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Child visitors in cultural tourism: insights for designing inclusive heritage experiences

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Abstract: This study investigates children's experiences in cultural tourism, offering a novel perspective on an underexplored demographic in tourism research. Adopting a phenomenological approach, it interprets the meanings embedded in children's narratives rather than seeking generalizable outcomes. Thirty-five children participated in a cultural tour and documented their experiences in unstructured observation books. The qualitative content analysis identified four key dimensions—*aesthetic, emotional, learning, and service quality*—and twenty associated themes. Findings reveal that children viewed cultural tourism positively, highlighting the aesthetic appeal of heritage sites, the richness of historical information, and the importance of interactive and responsive services. The study advances understanding of children as active meaning-makers in tourism and provides practical implications for designing inclusive, child-centered cultural tourism experiences. Its insights can guide tourism professionals, educators, and policymakers in developing more engaging and ethically grounded heritage experiences.

Keywords: Cultural tourism, child tourists, touristic experience, child-friendly tourism

Los niños visitantes en el turismo cultural: perspectivas para el diseño de experiencias patrimoniales inclusivas

Resumen: Este estudio investiga las experiencias de los niños en el turismo cultural, ofreciendo una perspectiva novedosa sobre un grupo demográfico escasamente explorado en la investigación turística. Adoptando un enfoque fenomenológico, interpreta los significados presentes en las narrativas infantiles en lugar de buscar resultados generalizables. Treinta y cinco niños participaron en un recorrido cultural y documentaron sus experiencias en cuadernos de observación no estructurados. El análisis cualitativo de contenido identificó cuatro dimensiones principales —estética, emocional, de aprendizaje y de calidad del servicio— y veinte temas asociados. Los resultados revelan que los niños percibieron el turismo cultural de manera positiva, destacando el atractivo estético de los sitios patrimoniales, la riqueza de la información histórica y la importancia de los servicios interactivos y receptivos. El estudio amplía la comprensión de los niños como constructores activos de significado en el turismo y ofrece implicaciones prácticas para el diseño de experiencias de turismo cultural inclusivas y centradas en la infancia. Sus aportaciones pueden orientar a los profesionales del turismo, a los educadores y a los responsables de políticas públicas en el desarrollo de experiencias patrimoniales más participativas y éticamente fundamentadas.

Palabras Clave: Turismo cultural, turistas infantiles, experiencia turística, turismo amigable con la infancia

1. INTRODUCTION

In an era characterized by rapid globalization, cultural tourism has emerged as a significant avenue for individuals seeking meaningful interactions with diverse traditions and heritage. The growing appeal of culture-based travel stems from its capacity to offer unique and immersive experiences that foster connections with tangible and intangible cultural assets. Unlike standardized tourism services, cultural tourism often provides unpredictable and distinct encounters, making it an attractive option for travelers seeking memorable adventures (Richards, 2018). Culture not only attracts tourists but also influences their behavior (Lee et al., 2023). Tangible and intangible cultural assets in a destination shape the tourist experience and foster loyalty (Hosany & Witham, 2010). Structures such as ancient cities, castles, monuments, and houses, as immovable cultural assets, enhance aesthetic satisfaction and emotional attachment to the destination (Oh et al., 2007; Ditoiu & Caruntu, 2014).

Cultural tourism is commonly understood not only as the consumption of cultural attractions but as an interpretive encounter through which visitors engage with heritage, history, and collective memory. Beyond physical sites and monuments, cultural tourism involves processes of meaning-making, learning, and reflection that allow visitors to situate themselves in relation to the past (Richards, 2018). From this perspective, heritage spaces function as informal educational environments, where knowledge is not transmitted solely through factual information but constructed through interpretation, experience, and emotional engagement (Buskell, 2022). Recognizing cultural tourism as an experiential and educational practice provides a critical foundation for examining how different visitor groups—particularly children—engage with heritage in distinct and developmentally meaningful ways.

With the number of children aged 5–14 expected to reach 800 million globally by 2030 (McDougall & Chantrey, 2004), children represent a significant demographic force in contemporary societies. They are an

important consumer group and a critical influence on family purchasing decisions across various sectors, including tourism (Dal & Dal, 2015; Canosa & Schänzel, 2021). The child–family relationship, central to modern consumption dynamics, also shapes touristic purchasing behaviors and travel preferences. Child tourists, like adults, seek to escape routine life and to engage in enriching experiences through family travel. Activities and social interactions during holidays play an essential role in shaping their perceptions of tourism. Although parents typically make final travel decisions, children’s voices increasingly influence destination choice, as they begin to exhibit consumer agency from an early age—typically between ages 7 and 12 (Aygün, 2006). Studies have shown that children are not passive observers but active participants in travel planning and experience formation (Gamradt, 1995; Schänzel & Yeoman, 2015). As future adult tourists, their early interactions with cultural and natural environments are formative and carry long-term implications for the tourism economy (Hu et al, 2023).

While a growing body of research has examined children’s tourism experiences (e.g., Westman et al., 2013; Rhoden et al., 2016; Ying-Wu et al., 2019; Seraphin et al., 2022), limited attention has been given to their engagement with cultural tourism specifically. Related studies—such as those by Kerr and Price (2018), who explored children’s experiences in dark tourism contexts—demonstrate that children’s participation in cultural and heritage-based environments is multifaceted and worthy of deeper exploration. Nevertheless, the cultural tourism context remains under-theorized in relation to children’s meaning-making and experiential learning. This study thus seeks to advance understanding of how child tourists experience and interpret culture-based travel.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the study also offers methodological originality by employing observation books and in-situ engagement to capture children’s authentic voices during cultural visits. The observation books, designed with open-ended prompts, encouraged participants to reflect on what they saw, felt, and learned while interacting with heritage sites, enabling them to construct their own narratives without the constraints of formal interviews. The researcher’s direct presence during the visits further allowed for contextual observation and deeper interpretation of the emotional and behavioral nuances embedded in children’s response. This immersive and ethically sensitive approach aligns with the phenomenological emphasis on lived experience and with the view of children as competent and expressive social actors (Prout & James, 1997; Christensen & James, 2017; Li et al., 2024). By integrating these theoretical and methodological perspectives, the study provides original insights into children’s cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic engagement with cultural heritage. It extends existing discussions in both cultural tourism and childhood studies, offering implications for tourism professionals, heritage site managers, and educators seeking to design more inclusive and child-centered cultural tourism experiences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Cultural tourism

Culture and tourism have been intertwined throughout the history of civilization (Richards, 2018), manifesting in two primary ways: cultural attractions drive tourism, and tourism influences the local culture of the destination (Usta, 2001). In essence, tourism is a space where tourists and local cultural elements interact. Cultural tourism, one of the oldest forms of niche tourism, has grown in recent years in response to tourist demand and now accounts for approximately 40% of total tourist activity (Espeso-Molinero, 2023).

Factors such as tourists' desire for closer connections with nature, curiosity about ancient cultures, interest in local lifestyles, and a growing preference for destinations with distinct identities have fueled this growth (Emekli, 2006). Culture encompasses all phenomena influencing human life, meaning that all tourism activities can be understood through the lens of cultural tourism (Mousavi et al., 2016)

The consumption of cultural products for tourism has been a key concept in defining culturally based tourism. MacCannell (1976) argued that cultural products are not merely the result of cultural processes but also incorporate various elements derived from these processes, with tourism serving as a platform that brings these elements together. Similarly, Richards (2018) defines culturally based tourism as a 'cultural consumption activity' that includes art, heritage, folklore, and all elements perceived as cultural by tourists. Du Cros and McKercher (2015) describe cultural-based tourism as a form of tourism where cultural heritage assets of a destination are transformed into consumable products for tourists. This definition highlights four key components: tourism, cultural assets, product/experience consumption, and tourists.

An analysis of the factors attracting cultural tourists reveals varying conclusions among researchers, making it difficult to reach a universal definition, as is the case with culture and cultural tourism. Doğaner (2001) defines cultural heritage as tangible natural assets, including historical, archaeological, urban, and natural sites, as well as structures like mounds, mosques, and churches. Emekli (2006) expands this definition to include intangible elements such as traditions, customs, religious beliefs, music, dance, and culinary practices. Other studies emphasize that both tangible and intangible cultural assets—such as monumental architecture, artistically significant structures, archaeological sites, and traditional lifestyles—are key components of cultural tourism (Halkos et al., 2024). Furthermore, cultural tourism increasingly intersects with educational objectives, positioning heritage sites not merely as attractions to be consumed but as interpretive environments in which learning, meaning-making, and experience converge (Moscardo, 2011). Cultural tourism thus functions as a form of informal education, enabling visitors to engage with historical narratives, cultural values, and collective memory through direct encounter and interpretation rather than through formal instruction (Toker & Rezapouraghdam, 2021). This educational dimension is not limited to the transmission of factual knowledge but extends to experiential, emotional, and reflective forms of learning that shape how visitors perceive and internalize heritage (Olesen & Holdgaard, 2024). Recognizing cultural tourism as an interpretive and educational practice provides a critical foundation for examining visitor experiences beyond adult-centric perspectives and opens analytical space for understanding how children engage with heritage as active learners and meaning-makers.

2.2. Tourist experience in cultural tourism

Despite the prevalence of mass tourism, many tourists today seek unique travel experiences driven by physical, emotional, psychological, and sociological factors (Ferrari, 2013). The lack of standardization in cultural tourism services and the unpredictability of experiences create distinctive journeys for tourists (Richards, 2018). As a result, culture not only serves as an attraction but also significantly influences tourist behavior (Lee et al, 2023). Since culture is shaped by human hands, globalization introduces new opportunities for cultural experiences, allowing both cultures and tourists to transcend homogeneous forms. This dynamic can influence behaviors in both positive and negative ways (Liu & Fellows, 2013)

The products and services offered by tourism businesses are distinctive in both quality and quantity, adding meaning to tourists' lives. This is true throughout all stages of product and service delivery, from

presentation to purchase and consumption (Ritzer, 2005). As a result, the experience derived from consuming products designed within a specific concept is unique (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009). However, this experience also shapes tourists' expectations and needs. For cultural tourists, merely satisfying the desire for learning is insufficient; experiences that leave a lasting impact are essential (Ferrari, 2013). The presence of numerous tangible and intangible cultural assets in a destination significantly influences the tourist experience and fosters loyalty to the destination (Hosany & Witham, 2010). Notably, structures with distinctive architecture and physical features, such as ancient cities, castles, monuments, and houses—immovable cultural assets—provide visual pleasure, enhance aesthetic satisfaction, and cultivate emotional attachment to the destination (Oh et al., 2007; Ditoiu & Caruntu, 2014). Reality and authenticity are key factors in attracting tourists to cultural-based tourism. Cultural tourists often perceive many aspects of their daily lives as artificially created (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010) and seek authentic experiences that add meaning to their lives (Hargrove, 2002). Authenticity is found in recognizing places with historical and cultural significance (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006).

The concept of tourist experience has been extensively theorized in tourism studies, emphasizing its multidimensional and subjective nature. Early conceptualizations framed tourist experience as a combination of activities, settings, and emotional responses occurring before, during, and after travel (Clawson & Knetsch, 1966). On the other hand recent framework conceptualizes experience as a holistic process involving cognitive, affective, sensory, and behavioral components (Jafar & Ahmad, 2024). Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience economy model, for instance, positions experiences along dimensions of participation and immersion, highlighting how learning, entertainment, aesthetics, and escapism shape visitor engagement—dimensions particularly relevant to cultural tourism contexts.

In cultural tourism, experience is closely linked to interpretation and meaning-making. Models of heritage experience emphasize the role of authenticity, narrative, and interpretation in shaping how visitors relate to cultural sites (Genc & Gulertekin Genc, 2023; Leong et al, 2024). Rather than passively consuming information, visitors actively construct meaning through interaction with heritage environments, guides, and fellow visitors. This interpretive process underscores the educational dimension of cultural tourism, where learning emerges through experiential engagement rather than formal instruction. Importantly, contemporary experience frameworks also stress the embodied and relational dimensions of tourism. Sensory conditions, emotional responses, and service interactions collectively shape how experiences are perceived and remembered (Steriopoulos et al., 2024). In cultural heritage settings, factors such as physical comfort, accessibility, environmental design, and staff behavior are integral to experience formation. These models provide a critical lens for understanding how cultural tourism experiences are enabled—or constrained—by contextual and material conditions, a perspective particularly relevant when examining experiences of children.

2.3. Children as touristic consumers

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), children are individuals under the age of eighteen who have not yet reached physical, mental, and social maturity (Karadoğan, 2019). Childhood, a crucial period in life, shapes physical and mental health and forms the foundation for personality traits, attitudes, and behaviors in adulthood (Güller, 2013). Experiences gained during childhood, including those related to consumption habits, influence later behaviors. As such, children are an important

consumer group and directly impact family purchasing decisions. The child-family relationship, a central issue in contemporary societies, also affects touristic purchasing behavior (Canosa & Schänzel, 2021). Children traveling with their families learn about tourism by observing their parents' decisions and behaviors (Emir & Pekyaman, 2010), making them the future adult tourists.

The choice of activity significantly shapes children's touristic experiences. While adult tourists tend to favor cultural and educational holidays, children often prefer destinations with physical activities (Carr, 2006). Age also influences activity preferences; children aged 14-15, for instance, have more opportunities to socialize with peers, making socialization a key factor for older children's touristic experiences (İçöz, 2018). Some studies suggest that children's curiosity and learning instincts help them adapt to new cultural environments during family holidays (Fu et al., 2014). For many children, holidays are not just about leisure but about observing cultural differences and comparing them to their own environments. Children who recognize the importance of cultural interaction tend to have more memorable touristic experiences (Guo & Liu, 2022).

Research on children in tourism has increasingly challenged earlier views of children as passive companions in family travel. Contemporary studies emphasize children's agency, highlighting their role as active participants who perceive, interpret, and evaluate tourism experiences in ways distinct from adults (Schänzel & Yeoman, 2015). From this perspective, children are not merely future tourists but present experiential subjects whose voices offer unique insights into destination design, service provision, and visitor experience.

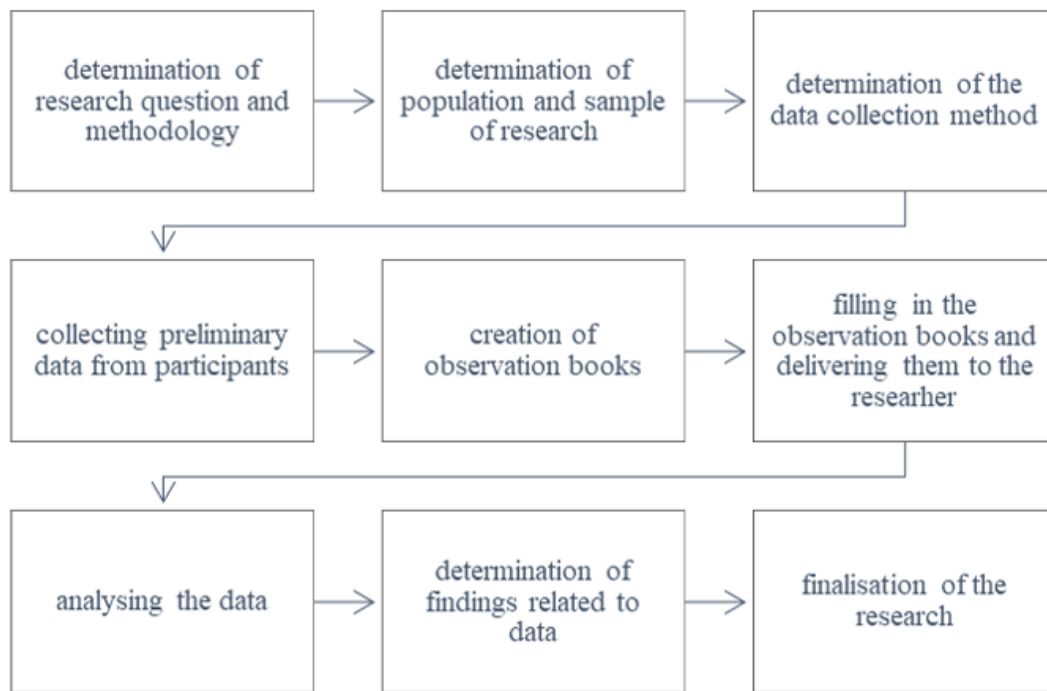
Theoretical approaches to children's tourism experiences often draw on developmental psychology and experiential learning frameworks, suggesting that children engage with tourism environments through curiosity, play, sensory exploration, and emotional response (Carr, 2011; Rhoden et al., 2016). Unlike adults, children's experiences are more strongly shaped by physical comfort, environmental stimulation, and relational interactions, including guidance, storytelling, and staff attitudes. These factors directly influence children's ability to engage meaningfully with cultural content (Buzlu et al., 2025). Despite this growing body of research, studies examining children's experiences within cultural and heritage tourism remain limited. Existing literature tends to focus on leisure, theme parks, or family tourism (Miyakawa & Oguchi, 2022; Hu et al., 2023) leaving cultural tourism under-theorized in relation to children's experiential and learning processes. Addressing this gap requires integrating experience-based tourism models with child-centered perspectives, thereby positioning children as legitimate interpreters of heritage and as critical stakeholders in inclusive cultural tourism design.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a phenomenological framework to explore how children experience and interpret cultural tourism. Within a this paradigm, knowledge is viewed as plural, contextual, and constructed through individual meaning-making rather than through universal truths (Patton, 2015). Phenomenology complements this stance by seeking to reveal the essence of lived experience—the meanings embedded in participants' perceptions and narratives (Van Manen, 2016). In this sense, the study's epistemological foundation positions children as competent social actors whose experiences are valid sources of knowledge (Christensen & James, 2017; Li et al., 2024). Accordingly, the research design prioritizes children's

subjectivity and narrative expression over generalizability, focusing on depth, interpretation, and authenticity. In order to realize this aim, a qualitative methodology was employed, adhering to a structured yet flexible interpretive process. The research process included defining the study's purpose and significance, outlining the methodological framework, selecting participants, and determining data collection and analysis strategies. Such an approach aligns with the interpretive paradigm, emphasizing contextual understanding and meaning reconstruction over statistical inference. Figure 1 presents an overview of the research process.

Figure 1. Stages of the research process



To answer the research question—“What kinds of experiences do children participating in culture-based tourism have?”—the study sample consisted of 35 children (19 girls, 16 boys) aged 11–13 from a state secondary school in Didim, a major tourism district in Aydın, Türkiye. Children living in areas where tourism constitutes a significant economic activity often possess an intuitive awareness of tourism phenomena (Gamradt, 1995). Moreover, children over the age of 11 are typically in a reflective developmental stage, capable of abstract thinking, emotional regulation, and complex interpretation (John, 1999).

Prior to data collection, an introductory briefing session was conducted with participating students to explain the purpose, scope, and voluntary nature of the study in an age-appropriate manner. In addition to obtaining written informed consent from parents or legal guardians, verbal assent was also obtained from the children themselves, in line with ethical guidelines for research involving minors (Morrow, 2008). Children were explicitly informed that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time without consequence, and that there were no right or wrong answers in their observations.

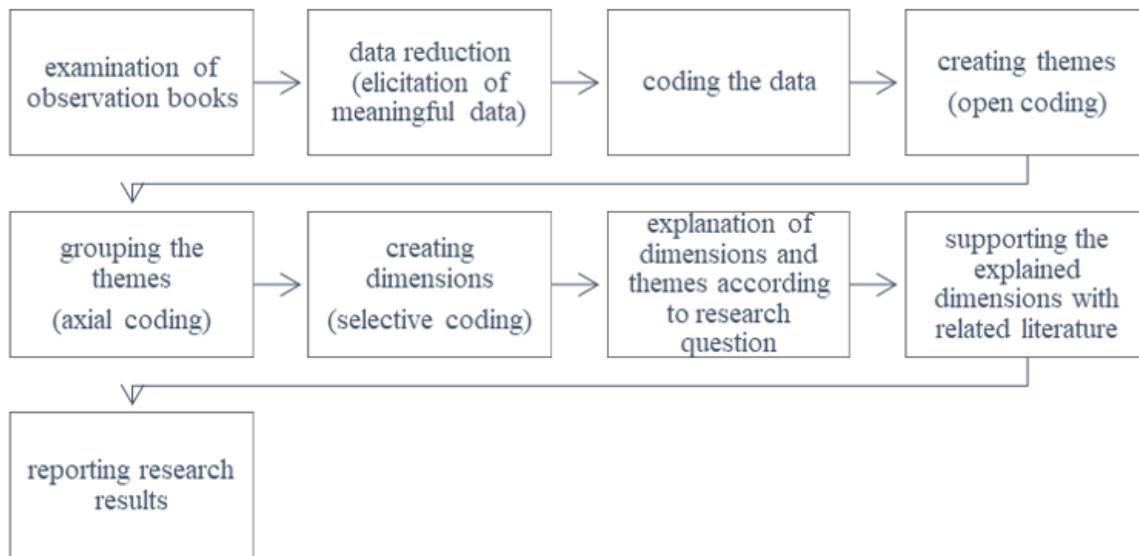
Several ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process. Given the vulnerability of children as research participants, particular attention was paid to minimizing power imbalances and ensuring a supportive and non-intrusive research environment. The use of unstructured observation books allowed children to express themselves freely, without pressure or adult-led direction. No evaluative feedback was provided on children's writings, and the researcher adopted a non-interventionist role during data production.

To protect participants' identities, all personal identifiers were removed during transcription and analysis. Pseudonyms were not used; instead, anonymized participant codes indicating gender and age were assigned. No identifiable personal information was collected or reported.

A one-day cultural tour was organized covering three major heritage sites in the Didim region: the Temple of Apollo, the Ancient City of Miletus, and the Miletus Museum. The selection of the three heritage sites—the Temple of Apollo, the Ancient City of Miletus, and the Miletus Museum—was based on a set of purposeful criteria aligned with the aims of the study. First, all three sites are among the most prominent and frequently visited cultural heritage attractions in the Didim region, making them representative of mainstream cultural tourism experiences encountered by local and visiting families. Second, the sites collectively offer diverse forms of heritage engagement, including monumental architecture, archaeological landscapes, and curated museum exhibitions, allowing for a comparative exploration of children's experiences across different heritage settings. Third, their geographical proximity enabled a one-day itinerary suitable for school-aged children, minimizing fatigue related to long-distance travel while maintaining experiential diversity. At the time of the visit, none of the sites offered child-specific interpretive programs or materials; instead, interpretation was primarily adult-oriented, allowing the study to examine children's experiences in heritage settings not explicitly designed with their needs in mind. During the visits, children used observation books—completely unstructured reflective journals—to record their impressions, emotions, and spontaneous thoughts. The observation books primarily generated written textual data, as participants chose to express their experiences through short narratives, descriptions, and reflective statements rather than sketches, diagrams, or visual representations. No guiding questions or prompts were provided; participants were free to write or draw whatever they found meaningful. This open form encouraged authenticity, creativity, and emotional immediacy, making it particularly suitable for research with children, who often express their experiences in nonlinear and associative ways (Punch, 2002). The researcher accompanied the children throughout the visits and took field notes focusing on contextual and situational aspects of the experience, such as group dynamics, environmental conditions, and observable reactions (e.g., fatigue, excitement, or disengagement). These observations were not guided by a structured observation protocol and did not constitute a separate data set for analysis. Instead, field notes were used as supplementary contextual material to support the interpretation of the written narratives in the observation books and to enhance the researcher's phenomenological understanding of the setting. As such, observational notes informed analytic sensitivity but were not independently coded or reported as empirical findings.

All entries were produced in Turkish and subsequently translated into English by the researcher. To preserve cultural and linguistic nuances, a back-translation procedure was implemented: a bilingual expert retranslated a selection of texts into Turkish, and discrepancies were collaboratively reviewed to ensure semantic accuracy. In the Findings section, participant quotations are identified using anonymized alphanumeric codes indicating gender and age (e.g., "P7, girl, 12") to preserve contextual clarity while ensuring full anonymity.

Data in the study were collected using observation books, and content analysis was applied to the obtained data. The models developed by Corbin and Strauss (1990) and Miles and Huberman (1994) guided the content analysis process. The stages of analyzing the written data are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Data analysis stages of the research

Initially, open coding was used to identify recurrent concepts and meaningful units. Manual coding was preferred over software tools to preserve interpretive creativity and proximity to the data (Krippendorff, 2022). In the second stage, axial coding grouped similar expressions into thematic categories, establishing connections among them. Finally, selective coding refined these categories into four main thematic dimensions — aesthetic, learning, emotional, and service quality — which collectively captured the holistic nature of children’s experiences (Ryan & Bernard, 1994; Merriam, 2009). Direct quotations were included to preserve authenticity and to illustrate how meaning was articulated in the children’s own words (Baltacı, 2019).

This analytical process not only revealed patterns in perception and emotion but also highlighted children’s ethical and moral reflections regarding cultural heritage. Instances where participants expressed concern about disrespectful behavior toward heritage sites underscored an emergent sense of cultural stewardship and moral awareness. These findings suggest that cultural tourism experiences foster early forms of environmental and ethical consciousness among children—a theme discussed further in the following section.

4. FINDINGS

The data obtained from the observation books were analyzed in relation to the research question, resulting in the identification of main dimensions and themes. Through content analysis, four dimensions and twenty themes emerged, explaining the touristic experiences of children participating in cultural-based tourism. The distribution of these expressions across dimensions and themes is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Emergent Dimensions and Themes in Children's Cultural Tourism Experiences

Dimensions	Themes	Number of expressions	
Aesthetic	Inscription, symbol, ornamentation	21	
	Architectural features	21	
	Other attractions	10	
Total		52	
Learning	Historical information	15	
	Stories, meanings	8	
	Impact on total experience	2	
Total		25	
Emotional	Satisfaction	23	
	Enjoyment	12	
	Excitement	8	
	Bewilderment	4	
	Discomfort	13	
	Challenges	3	
Total		53	
Service quality	Tour management	positive experience	13
		negative experience	4
	Transport	positive experience	4
		negative experience	2
	Food	positive experience	9
		negative experience	3
	Museum/ archaeological site	positive experience	4
		negative experience	9
	Total		48

Table 1 shows that child tourists predominantly express emotional responses (N=53) when describing their experiences. Within the emotional dimension, the most frequent theme is 'satisfaction' (N=23), reflecting an overall positive evaluation of the cultural trip. The prominence of the satisfaction theme indicates that the trip had generally positive outcomes. Following satisfaction, the themes with the most expressions are 'discomfort' (N=13) and 'fun' (N=12), suggesting that some children encountered challenges during the trip, while others found it enjoyable. Though less frequent than satisfaction, discomfort, or fun, themes such as 'excitement' (8 expressions), 'surprise' (N=4), and 'difficulties' (N=3) also appear in the narratives, highlighting other emotional experiences of the child tourists.

Aesthetic elements are equally significant as emotional expressions (N=52) in the experiences of child tourists. The themes of 'inscription, symbols, ornamentation' and 'architectural features' each received 21 expressions. This suggests that the visual appeal of ancient writings, symbols, and historically significant structures is particularly engaging for child tourists. Additionally, some children highlighted other attractive elements (N=10) they found appealing during their experiences

A total of 25 statements reflected the learning dimension of the cultural tourism experience. Within this dimension, 'historical information' emerged as the most prominent theme, with 15 expressions, indicating its significant impact on the experiences of child tourists. Additionally, 'stories' (N=8), such as foundation legends, mythological characters, and symbolic meanings, also contributed to the learning experience, albeit to a lesser extent. Child tourists also evaluated the services included in the cultural tour, such as tour management, transportation, food, and museums/archaeological sites, either positively or negatively. The most positively evaluated service theme was 'tour management,' with 13 positive and 4 negative expressions. This suggests that the organization of the tour and the guidance by a professional made a lasting impression on the participants. In contrast, 'transportation' (positive: 4, negative: 2) had a relatively minor impact on their experiences. Regarding food services, child tourists generally expressed positive feedback (positive: 9, negative: 3). However, 'museum/archaeological sites' was the only service theme with a higher number of negative expressions (positive: 4, negative: 9), indicating dissatisfaction with the experiences at these sites. To present the findings in a more accessible manner, each dimension and its corresponding themes were identified, and direct quotations from the participants were included to substantiate the study's results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Aesthetic Dimension

Aesthetics, often defined as the philosophy of beauty, refers to the qualities of objects that evoke positive experiences in individuals. In this context, beauty is understood in terms of the physical characteristics of the objects themselves (Tekel, 2015). In their observation books, child tourists described the beauty of objects at the visited locations through various expressions, categorized under three themes: inscription, symbol, ornamentation; architectural features; and other attractive elements, all of which fall within the aesthetic dimension.

One child tourist noted:

“The stone reliefs and writings on the walls are very impressive” (P1, Girl, 12).

Another described the Temple of Apollo:

“...Then, when I visited the Temple of Apollo, the things that caught my attention the most were the statues and decorations. Because they were processed very beautifully” (P5, Boy, 13).

Regarding architectural features, it is evident that the child tourists were particularly impressed by the Temple of Apollo, Miletus Theatre, Miletus (Faustina) Bath, and Miletus Museum. Expressions such as "big," "wonderful," "interesting," "beautiful," and "impressive" were frequently used when describing these architectural structures, with general evaluations of their features being common:

“Miletus is a completely different place. It's so beautiful, it's so big, it's perfect, how did they make all those stairs? The fact that it was so big impressed me” (P8, Boy, 11).

“After leaving the theater, we visited the baths of Miletus. I liked the pools, statues, and changing rooms the most in the bath; the rest did not interest me much” (P11, Girl, 12).

This suggests that the architectural grandeur and the aesthetic elements of the sites left a lasting impact on the children's experiences, highlighting their appreciation of historical and visual beauty."

Learning Dimension

Learning, defined as the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and behaviors necessary for an individual to adapt to their environment, is influenced by various elements (Yılmaz, 2009). Experience plays a significant role among these resources (Mutlu and Mutlu, 2017). In culturally based tourism, participants' learning of specific information contributes to a more active and social experience (Masberg and Silverman, 1996). The analysis of data obtained in this study revealed that the learning dimension was articulated under three themes: historical information, stories-meanings, and contribution to the overall experience.

One participant noted:

"I had visited the Temple of Apollo many times before, but when I learned about its history, I liked it even more. We learned a lot of information in the Temple of Apollo" (P1, Girl, 12).

The relationship between learning and travel has been evident since the inception of modern tourism (Wu and Wall, 2017). Sharing the acquired knowledge is also an important part of the experience (Chen et al., 2012). It appears that some of the participating children were eager to share the historical information they gained during the trip. Additionally, the mythological stories and the various insights provided by the tour guide had a positive impact on their experiences:

"We saw that some symbols were engraved on some columns and stones on the floor. These were a kind of signature" (P2, Boy, 13).

"There were tiny stones. The reason for this is that there are many earthquakes there" (P27, Boy, 12).

These findings indicate that both the factual historical knowledge and the mythological narratives enriched the children's learning experiences during the cultural tour, enhancing their overall engagement with the visited sites.

Emotional Dimension

The concept of emotion is understood as the activation of a person's thoughts related to various feelings, accompanied by different psychological and biological states (Tuğrul, 1999). Emotions such as anger, hope, excitement, fear, joy, satisfaction, curiosity, and shame are common examples (Bozkurt, 2014). Research indicates that emotions play a significant role in interpreting products in service sectors, including tourism. Tourists exhibit diverse emotional reactions during or after consuming different tourist products (Varela-Neira et al., 2008). To activate emotions, a stimulus is required, which triggers an emotional response, followed by a mental or physical reaction and a subjective emotional experience where this reaction is interpreted (Crooks and Stein, 1991).

In the context of the cultural tour conducted for this study, the services and environmental factors (such as the maintenance of ruins, comfort of the tour vehicle, hot weather, etc.) acted as stimuli that triggered the

emotions of child tourists. In contrast, reactions such as fatigue, sweating, and running were observed among the children. Subjective emotional experiences, including satisfaction, fun, excitement, surprise, discomfort, wishes, and difficulties, were reported as the children's interpreted emotional reactions:

"The trip was both historical and helped us have fun and socialize" (P5, Boy, 13).

"How many thousands of years ago did they make such heavy stones without technology? They were so strong" (P8, Boy, 11).

"But I noticed that people didn't show any respect for it. They drew a heart on a historical artifact that is approximately 2800 years old. This is a bad thing because they damage historical monuments" (P5, Boy, 13).

These expressions illustrate the complex interplay of emotional responses that child tourists experienced during the cultural tour, encompassing both positive and negative feelings toward the visit.

Service Quality Dimension

Although natural, historical, cultural, and economic attractions are central to touristic experiences, it can be argued that supporting products such as accommodation, transportation, and food play a crucial role in enhancing the overall experience. Tourists not only choose to travel based on the attractiveness of the destination but also expect the supporting products to be of high quality (Papatya et al., 2013). The subjective nature of the experience is linked to the varying perceptions tourists have of service quality (O'Dell, 2007), which can lead to either positive or negative outcomes. In other words, while some tourists may have a positive experience with the same product, others may have a negative one.

The culturally based trip organized for this research included various elements that influenced the total experience, such as tour management and guidance, historical and cultural attractions, transportation, and food. When describing their touristic experiences, child participants expressed both positive and negative sentiments regarding the mentioned service categories.

"Information was given everywhere. It's really fun" (P1, Girl, 13).

"During the cultural tour, we first went to the Temple of Apollo by private bus, and I liked that the whole journey was done by private bus" (P11, Girl, 12).

"I felt very nauseous because the bus was hotter than outside" (P30, Girl, 13).

"Our trip ended with a nice meal" (P1, Girl, 12).

"It's a bit bad that we didn't choose the meals. I wasn't very satisfied. Other than that, it was very nice." (P17, Girl, 13).

"I love visiting museums. But this museum is a legendary museum. I took photos, and my favorite was the coins" (P27, Boy, 12).

"What I didn't like there was a lot of thorns and branches. These sting people's arms and legs as they pass by." (P20, Boy, 13).

"While we were visiting the museum, the museum staff were not helpful at all" (P5, Boy, 13).

These responses reflect the varied experiences of child tourists, highlighting both the positive and negative

aspects of the services provided during the cultural tour. Importantly, these accounts do not merely reflect temporary dissatisfaction with services but reveal structural conditions that limit children's full participation in heritage spaces. Physical discomfort caused by environmental neglect (such as thorns and inadequate site maintenance), climatic exposure, and indifferent staff attitudes indicates that these cultural settings are not fully designed with children's bodily comfort, emotional sensitivity, and vulnerability in mind. In this sense, service-related problems function as indicators of non-inclusive heritage environments rather than isolated operational shortcomings.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explored the cultural tourism experiences of children in Turkey, revealing how young visitors engage cognitively, emotionally, aesthetically, and socially with heritage environments. By analyzing 178 expressions drawn from participants' observation books, twenty thematic patterns emerged across four key experiential dimensions: aesthetic, emotional, learning, and service quality. These categories illustrate that children's encounters with cultural heritage are not merely recreational but meaning-making experiences shaped by sensory impressions, social interaction, and moral reflection.

Aesthetic and emotional experiences were the most salient dimensions. Children's fascination with architectural details, ancient ruins, and the natural landscape demonstrates how aesthetic perception functions as an entry point to cultural understanding. This resonates with Breiby's (2014) and Levinson's (2011) arguments that aesthetic engagement heightens emotional resonance and fosters attachment to place. The emotional dimension—marked by joy, excitement, curiosity, and occasional boredom—reflects children's affective responsiveness to both content and context. Yet, beyond enjoyment, several children expressed ethical discomfort when witnessing damage or disrespect toward cultural sites. Such reactions signal an emergent sense of moral and cultural stewardship, aligning with broader discourses on children's environmental and cultural ethics (Carr, 2011; Piscitelli & Anderson, 2001). In this sense, cultural tourism appears to act as an informal arena for early value formation regarding heritage preservation.

The role of the tour guide further underscores the relational nature of children's experiences. Effective guidance—characterized by storytelling, empathy, and interactivity—enhanced learning and emotional engagement, supporting Cohen's (1985) and Çetinkaya and Öter's (2016) findings on the pedagogical function of guides. Conversely, when guides were disengaged or the content overly abstract, children's attention diminished, revealing the need for interpretive strategies calibrated to younger audiences. Similarly, dissatisfaction with food quality or museum staff behavior, though seemingly minor, reflects a broader issue: children's limited participation in shaping the tourism services designed for them. These findings can be interpreted through the lens of children's active role—the idea that children are not passive recipients of tourism products but active co-creators of meaning (Schänzel & Yeoman, 2015). Recognizing their agency implies involving them in decision-making processes related to heritage interpretation, tour planning, and visitor experience design. This study therefore extends discussions in childhood studies by demonstrating that tourism can serve as a participatory field in which children negotiate autonomy, express preferences, and develop critical awareness of their surroundings.

A particularly critical finding of this study concerns the physical discomfort articulated by children, including exposure to heat, encounters with thorns and poorly maintained pathways, and unresponsive

museum staff. These experiences should not be interpreted merely as minor inconveniences but as manifestations of non-inclusive heritage environments. From a child-centered perspective, inclusivity extends beyond interpretive content or educational narratives to encompass bodily comfort, environmental care, and relational ethics (Attfield, 2022). When children encounter physical pain or fatigue, their capacity to engage meaningfully with heritage is constrained (Song et al., 2020). These findings highlight that heritage sites often remain implicitly adult-oriented spaces, where children's embodied experiences are insufficiently considered. Designing inclusive heritage experiences therefore requires attention to the physical and emotional conditions through which children access and inhabit cultural spaces, reaffirming that inclusivity is as much a material and relational issue as it is a pedagogical one.

Learning experiences, while somewhat less prominent than aesthetic or emotional ones, provided insight into how children internalize cultural narratives. Many participants articulated curiosity about the historical significance of monuments and demonstrated reflective thought on the lessons derived from their visits. Such learning was primarily experiential rather than didactic—emerging from embodied encounters, peer discussions, and guided interpretation. This supports experiential learning frameworks (Kolb, 1984) that position experience as the foundation of knowledge acquisition and aligns with research suggesting that tourism can foster informal education and cultural empathy (Packer & Ballantyne, 2016).

From a phenomenological standpoint, the findings affirm that meaning in tourism arises from situated interpretation rather than fixed categories of experience. Each child's engagement was shaped by individual sensibilities, social context, and immediate environment—demonstrating multiplicity rather than homogeneity of meaning. This reinforces the view that children are competent social actors (Prout & James, 1997) whose voices reveal alternative ways of knowing and relating to heritage. The use of observation books and in-situ engagement was particularly effective in eliciting these plural perspectives, validating this method's suitability for child-centered tourism research.

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted within a single regional context and focused on a specific set of heritage sites, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other cultural, geographical, or institutional settings. The participant group was also restricted to a narrow age range and involved a relatively small number of children, reflecting the depth-oriented nature of phenomenological inquiry rather than representativeness. In addition, the study examined children's experiences during a one-day cultural visit, capturing perceptions and reflections at a specific moment in time. While this approach allowed for rich, in-situ data collection, it does not account for how children's interpretations of heritage may evolve through repeated visits or over longer periods. Finally, reliance on written observation books may have favored children who are more comfortable with verbal expression, potentially underrepresenting alternative modes of meaning-making.

These limitations suggest several directions for future research. Comparative studies conducted across different cultural contexts, heritage typologies, and age groups could deepen understanding of how children's cultural tourism experiences vary and which factors most strongly shape inclusivity and engagement. Longitudinal research designs would be particularly valuable in exploring how early encounters with cultural heritage influence children's attitudes toward learning, preservation, and tourism over time. Future studies might also adopt multimodal or participatory methods—such as visual, creative, or digital tools—to capture a broader range of children's expressive capacities and experiential meanings. By extending research in these

directions, scholars can further develop child-centered and inclusive frameworks for understanding cultural tourism experiences.

By situating children within the cultural tourism landscape of Turkey, this study contributes both theoretical and practical insights. Theoretically, it advances understanding of how children experience cultural heritage as active meaning-makers, blending cognitive learning with affective and ethical interpretation. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of participatory tools—such as observation books—for capturing children’s authentic voices within phenomenological inquiry. Empirically, it reveals that children’s cultural experiences are multidimensional, encompassing joy, curiosity, reflection, and moral awareness. Practically, the study offers several implications for policy and tourism management. First, heritage site planners and educators should design interpretive programs that integrate storytelling, tactile engagement, and creative reflection to match children’s developmental capacities. Second, child participation should be institutionalized within tourism planning, aligning with the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989), which affirms children’s right to express views on matters affecting them. Third, service providers—from guides to museum staff—should receive training in child communication and empathy to foster inclusive experiences. Finally, tourism education curricula could incorporate heritage stewardship and sustainability themes to cultivate children’s ethical awareness from an early age.

In sum, this study reframes children not as passive visitors but as active agents capable of interpreting, critiquing, and reshaping the cultural environments they encounter. By deepening the theoretical dialogue between cultural tourism and childhood studies, it invites further cross-disciplinary research exploring how young tourists construct meaning in diverse heritage contexts. Future studies might employ longitudinal or comparative designs to examine how such early encounters influence lifelong attitudes toward culture, sustainability, and travel.

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