Educational experiences and acquiring knowledge are also deemed significant. For instance, an 11-year-old girl depicted two girls studying and remarked: *My cousin and I are studying and exploring at a renowned university.* In a drawing, the girl has depicted herself alongside her Chinese tutor preparing to board a plane amidst a Chinese setting, replete with Chinese cultural elements and words, showing her skill in the Chinese language. Another girl portrayed a library and expressed her fondness for visiting Ahvaz city, spending time with her grandfather, and reading books.



Fig. 7. Self-explore experiences. Samples 3.7: A girl in a spaceship; 2.53: A girl playing Piano.

The depiction of solo travel and self-exploration experiences highlights the importance of autonomy and personal growth in children's travel preferences. This finding aligns with theories of child development, such as Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, which emphasize the importance of autonomy and identity formation during childhood (Erikson, 1950). Moreover, the emphasis on educational experiences and cultural exploration reflects the evolving nature of children's travel motivations, moving beyond mere leisure to include learning and personal enrichment (Lin, 2014). These findings connect well to the way Raghavan and Alexandrova (2015) explain wellbeing, as they believe a child is doing well when they are learning and growing in a way that prepares them for a successful future, based on their surroundings. Additionally, this aligns with the 'Meaning' component of Seligman's (2012) PERMA model. Solo travel and independent exploration provide children with opportunities for autonomy and self-discovery, as they navigate unfamiliar environments and pursue their interests and passions. Additionally, engaging in educational experiences and cultural exploration fosters a sense of mastery and accomplishment, as children acquire new knowledge and skills and expand their horizons. Furthermore, the pursuit of personal interests and hobbies, such as playing musical instruments or

painting, provides children with opportunities for creative expression and personal fulfillment, contributing to their overall sense of meaning and purpose.

4.5. International vs domestic destinations

Many participants in the study either explicitly mentioned countries' names or depicted symbols, such as flags or iconic landmarks like the Eiffel Tower, representing various destinations, both domestic and international, in their drawings. Notable international destinations included Western countries such as Canada, the US, Germany, and France, as well as Asian countries like South Korea and Japan, and nearby nations like Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. The drawings in the mentioned international contexts predominantly showcase children enjoying various activities with their families and friends, such as shopping, spending time in nature, and playing. However, what stands out significantly is their desire to participate in music concerts in South Korea, with some girls even naming the music bands they aspire to visit.

Furthermore, some drawings featured Mecca in Saudi Arabia and holy sites in Iraq. All these drawings depict the girl and her family members engaged in prayer within a sacred shrine. In a particular drawing, a girl is depicted listening to music while crying and waiting for a bus with a sign indicating its destination toward “Karbala” (a holy city for Shia Muslims in Iraq). The girl notes: *Listening to Noha* (elegy poems for Hussein; a prominent Islamic figure) *and thinking of Imam Hossein brings me comfort*.

As for domestic destinations, different cities and regions are mentioned. However, cities like Mashhad, considered the holiest city in Iran, and northern regions of the country, known for recreation particularly among residents of the capital, were frequently cited. In addition, a 10-year-old girl, while holding the map of Iran, portrays her family members moving their car, mentioning: *we are heading south*. The attractiveness of visiting the southern islands, such as Kish and Qeshm, is emphasized in other samples. Regarding the keenness for domestic cultural experiences and attractions, in the instance 3.52, the girl is seen with her parents close to a building marked as the "Museum of Ancient Iran". Kashan and Isfahan, two culturally rich cities located near the capital, are also referenced in the samples. Additionally, it is worth noting that due to the diverse origins of many residents in the capital, as depicted in children's drawings, there is an enthusiasm for traveling to visit grandparents and relatives in other cities or villages.

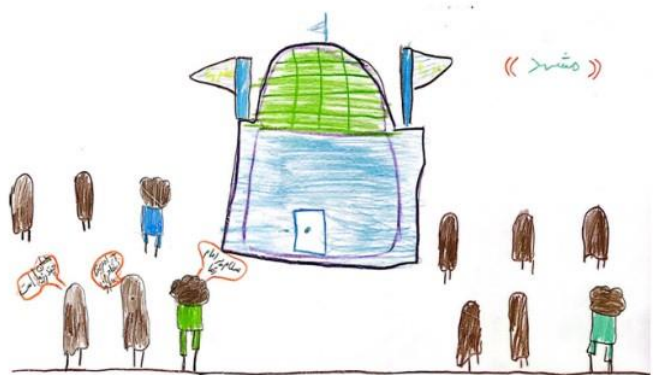


Fig. 8. International and domestic destinations; Sample 2.30: A girl looking at Eiffel Tower; Sample 3.47: A group visiting a shrine (in Iran).

The diversity of destination preferences depicted in the children's drawings reflects the evolving landscape of family tourism and children's travel aspirations. This finding resonates with research highlighting the influence of media, cultural exposure, and family dynamics on children's destination preferences (Uysal et al., 2016). Furthermore, the expression of cultural curiosity and religious significance in certain destinations aligns with studies emphasizing the role of cultural experiences in promoting children's sense of identity and belonging (Qiao et al., 2019; Stevens et al., 2019).

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted ways in which tourism experiences contribute to different dimensions of children's wellbeing, including hedonic wellbeing (HWB), and eudaimonic wellbeing (EWB). By aligning with theoretical frameworks and empirical research in the field, these findings provide valuable insights into how tourism can positively impact children's overall wellbeing more in a development context rather protection context of old times.

5. Implications and conclusion

5.1. Theoretical implications

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the theoretical understanding of child wellbeing in the context of tourism. The research extends the traditional hedonic perspectives on child enjoyment __emphasizing pleasure and happiness__ to include broader eudaimonic aspects, which focus on meaning and self-realization. This dual-focus approach aligns with Seligman's PERMA model, where Pleasure, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment converge to define wellbeing.

More specifically, the findings enrich literature in three ways. First, the emphasis on engagement through enjoyable activities like playing, shopping, and culinary experiences expands upon previous research (Seraphin & Yallop, 2020; Israfilova & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019), offering a sophisticated view of how such engagements contribute to positive emotional states and social connections, crucial for psychological resilience in children. Furthermore, the research provides empirical support for the idea that immersion in nature enhances children's physical, psychological, and emotional development, while fostering a sense of belonging and environmental stewardship. Second, the focus on family and peer interactions (social relationships) supports theories proposed by Raghavan and Alexandrova (2015) on the importance of supportive social environments in promoting child wellbeing. This study adds to the body of literature emphasizing the role of strong familial bonds and friendships in the travel context in fostering a child's social skills, self-esteem, and emotional health. Third, the findings on self-exploration and personal growth contribute to the understanding of child development stages as proposed by Erikson (1950), illustrating how travel experiences support autonomy, competence, and identity formation in children. Finally, by highlighting the significance of educational and cultural exposures during travel, this research extends current theories on cognitive and social development, suggesting that such experiences enrich children's cognitive frameworks and contribute to a comprehensive educational development.

5.2. Practical implications

From a practical perspective, these findings provide actionable insights for multiple stakeholders involved in tourism, education, and community planning. First, travel planners can design child-centric tour packages that emphasize interactive and educational experiences, integrating nature-based activities and cultural exposure to cater to the developmental needs of children. These programs could be designed to foster children's self-confidence, enhance social interaction skills, and support their overall development. Second, insights from this research can guide urban planners in designing community spaces and recreational areas that facilitate social interaction and engagement with nature, supporting child development and family bonding.

Third, the findings suggest incorporating experiential learning through field trips and cultural exchanges in the curriculum, fostering a holistic educational approach that balances learning with real-world experiences. Fourth, the appreciation for nature expressed in children's drawings highlights the need for environmental education and awareness programs that engage children from a young age, promoting sustainable behaviors. These childhood experiences will lead to adults' pro-environmental behaviour in the future (Shekari et al., 2024). Finally, professionals in these fields can use the insights from this study to advise parents on the psychological benefits of involving children in planning travel and engaging in shared family activities, which are instrumental in developing strong familial ties and promoting mental health.

5.3. Limitations and directions for future research

Studies involving children's drawings and their preferences for travel activities will come out with certain limitations that could impact the generalizability and interpretation of the results. First, the study may be limited by the demographic and geographic diversity of its sample. If the sample predominantly includes children from specific socio-economic backgrounds or regions, the findings may not be representative of all children's preferences and experiences. Additionally, the size of the sample can significantly affect the reliability of the data; a small sample size might not adequately capture the range of perspectives and experiences among children.

Secondly, the reliance on drawings as the primary data collection method may limit the depth of information that can be gathered about the children's preferences and experiences. While drawings can provide insightful qualitative data, they might not capture detailed or nuanced understandings of children's thoughts and feelings compared to other methods such as interviews or questionnaires. For future studies, it is suggested to combine this method with other techniques, including interviews.

Third, the children's preferences and experiences depicted in their drawings might be influenced by temporary or recent experiences, such as a recent trip or a popular cultural trend, rather than long-term preferences. This temporal aspect can affect the stability and longevity of the results. Collecting data from the same group of children over an extended period can help mitigate the impact of temporary experiences on their drawings. Forth, the children's responses and the content of their drawings may be heavily influenced by their cultural context. What children in one cultural setting find enjoyable or significant might differ greatly from children in another setting, limiting the applicability of findings across different cultural contexts. To address the impact of cultural

context on children's drawings, implementation a cross-cultural comparative analysis could be helpful. Recognizing these limitations is crucial for understanding the scope of the research and for framing the findings within the appropriate context. It also helps in designing future studies to address these gaps, thereby enhancing the robustness and applicability of research in understanding children's preferences and experiences in tourism and other contexts.

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