

## RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# The Funny Side of Tourism: Exploring Children's Engagement With Humour-Driven Interpretation

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## ABSTRACT

Engaging young visitors is crucial for a meaningful tourism experience. This study focuses on humour as a positive psychology practice, to explore how it enhances children's engagement with tourism interpretation. Using constructivist grounded theory, the research employed participant observation of tours operated for children in Iran. Children aged 9–12 years were specifically targeted. Results revealed that children responded most positively to silly, witty and clever humour, with smiling and laughter being the predominant reactions. Nature-themed humour proved most effective in fostering social, emotional and cognitive engagement. The study also identified five ways that humour influences children's engagement: promoting social interaction, enhancing enjoyment, sparking curiosity, alleviating fatigue and encouraging active participation. These findings extend existing frameworks on humour in tourism to include child-specific reactions and preferences, contributing to both theoretical and practical applications. The research provides valuable insights into effectively incorporating humour into interpretive programmes designed for child-focused tourism experiences.

## 1 | Introduction

The literature on humour and tourism highlights humour as an engaging tool to enhance positive experiences among tourists (Pabel 2019; Pabel and Pearce 2018, 2019; Pearce and Pabel 2015). While humour and its benefits have been studied within the tourism discipline, there remains a significant research gap regarding humour to engage children. Pabel (2019) recognised the potential capacity of humour to be employed in tourism interpretation, which is defined as an educational activity aimed at enhancing people's knowledge of the local community and its surroundings (Moscardo 2022).

The integration of humour into interpretive practices not only enhances the enjoyment and educational value of tourism experiences but also facilitates deeper emotional and social

connections among young visitors (Tilden 1957). In tourism interpretation, humour has been identified as a factor that can capture and sustain visitors' interest (Beck and Cable 2011). The tourism and humour literature has recognised the humour techniques that enhance interactions with tourists, including using jokes to mock their fears, incorporating farcical elements to alleviate potentially embarrassing moments, and employing exaggerated performances by tour guides to create memorable experiences (Zhang and Pearce 2016). However, the type of humour and its delivery method should be carefully selected and tested with the target audience.

The cognitive outcomes of tourism interpretation, including knowledge gain, positive attitude change, and the promotion of pro-environmental behaviours, have been extensively documented (Ham and Weiler 2012; Huang et al. 2015;

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Moreno-Melgarejo et al. 2019; Orams 1994; Van Dijk et al. 2012). However, to be effective, interpretation needs to be engaging and impactful (Kim et al. 2011). Research has consistently shown that when learners are actively engaged and emotionally connected to the material, they demonstrate improved knowledge retention, deeper understanding, enhanced critical thinking skills and attitude change (Fredricks et al. 2004; Pekrun 2019, 2022). This emotional engagement is particularly crucial in tourism settings, where visitors' experiences are often brief and must compete with other stimuli and activities for attention.

The tourism sector has also recognised the value of engagement in learning experiences. For instance, Moscardo (2014) found that interpretation that promotes active engagement and positive experience in tourist settings led to increased visitor satisfaction and better learning outcomes. This demonstrates that engagement is particularly crucial in informal learning environments like tourism sites, where visitors' motivations and expectations differ from those in traditional educational settings.

This study explores how employing humour in tourism interpretation for children leads to engaging experiences, which can be achieved through:

1. Identifying children's reactions to different humour types and techniques in tourism interpretation.
2. Recognising humorous themes that encourage children's engagement.
3. Understanding how humour in the tourism context contributes to children's engagement.

By addressing these objectives, this research advances the growing body of literature on children's tourism experiences and the use of humour in tourism interpretation. The study expands our understanding of how cognitive and emotional responses to humour can enhance engagement among children, offering valuable insights for tourism operators, educators and interpreters working with young audiences.

## 2 | Literature Review

### 2.1 | Humour, Engagement, and Learning

Previous research has emphasised the positive role of humour in tourism contexts. While Frew (2006) offered foundational insights by categorising humour in tourism as either formal (e.g., comedy festivals) or informal (e.g., spontaneous humour during travel encounters), contemporary studies have extended this work by highlighting humour's capacity to foster engagement, emotional resilience and social bonds in both tourism and learning environments. Pearce's (2009) Tourism Patterns and Pathways Framework remains influential, particularly through the 3Cs model, comfort, concentration, and connection, which outlines humour's role in enhancing visitor experience and attention. Additionally, studies grounded in positive psychology suggest that humour contributes to positive psychological states during tourism experiences (Pearce and Pabel 2015), and also to psychological well-being, social connectedness and creativity in learning environments (Fredrickson 2013; Ruch et al. 2018).

In the broader context of learning, engagement is understood as the process that reflects active and constructive involvement in learning activities (Ben-Eliyahu et al. 2018). Engagement is seen to manifest affectively, behaviourally and cognitively across in-class and out-of-school learning activities (Ben-Eliyahu et al. 2018). These insights into engagement are relevant when considering the role of humour in tourism settings, especially for younger visitors. Interdisciplinary studies highlight the connection between humour, children's engagement and their learning experiences (Fehrest et al. 2024a). For example, humour can be an effective tool in early childhood education, fostering holistic learning (Rönkkö and Aerila 2018). There is also a strong correlation between students' humour perceptions and learning engagement (Masek et al. 2019). Humour has been shown to improve retention and participation (Sultana et al. 2019), stimulate emotional engagement (Hoad et al. 2013; Miller et al. 2017), and strengthen teacher-student relationships (Abraham et al. 2014). Additionally, it has been linked to improved learning outcomes (Huss and Eastep 2016) and the creation of suitable learning environments (Krause 2014). Humour in educational programmes tailored for children can serve as a valuable means to both empower and entertain, fostering active participation in engaging activities (Fehrest et al. 2024b). Therefore, the positive emotion and atmosphere created by humour can potentially enhance children's learning experiences in tourism, which has been recognised as an appropriate context for using humour (Pearce and Pabel 2015).

As a component of positive emotional engagement, humour contributes meaningfully to tourist learning by fostering attention, emotional resonance and cognitive stimulation. Drawing on the principles of positive psychology, Neuhofer (2025) argues that transformative tourism experiences should be designed to evoke positive emotions, which serve as precursors to deeper reflection and behavioural change. The inclusion of humour can support this process by promoting flow, a psychological state of deep immersion linked to learning and satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi 2020). Chang et al. (2024) further highlight that emotional and cognitive engagement, facilitated through storytelling and interpretive interaction, enhances tourist well-being and encourages reflective thinking. Within this framework, humour can help negotiate intrapersonal constraints and promote openness to new ideas, thereby enhancing the educational potential of tourism experiences (Filep and Laing 2019). By linking humour with engagement and positive affect, tourism experiences can more effectively support both hedonic enjoyment and eudaimonic learning outcomes.

### 2.2 | Tourism Interpretation for Children

Tourism interpretation aims to foster a deeper understanding of a place and its local people, making visits more meaningful (Moscardo 2022). Effective interpretation positively influences tourists' knowledge, emotions, and satisfaction (Io 2013). Among the various forms, interpersonal interpretation, particularly through tour guides, is more effective than non-personal methods such as brochures, especially when communicating cultural aspects (Weng et al. 2020). Key factors contributing to effective interpretation include the guide's knowledge, service attitude, communication skills

and emotional intelligence (Io 2013). While interpretation can raise awareness and support for management policies, its influence may be confined to behaviours specific to the site (Kim et al. 2011). Further research is needed to enhance interpretive strategies, especially for young audiences who engage differently with content.

Children's engagement with interpretive methods is shaped not only by the techniques used but also by the social and emotional contexts of the experience. Sutcliffe and Kim (2014) argue that the setting in which interpretive strategies are delivered has a more significant influence on children's understanding and behavioural response than the techniques themselves. Moreover, peer interaction is as important as engagement with the content itself. Supporting this, Israfilova and Khoo-Lattimore (2019) found that children's learning at heritage sites improved when they visited with peers. Their study revealed that emotional and social aspects of the visit enhanced children's motivation to learn and facilitated better knowledge retention. Kinaesthetic and visual elements of interpretation were particularly effective for children requiring hands-on learning, providing a richer alternative to traditional classroom education.

### 2.3 | The Interplay Between Positive Psychology and Children

Children's travel experiences offer a fertile ground for the application of positive psychology. Emerging studies demonstrate that travel can enhance children's well-being by promoting positive emotions, engagement, meaningful relationships, and personal development. For instance, Ghaderi et al. (2024) found that interactive, nature-based travel shared with family and peers enhanced children's happiness and development. Similarly, Mirehie and Sharayevska (2022) linked family travel to both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Children reported feeling calmer, more confident and better connected to peers and family after travel. Although limited research has addressed the intersection of tourism, positive psychology, and children's well-being, existing studies suggest positive psychology interventions can equip children with tools to enhance positive thinking, emotional regulation and resilience (Kwok et al. 2016). This highlights the need to explore how interpretive experiences, especially those incorporating humour, can be designed to generate positive outcomes in young visitors.

Integrating humour into tourism interpretation offers a valuable avenue for enhancing children's experiences, particularly when viewed through the lens of positive psychology. Rooted in the promotion of well-being, resilience and meaningful engagement (Filep 2016), positive psychology provides a framework for designing tourism experiences that support mental health and emotional development (Chang et al. 2024; Coghlan 2015). Humour contributes to achieving goals of both interpretation and positive psychology by fostering positive emotions, interpersonal connections, and enriched experiences (Powell and Stern 2013). It enhances emotional engagement, supports learning and memory retention (Pearce and Pabel 2015), and is associated with higher interpretation quality and visitor satisfaction (Powell and Stern 2013). Drawing on Fredrickson's (2001)

broaden-and-build theory, Filep (2011) suggests that positive emotions such as amusement expand individuals' cognitive and behavioural repertoires, contributing to the development of lasting personal and social resources.

In the context of children's tourism, humour can be especially effective. Knapp and Benton (2005) emphasise the importance of amusing children while delivering educational content during tours, suggesting that humour enhances both engagement and learning. Humour has the potential to enrich the educational and entertainment value of interpretation and also contributes to psychological flourishing by encouraging emotional and social connection (Fehrest et al. 2024a, 2024b). Yet, despite its promise, the role of humour in children's tourism interpretation remains underexplored in the scholarly literature.

## 3 | Methodology

### 3.1 | Paradigmatic and Methodological Considerations

This study employs Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) as its methodology, an approach developed by Charmaz (2014) that evolved from the original Grounded Theory established by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s. CGT distinguishes itself through its relativist epistemology and realist ontology, emphasising the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and participants (Charmaz 2017). This aligns with the participant observation methodology used in this study and is particularly suitable for research involving children (Morse et al. 2016). CGT's principles of openness, flexibility, and reflexivity complement this study's objectives to explore children's experiences with humour during tourism interpretation.

The use of CGT is justified by its capacity to capture the complexity of children's experiences and the subjective nature of humour. It enables the development of middle-range theories that are contextually grounded, acknowledging that generalisations are contingent and conditional (Matteucci and Gnoth 2017). This aligns with the study's aim to understand the 'what' and 'how' of children's reactions to different humour types in tourism interpretation. By utilising CGT, this research seeks to move beyond mere description to generate theoretical insights that can inform academic understanding and practical applications in children's tourism interpretation. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how different types of humour influence children's engagement in tourism settings, addressing a significant gap in the current literature on children's tourism experiences (Poria and Timothy 2014).

### 3.2 | Study Design

This study employs a qualitative research design using participant observation to explore children's engagement with humour during tourism tours. Participant observation is a well-established method for investigating behaviours and interactions in naturalistic settings, enabling researchers to collect rich, empirical data through coding and memos (Głąbiński 2016; Jennings 2010). However, the researcher's presence can

influence participant behaviour, requiring careful consideration to maintain the authenticity of observations (Głabiński 2016). This involves considerations of appearance and behaviour to facilitate trust and openness among participants, which is important when studying children. Steps were taken to minimise researcher influence, such as maintaining a neutral presence and establishing rapport with participants.

### 3.3 | Description of Tourism Operators

This study observed 11 tours operated by six tourism operators in Iran, specialising in educational and recreational tours for children aged 9 to 12 years. These tours included nature walks, historical site visits, cultural workshops and outdoor adventure activities designed for young participants. The tours were selected based on purposive sampling to account for variation in design and timeframe (e.g., half-day, one-day and two-day tours). Due to a lack of a comprehensive directory of children's tour operators, potential operators were identified using snowball sampling. Initial operators were identified via social media (e.g., Instagram), with early contacts referring additional eligible participants.

### 3.4 | Ethical Considerations

Informed written consent was obtained from parents or guardians, and children provided oral consent before participation. To minimise behavioural bias, a limited disclosure approach was adopted, consistent with Chapter 2.3 of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (NHMRC 2018). Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose after the tour. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Two observers, who were experienced in working with children, contributed to the data collection.

### 3.5 | Data Collection

Both observers independently recorded events using a manual coding scheme prepared before fieldwork. An initial meeting was conducted to discuss the items and definitions in the observation form, ensuring alignment and a shared understanding between observers. This collaborative approach enhanced the consistency and reliability of the data collected through triangulation and provided multiple perspectives on the observed behaviours (Patton 2014).

The data coded by the two observers was then assessed for inter-rater reliability to ensure consistency in their summaries. In addition to completing observation forms, the primary researcher maintained detailed field notes documenting humorous episodes during tours and children's interactions with tour facilitators, parents and peers. Field notes are a rich source of qualitative data, capturing contextual details and researcher insights that may not be evident in structured observations alone (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The data were collected over 2 months (December 2023–January 2024), allowing immersion in multiple tour settings.

### 3.6 | Development of Observation Codes

An observation checklist was developed to guide data collection, using codes aligned with the research objectives. Two key strategies were used following Bakeman and Quera's (2011) methodological approach. First, existing coding schemes from related studies were reviewed and adapted to the research context. The primary framework was Pearce's (2009) Tourism Patterns and Pathways Framework, which assesses humour in tourism, modified to incorporate constructs from the children's engagement literature to suit the target population. Second, an iterative process of observation and reflection during early data collection allowed for the refinement of context-specific codes. These focused on humour production and perception, capturing instances where children initiated or responded to humour. The checklist was designed to explore: (1) children's reactions to different humour types and techniques; (2) humorous themes that foster engagement; and (3) how humour influences engagement in tourism contexts. The research team collaboratively defined all codes, drawing on the literature from humour and child engagement studies. These codes were reviewed and agreed upon by the two observers to ensure consistency. Table 1 outlines the checklist, including definitions and sources.

### 3.7 | Observation Sampling

This study used behavioural event recording, in which the two observers assigned codes to specific events rather than using fixed time intervals (Bakeman and Quera 2011). Events were defined based on the activities in the tour itinerary, which ensured that observations were contextually grounded and relevant to the specific tour activities. Before each tour, discussions among the tour guide and the observers helped identify and categorise the number of events to be observed.

Children's behaviours were recorded within the context of each event, capturing their interactions, reactions and responses as they naturally occurred. A total of 52 events were observed across 11 tours. Some events contained multiple humour-related instances, which were further labelled as 'episodes'. In total, 83 episodes were recorded, comprising 53 funny and 30 non-funny episodes. These classifications, supported by the observers' memos, offered a diverse dataset to explore humour's role in engaging children during tourism experiences.

### 3.8 | Reliability and Validity of Data

To assess the inter-rater reliability of the observational data, the Cohen's Kappa statistic was calculated using SPSS. Cohen's Kappa is a robust measure of agreement between observers, accounting for the possibility of agreement occurring by chance (Bakeman and Quera 2011). To minimise errors such as omissions or coding discrepancies, the two observers conferred at the end of each event to compare and reconcile their observations, focusing particularly on the recorded humorous episodes. This collaborative review process ensured all relevant data were captured accurately and coding discrepancies were resolved promptly. The point-by-point agreement method was used to ensure consistency before data analysis.



**TABLE 1** | Observation checklist, definitions and supporting literature.

	Item	Definition/dimensions	Source
Humour components	Humour source	Who shapes the humour (tourist guide/entertainer; author; commentator; community member/host)	Pearce (2009)
	Humour target	Who the humour is intended for (tourists; locals; employees; general audience)	Pearce (2009)
	Humour context	Settings with danger; safety; fun; mild messages; strong messages	Pearce (2009)
	Humour theme	Theme of humour (gender; nature; emotions; competencies; danger; thrills; conflict; history)	Pearce (2009)
	Humour technique	Jokes; stories; tricks of language; style of narration; physical clowning; funny exaggerations; mimicry; friendly teasing; playful acts; wordplay; puppets; funny figures	Pearce (2009); Lyon (2006); Pabel and Pearce (2016); (Fehrest et al. 2024b)
	Humour medium	Delivery mechanism (talks; visual; text; cartoons; mime; film; dance).	Pearce (2009)
	Humour type	Playful; mocking; corny; farcical; silly; self-deprecating; gentle; sarcastic; witty; embarrassing; clever.	Pearce (2009)
Reactions	Laughter	The eyes narrow; the mouth opens, jaw drops, teeth show and a universal deep 'h' sound emerges from the larynx	Pearce and Pabel (2015)
	Smiling	When smiling, facial muscles shape the mouth, lift the corners, round the cheeks and reveal teeth to express enthusiasm	Pearce and Pabel (2015)
	Mirth response	An emotional response to humour, often tied to enjoyment, surprise and marked by laughter	Martin (2007); Pearce and Pabel (2015)
	Annoyed	A brief state of irritation or impatience, often shown through frowning or tense facial expressions	(Ekman and Friesen 1976)
	Bored	A disinterested state marked by inattention or restlessness	(Eastwood et al. 2012)
	Neutral/no response	No visible reaction or engagement with surroundings	(Bakeman and Quera 2011)
Social engagement	Unoccupied	Child is not engaged in play, possibly transitioning between activities	Schneider et al. (2000); Bakeman and Quera (2011)
	Onlooker	Child is watching others play	Schneider et al. (2000); Bakeman and Quera (2011)
	Interaction (peer-to-peer)	Children or tourists spontaneously create and share jokes during play	Adapted from Pearce and Pabel (2015); Andersson (2007)
	Interaction (child-tour guide/parent)	Spontaneous joke-making during play	Adapted from Pearce and Pabel (2015)
	Interaction (special characters-if any)	Spontaneous joke-making during play in response to a special character	Adapted from Pearce and Pabel (2015)
	Parents encourage/discourage children to be funny	Parental responses that encourage or discourage humour, including praise or disapproval	(Manke 1998)

(Continues)

**TABLE 1** | (Continued)

	Item	Definition/dimensions	Source
Cognitive engagement	Clever replies	Quick word recognition and response	Adapted from Pearce and Pabel (2015)
	Paying attention/focusing	Paying attention during the activity	(Ben-Eliyahu et al. 2018)
	Recalling information (talking about it)	Retrieving and sharing prior knowledge, showing memory and understanding	(Tulving 1983)
Emotional engagement	Expression of joy	Displaying happiness through smiling, laughing or positive body language	(Bergen 1998); (Chaniotakis and Papazoglou 2019)
	Movement play	Humour is primarily expressed through external actions like body movements, gestures and facial expressions	Adapted from Liu (2019)
	Mild surprise	A mild surprise marked by raised eyebrows, wide eyes and a slightly open mouth	(Ekman 1999)
	Enjoyment	Enjoyment of play, shown by positive expressions and calm demeanour	(Fredrickson 2001)
	Relaxed response	Physical and mental calm, shown by relaxation and slow breathing	(Smith et al. 2007)
	Aggressive response	Hostile reaction with verbal, physical or nonverbal threats, often from frustration	(Kuzhiyengal Mambra and Kotian 2023)

Table 2 presents the inter-rater reliability agreement results for the observation checklist items, demonstrating a high level of inter-rater reliability across all categories.

## 4 | Findings

### 4.1 | Children's Reactions to Different Types and Techniques of Humour

The first research objective examined children's reactions to different types and techniques of humour. Based on Pearce's (2009) framework, reactions were categorised into laughing, smiling, mirth response and clever replies. While clever replies are primarily a form of humour rather than a reaction (Pearce 2009), they serve as a valuable indicator of children's attention and engagement. Table 3 presents the frequencies of observed reactions, showing smiling and laughter were the most common responses, followed by clever replies and mirth responses. Notably, 30 episodes were recorded where no humour was present, highlighting variations in humour effectiveness.

Further analysis examined children's reactions to humour type (see Table 4). The data revealed that silly humour accounted for 20% of all reactions, making it the most frequent trigger of laughter among children. In contrast, witty (9%) and clever humour (8%) were more likely to elicit smiles and mirth responses, suggesting an appreciation for more intellectual forms of humour. Notably, mocking (8%) and silly humour (9%) generated the highest percentage of clever replies, indicating that these types encouraged playful and creative verbal interaction.

Regarding humour techniques, the findings in Table 5 show that jokes (22%) and friendly teasing (29%) elicited the highest overall response rates among children. Mimicry (10%) and tricks of language (7%) were also noteworthy, particularly for their role in generating clever replies and mirth responses, suggesting these techniques effectively stimulated verbal creativity and playful engagement. In contrast, playful acts (6%) had a more modest impact across reaction types.

### 4.2 | Humorous Themes That Encourage Engagement

The second research objective sought to identify humorous themes that encourage engagement among children. Based on Pearce's (2009) framework, humour themes were categorised into emotion, thrill, history, nature, competencies and absurdity. Children's engagement was measured across three dimensions: social, emotional and cognitive (cf. Pearce 2009). Table 6 presents a breakdown of children's engagement across these humour themes.

Among the themes, nature-based humour was the most engaging, accounting for 40% of child-guide interactions (social engagement), 36% of joyful expressions (emotional engagement), and 31% of attentive behaviour and 33% of clever replies (cognitive engagement). This indicates that nature-based humour engages children on multiple levels, encouraging attention and positive emotional reactions. The field notes and memos recorded instances of using humour resulting in fostering enthusiasm and curiosity among children. The following is an illustrative example from the field notes:

**TABLE 2** | Cohen's Kappa agreement results for observation checklist items.

Observed item	Measure of agreement Kappa	Interpretation
Humour source	1.000	Perfect agreement
Humour target	1.000	Perfect agreement
Humour context	0.958	Almost perfect agreement
Humour theme	1.000	Perfect agreement
Humour technique	0.909	Almost perfect agreement
Humour medium	0.964	Almost perfect agreement
Humour type	0.917	Almost perfect agreement
Reactions	0.980	Almost perfect agreement
Social engagement	0.913	Almost perfect agreement
Cognitive engagement	0.961	Almost perfect agreement
Emotional engagement	0.958	Almost perfect agreement

Note: Approximate significance: <0.001.

**TABLE 3** | Frequency of children's reactions to humour.

Reaction	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
No humour	30	36.1
Laughter	22	26.5
Smiling	13	15.7
Clever replies	11	13.3
Mirth response	7	8.4
Total	83	100

**TABLE 4** | Children's reactions to different types of humour.

Reaction	Playful (%)	Silly (%)	Witty (%)	Clever (%)	Mocking (%)	Total (%)
Laughter	2	20	4	9	6	41
Smile	2	6	9	8	0	25
Clever replies	0	9	2	2	8	21
Mirth response	2	0	7	4	0	13
Total	6	35	22	23	14	100

The tour guide suggested collecting objects from nature.

Children: Objects like what?

Guide: Anything you like or anything that looks weird to you, or you want to know more about! Anything that attracts your attention. (The children started to make jokes.)

Child 1: "Can it be cockroaches? Or flies? Insects? (The guide smiled; other kids laughed).

Guide: Yes, anything you like, and doesn't make you scared when you see them grow bigger!

(This episode ended with children collecting several spiders and cockroaches to be examined under the microscope!)

Humour based on history also played a prominent role, particularly in emotional and cognitive engagement. It showed the highest rate of child–tour guide interactions (27%) and strong emotional engagement, particularly enjoyment (30%). The high levels of engagement with history-based humour suggest that children find historical themes both interesting and enjoyable, facilitating deeper cognitive processing and emotional connection during the experience. One example from the field notes comes from a visit to a historical palace in Tehran, where the tour guide used humour within a history-based scenario:

The (tour guide playing the role of) king called his assistant to an entrance location in the garden.

His assistant brought him a formal letter on which there were children's names! They read their names, and the children started introducing themselves.

Several children gave clever/funny replies while introducing themselves (as knights and royalty, etc.), which made everyone laugh!

TABLE 5 | Children's reactions by humour technique.

Reactions	Jokes (%)	Amusing stories (%)	Tricks of language (%)	Exaggerations (%)	Clowning (%)	Friendly teasing (%)	Mimicry (%)	Word play/pun (%)	Playful acts (%)	Puppets/funny figures (%)	Total (%)
Laughter	12	6	0	2	3	12	3	0	0	0	37
Smile	9	4	3	1	1	8	3	1	4	0	34
Mirth response	0	1	4	2	0	6	0	0	2	1	16
Clever replies	1	4	0	0	0	3	4	1	0	0	13
Total	22	15	7	4	4	29	10	2	6	1	100

Absurd humour emerged as another dominant humour theme, particularly in peer-peer interactions (38%) and emotional responses like enjoyment (22%). It also fostered cognitive engagement through clever replies (22%), indicating that absurd humour encourages quick, playful thinking and social interaction. Conversely, emotion and thrill-based humour were less effective in fostering sustained engagement. While these themes generated momentary amusement, they did not elicit significant cognitive responses, suggesting that deeper levels of engagement require intellectual or experiential stimulation.

Competency-based humour appeared to be effective in fostering peer-to-peer interaction (46%), enhancing expressions of joy (24%) and maintaining children's attention (17%). The observations revealed numerous instances of children using humour to playfully comment on each other's competencies, particularly when engaging in new activities, such as using a telescope for the first time. This form of humour lightened the atmosphere and helped children and their peers feel more at ease, creating a joyful and supportive environment.

### 4.3 | Influence of Humour on Children's Engagement

The thematic analysis of observational field notes based on the three stages of the CGT analysis—initial coding, focused coding and theoretical coding (Charmaz 2017)—identified five main themes that illustrate the impacts of humour. Figure 1 illustrates these identified themes.

#### 4.3.1 | Facilitating Social Interaction

Humour fosters peer-to-peer engagement and bonding with tour guides and parents, creating a lively, interactive environment. This was evident when children exchanged jokes and responded playfully to humorous remarks from the guide. One example from field notes was when children were given time to explore a botanical garden:

Suddenly, a child exclaimed while touching a tree trunk, *'It feels like pantyhose! Is it wearing any?'* The guide and everyone laughed, fostering a shared moment of joy.

#### 4.3.2 | Enhancing Enjoyment

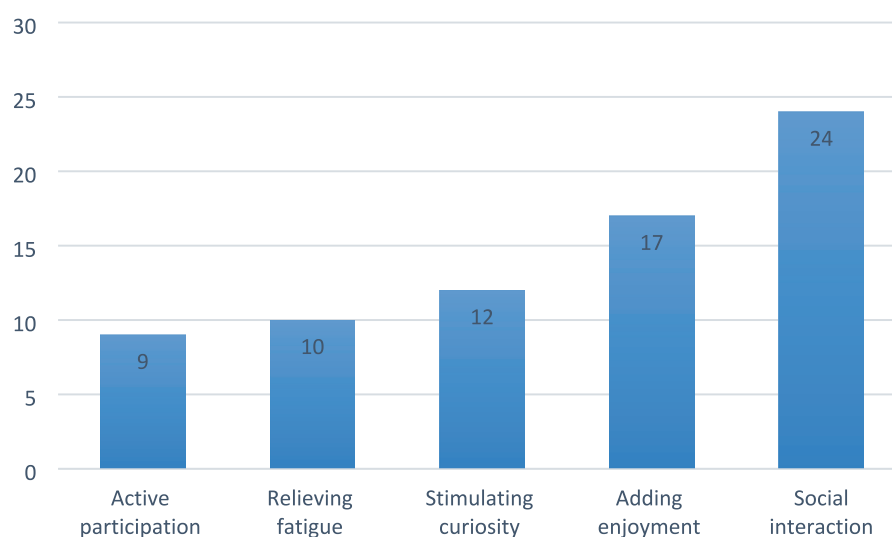
The second theme recognises that humour adds an element of fun and playfulness to tourism experiences. Activities such as stories, dances, bird sound imitations and role-play scenarios contributed to the lively atmosphere. This field note exemplifies this:

Children were delighted in imitating bird sounds, especially that of the world's smallest owl. This playful activity added a layer of fun to the tour.



**TABLE 6** | Children's engagement across different humour theme.

Humour theme	Social engagement		Emotional engagement			Cognitive engagement	
	Peer-peer (%)	Child-tour guide (%)	Expression of joy (%)	Mild surprise (%)	Enjoyment (%)	Paying attention (%)	Clever reply (%)
Emotion	8	5	8	0	4	3	11
Thrill	0	5	4	20	0	6	0
History	0	27	12	20	30	23	17
Nature	8	40	36	40	30	31	33
Competencies	46	8	24	0	14	17	17
Absurd	38	15	16	20	22	20	22
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

**FIGURE 1** | Themes illustrating humour's influence on children's engagement based on frequency.

#### 4.3.3 | Stimulating Curiosity and Attention

Humour draws children's attention and encourages curiosity-driven exploration. For example, a humorous interpretation of a geological formation resembling a castle intrigued children, prompting further questions. This field note provides an example:

At a geopark, the guide pointed to a massive rock formation resembling a castle and said, *'This is not the house of giants!'* The children listened attentively, were smiling and eager to learn more about the mysterious structure.

#### 4.3.4 | Relieving Fatigue

The fourth theme highlights humour's role in helping children cope with fatigue, especially during longer tours and physically demanding activities, which helps create a positive and relaxed atmosphere. For instance, a tour guide used

light-hearted jokes to keep children engaged during a desert scavenger hunt. The following excerpt provides an example from the field notes:

During a scavenger hunt in the desert, the guide used humour to distract the children from their tiredness. *'Do you see these footprints in the sand?'* he asked. 'Yes,' the children replied. *'Good, they belong to animals! Be sure to follow mine so you don't get lost!'* The children laughed, reinvigorated by the light-hearted comment.

#### 4.3.5 | Encouraging Active Participation

The final theme recognises that humour encourages active participation, motivating children to ask questions, interact with interpretive content and engage in discussions. This was observed when children responded with humorous but insightful questions during a historical interpretation session:

While the guide explained the history of an ancient temple, a girl persistently asked, *'Did this happen before or after Alexander the Great?'* Her humorous yet curious questions sparked laughter and further discussion among the group.

These emergent themes from various tours reinforce the multifaceted role of humour in tourism interpretation. Humour is not merely an entertainment tool; it meaningfully contributes to augmenting children's engagement by stimulating curiosity, facilitating active participation, promoting social interaction, enhancing experiential enjoyment and alleviating fatigue.

## 5 | Discussion

### 5.1 | Children's Reactions to Different Types and Techniques of Humour

In addressing the first research objective, this study demonstrated that children's reactions to humour during tourism activities are diverse and context-dependent. Laughter and smiling emerged as the most frequent reactions (see Table 3), consistent with the relief theory of humour, which posits that laughter serves as a release of accumulated energy or tension (Roth et al. 2006). In the context of children engaging in tourism activities, the novelty and unpredictability of these experiences can generate excitement and mild anxiety. Humorous elements within these activities provide an outlet for releasing built-up energy and tension, resulting in observable expressions of joy such as laughter and smiling, thereby enhancing emotional well-being (Martin and Ford 2018). The positive reactions observed support the notion that humour enhances the enjoyment of tourism experiences by fostering positive emotions and memorable moments (Pearce and Pabel 2015). The results in Table 4 highlighted that silly humour is particularly effective in engaging children, eliciting high levels of laughter and smiles. Silly or absurd humour elicited significant positive reactions, suggesting that children enjoy unexpected or nonsensical elements that challenge their understanding of the world (Hoicka and Martin 2016).

Additionally, silly humour prompted the highest number of clever replies (see Table 4), suggesting that it encourages playful interaction and verbal engagement. This supports previous findings that playful experiences are fundamental to children's understanding and appreciation of humour (Loizou and Recchia 2019). In contrast, witty and clever humour generated more smiling and mirth responses, highlighting children's appreciation of intellectual and subtle forms of humour. These types of humour appear to engage children more reflectively and thoughtfully, eliciting smiles and a sense of delight rather than outright laughter.

In humour techniques, jokes and friendly teasing elicited the highest number of reactions (see Table 5), making them particularly impactful. This finding underpins Dowling's (2014) work, suggesting that jokes and spontaneous witticism facilitate social interaction and positive engagement among children. Additionally, children showed an appreciation for mimicry through clever replies and tricks of language through

mirth responses, indicating these techniques' role in creating joy and amusement. The findings emphasise the potential of humour as a dynamic tool for engaging children in tourism settings.

### 5.2 | Humorous Themes That Encourage Engagement

The second research objective addressed humorous themes that encourage engagement. The findings show that nature-themed humour effectively promotes children's social, emotional and cognitive engagement (see Table 6). This builds on previous literature on interactive nature education and recent research on nature's well-being benefits (Bratman et al. 2019). In outdoor education, humour stimulates emotional engagement and improves learning outcomes (Hoad et al. 2013), as observed when children playfully explored concepts like animal features. Playful engagement with nature supports healthy development and positive environmental attitudes in children under 12 (Gill 2014). The current study's findings demonstrate how nature-themed humour can create more meaningful tourism experiences for children aged 9–12.

History themes also played an important role in fostering emotional and cognitive engagement. The effectiveness of history-based humour aligns with studies suggesting that humorous storytelling makes historical content more engaging (Zhang and Pearce 2016). Using historical humour can transform mundane facts into engaging stories, making historical sites more accessible and interesting to children (Ham 2016). While the tourism literature has already recognised nature and history as effective humour themes for adult tourists, this study confirms their effectiveness for engaging children as well.

This study also acknowledges absurd humour as an effective theme in creating social, emotional and cognitive engagement among children. This finding highlights the importance of contextually relevant and intellectually stimulating humour in engaging children. This contributes to the literature on children's humour by showing that absurd humour can enhance engagement across multiple levels (Coates and Coates 2020; Loizou and Recchia 2019). Regarding competency-related humour, the findings support the multifaceted role of humour for children, particularly when engaging in new activities, by making them feel at ease (Pearce 2009).

### 5.3 | Effect of Humour on Children's Engagement

The final research objective explored how humour enhances children's engagement in tourism. The thematic analysis identified five key themes (see Figure 1). Firstly, humour facilitated social interaction among children, tour guides and parents, creating a lively and engaging environment. Peer-to-peer humour and spontaneous humour fostered social bonding. This aligns with Martin and Ford's (2018) findings on humour's role in emotional well-being. Similarly, Loizou (2005) emphasised the social benefits of humour for children, while Strean (2011) highlighted its value in teacher–student relationships. In tourism contexts, social interaction is central to children's engagement in museums

(Johanson and Glow 2012), and Pearce and Pabel (2015) argued that humour creates an ideal foundation for interaction within tourism experiences. This supports the positive psychology tenet of fostering positive relationships (Seligman 2011).

Secondly, humorous elements such as storytelling, sound imitations, and role-playing added enjoyment, contributing to memorable and pleasurable experiences. Observations of bird sound imitations during tours exemplify this. The literature confirms the hedonic value of children's travel (Li et al. 2023; Rhoden et al. 2016) and highlights humour's role in making learning more enjoyable (Garner 2006). Educational tourism experiences enhanced by humour improve memory retention, making the experience both fun and educational (Ballantyne et al. 2011; Fehrest et al. 2024a, 2024b). This theme directly relates to the positive psychology concept of positive emotions helping children build more resources (Fredrickson 2001).

Thirdly, humour sparked curiosity and sustained children's attention. A guide's witty remarks about rock formations at a geopark, for instance, captivated children's interest. While humour can attract attention (McGhee 2014), curiosity involves directing attention towards knowledge gaps (Jirout and Klahr 2012). In tourism, curiosity drives exploratory behaviours, especially in children (Davari and Jang 2024a, 2024b; Fandakova and Gruber 2021), and humour can help bridge knowledge gaps and stimulate deeper engagement (Ham 2013). Travel serves as a meaningful exploratory activity (Von Stumm and Ackerman 2013), and this study demonstrates humour's role in enhancing that curiosity.

Fourthly, humour helped reduce fatigue and stress, particularly during long or demanding activities. Humorous remarks and playful group interactions generated a relaxed atmosphere. Prior research shows humour lowers stress, boosts cognitive engagement and eases learning anxiety (Garner 2006; Orekoya et al. 2014). It also helps alleviate boredom (Unsal et al. 2018). A relaxed and enjoyable learning state supports cognitive processing and reinforces learning (Fredrickson 2001). Humour also provides comfort in unfamiliar tourism settings (Pearce 2009), promoting a calm and receptive mental state.

Lastly, humour encouraged active participation. Children asked funny questions and eagerly interacted with tour guides, with shared laughter reinforcing their engagement. Humour promotes participation and engagement in educational settings (Savage et al. 2017), making interpretive programmes more dynamic (Weiler and Black 2015). Children value active involvement in exploratory and social play (Sutcliffe and Kim 2014; Rhoden et al. 2016), and experiential learning theory affirms that humour enhances creativity and critical thinking (Spörk et al. 2023). This highlights humour's value in fostering meaningful learning through active involvement.

These findings highlight humour as an important contribution to children's engagement in tourism settings. It supports key aspects of engagement, including social bonding, positive affect, curiosity, relaxation, and active participation, which align closely with the principles of positive psychology (Seligman 2011; Fredrickson 2001). When used effectively by tour guides, humour has the potential to enrich interpretive experiences,

making them more dynamic, educational and emotionally resonant. This perspective is supported by contemporary tourism scholarship that advocates for the integration of positive psychology into tourism design to foster well-being, engagement and meaningful experiences (Coghlan 2015; Filep and Laing 2019), particularly with children's developmental and experiential needs (Kwok et al. 2016).

## 5.4 | Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study contributes to the literature by extending existing frameworks on humour in tourism (Pearce 2009), by considering child-specific reactions and preferences. The findings inform the development of more effective and enjoyable interpretive programmes, with the potential to create richer learning experiences for children (Beck and Cable 2011). Engagement, as a foundational prerequisite, is essential for fostering meaningful and impactful interpretive encounters (Moscardo 2014). However, further investigation is required to understand how effective it has been on children's learning. Additionally, the findings enhance the existing understanding of visitor engagement, particularly within child-specific contexts (c.f., Hillman et al. 2016; Johanson and Glow 2012; Sutcliffe and Kim 2014), which remains an underexplored area of study. The current study suggests that the integration of humour into interpretive programmes can create more engaging experiences that resonate with children's cognitive and emotional needs (Ham 2013).

For practitioners, the results offer insights into designing child-centric tourism experiences. The study revealed that children exhibit diverse responses to silly, witty and clever humour, with preferences influenced by their developmental stage and contextual factors. Tour guides and educators can leverage nature-themed, history-themed and competency-related humour to enhance engagement. This insight is crucial for developing interpretive strategies that cater specifically to children's unique perspectives and learning styles (Ballantyne and Packer 2011). These findings highlight the link between humour, engagement and potential educational outcomes in tourism settings. Tourism operators can tailor their programmes to be more interactive, enjoyable and educational by understanding the types of humour that resonate with children.

## 6 | Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that humour is a powerful tool for engaging children in tourism settings. The findings indicate that different types and techniques of humour elicit varied reactions, with silly, witty and clever humour proving particularly effective. Nature- and history-based humour were the most engaging themes, supporting previous research on environmental and historical interpretation (Ham 2016). By understanding children's humour preferences, tourism professionals can develop more engaging and educational experiences, ensuring that humour is strategically integrated into interpretive programmes. Thus, this study makes both theoretical contributions and practical recommendations for enhancing children's tourism experiences through humour.

While this study offers valuable insights, its context-specific focus on Iran may limit the generalisability of the findings. Additionally, cultural variations in humour perception warrant further investigation. Future research should explore how different cultural backgrounds influence children's responses to humour and assess its impact on long-term learning outcomes.

Moreover, future studies can explore humour in diverse tourism contexts, such as theme parks, zoos or cultural festivals and across different cultural backgrounds. Investigating other forms of humour, including sarcasm, irony and culturally specific humour, could provide a more comprehensive understanding. Additionally, examining humour's impact on children's learning outcomes would substantiate its effectiveness as an educational tool in tourism. Understanding and applying the types and themes of humour that align with children's preferences enables tourism professionals to create engaging experiences that cater to children's unique perspectives and developmental needs.

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### Ethics Statement

This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at James Cook University (Approval No. H8679).

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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