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Engaging young minds: how tour guides use humour to co-create on-site interpretation for children

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of humour in providing participative interpretation and how it can enhance children's learning experience in tourism based on insights collected from Iranian tour guides and tour managers who specifically cater to children as a tourism demographic. The findings reveal that humour contributes to the co-creation of interpretive experiences between the tour guide and children, through four humour-driven strategies. However, some challenges require consideration when using humour with children. The findings are elaborated in a conceptual framework, followed by a comprehensive examination of the theoretical and practical implications. Overall, this study adds to the discourse on children and tourism, providing valuable insights into how humour can facilitate the development of meaningful participative experiences for children in tourism settings.

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Humour; participative interpretation; children's learning experience; co-creation; tweens

Introduction

There has been an increasing demand for interactive and participative experiences (Bharwani & Jauhari, 2017; Mathisen, 2013), especially in tourism settings where people expect memorable experiences (Ihamäki, 2012; Kim, 2010). The co-creation process can lead to a lasting and meaningful visitor experience by involving the end-consumer (Zhang et al., 2018). On-site interpretation is one of these experiences. Interpretation styles vary from positivist approaches which emphasise passive consumption of knowledge to constructivist approaches which encourage participation and creativity (Ross, 2020). According to Moscardo (1999), interpretation should involve participation to encourage mindfulness. However, children are often not uniquely considered in the tourism literature on interpretation, despite their distinct engagement needs and learning styles. Despite an increasing demand for participatory and meaning-making experiences (Bosangit et al., 2015), and children emerging as a more visible market segment in tourism (Mohammadi & Fehrest, 2023), these young tourists have been underrepresented in tourism research (Mohammadi & Pearce, 2020).

The literature on the tourism-humour relationship suggests that humour can offer value to tourism businesses and tourists with its interactive nature (Pabel & Pearce, 2015, 2016). For example, humour creates a competitive advantage for tourism businesses that provide an enjoyable, engaging and distinctive tourism experience (Pabel & Pearce, 2015). Tourism professionals can benefit from using humour since it can build close relationships and keep tourists loyal to their services (Mathies et al., 2016). Humour can also influence tourism interpretation and presentation (Pabel, 2019), enriching tourists' on-site experiences (Pabel & Pearce, 2016). Apart from its entertainment value, its control function is recognised by tour guides, as they are known to use humour to regulate the atmosphere of a tour (Zhang & Pearce, 2016). Encouraging humour and laughter can support engaging and participative tourism experiences; however, their effectiveness is contingent on context, audience characteristics, and the manner in which humour is delivered (Pearce & Pabel, 2015).

Tour operators and guides, who shape tourist experiences and provide on-site interpretation, can offer valuable insights when using humour with younger audiences. Tourism research increasingly examines tour operators' and guides' perspectives on humour, with several studies highlighting the importance of industry professionals' views and the benefits humour can offer to tourists (Pabel & Pearce, 2015, 2016, 2018).

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However, existing tourism–humour research has paid limited attention to children as a distinct audience. Children differ from adults in their cognitive development, social interaction patterns, and humour comprehension processes (Bergen, 2019; Jackson et al., 2021). These differences suggest that humour may function differently in child-focused tourism settings, warranting dedicated investigation. Examining the perspectives of tour guides and managers who design and deliver children's tours can therefore deepen understanding of how humour shapes children's tourism learning experiences through participative interpretation.

Taking a constructivist approach, this study aims to explore the role of humour in providing participative interpretation for children and how it enhances their tourism learning experience. The following three research objectives are addressed: (1) Exploring how tour managers and guides use humour in child-focused tours, including how it is applied, why it is used, its perceived outcomes, and associated challenges; (2) Identifying the most suitable forms of humour in tourism settings effective for on-site interpretation aimed at children; and (3) Exploring how humour facilitates the co-creation of on-site interpretative experiences for children. To explore these objectives, interviews were conducted with tour managers and tour guides who had experience in hosting tours for children aged 9–12. The findings were used to develop a conceptual framework and offer practical insights into the use of humour while advancing our understanding of the relationship between tourism and humour with a focus on children.

Literature review

Interpretation for children

Tourism interpretation often aims to facilitate informal learning by conveying meaning about places, culture, and environment (Moscardo, 2022). Interpretation for children and its outcomes has been explored previously in tourism. Several studies have focused on field trips and museum visits where children can be engaged via interpretation (Holmes, 2011; Mortensen & Smart, 2007; Nadelson & Jordan, 2012). In this study, participative interpretation refers to interpretive experiences where children actively engage in meaning-making through interaction, play, and shared activities rather than passively receiving information. These studies are mainly based on the idea that children learn while 'doing' and field trips allow them to learn differently. Sutcliffe and Kim (2014, p. 336) regard field trips and interpretation during such trips as 'real-world examples of education concepts'. While many tourism-based educational settings can inspire children, the natural environment is particularly well suited to experiential and embodied forms of learning that foster curiosity and engagement. The provision of interpretation specifically focused on children provides enjoyable visitor experiences not just for them, but also for the adults accompanying them (Davidson & Black, 2007).

Tourism research increasingly supports inclusive sustainable tourism through education (Burrai et al., 2019; Seraphin, 2020), delivered formally in schools (Kemper et al., 2019) or informally via tours and interpretation (Smith et al., 2019; Stoddard, 2018). For children, interpretation often occurs through nature schools offering guided walks to promote ecological learning (Hansen-Møller & Taylor, 1991). Early engagement with nature fosters creativity, curiosity, and lifelong learning (Miller, 2007). The rise of world schooling further highlights tourism's educational potential (Molz, 2017). Enhancing interpretation for young audiences is vital to advancing sustainable tourism goals (Seraphin et al., 2022).

Prior research suggests that effective on-site interpretation is shaped by several key factors, including meaningful storytelling, active participation, emotional engagement, guide–visitor interaction, and cognitive stimulation (Moscardo, 1999; Moscardo & Hughes, 2023; Stern & Powell, 2013). These elements foster attention, connection, and learning, particularly in experiential contexts. While these factors are widely recognised in interpretation research, the specific mechanisms through which humour interacts with them remain underexplored, especially in child-focused tourism settings.

Humour by tour guides

The quality of the tour guide's service is crucial in shaping the overall tourist experience (De Rojas & Camarero, 2008). Effective interpretation by a high-quality tour guide not only imparts information but also introduces an element of playfulness to the tourist experience (Kuo et al., 2016). Within these broader interpretive processes, humour has been shown to influence emotional tone, social connection, attention, and visitor satisfaction (Pearce & Pabel, 2015). Research by Stern and Powell (2013) linked humour to increased visitor satisfaction, appreciation, and behavioural intentions, identifying it as a key factor in successful interpretation programmes. Additionally, guides' use of humour, whether as a communication style or dispositional tendency, can influence visitor perception (Stern et al., 2013). Pearce (2009) further demonstrated humour's

role in improving comfort, concentration, and social connection, resulting in the development of the 3Cs model.

The effectiveness of humour in tourism settings depends on several factors. Tour guides need to be aware of both explicit and implicit elements of humour, which encompass unspoken cues and silences, particularly within the framework of group 'joking' (Rothwell et al., 2011). Tour guides' ability to 'read people' has been suggested by Pearce and Pabel (2015). Other pre-requisites for making humour work include natural and spontaneous delivery, being related to the subject, entire performance integrity (not only verbal humour), and specific tourism context consideration (Pearce & Pabel, 2015). Recognising these aspects places significant responsibility on tour guides and outdoor leaders to handle humorous incidents with sensitivity. Integrating humour and interpretation for children is a fresh direction in tourism that can provide new insights into children's learning experiences as tourists.

Humour-focused learning for children

There are two main aspects of reviewing children's humour-focused learning in tourism. First, the discourse on informal tourism learning often lacks cohesion and tends to highlight the purpose of travel learning rather than delving into the structure of the learning process (Falk et al., 2012; Stone & Duffy, 2015). Tourism researchers are encouraged to look beyond educational tourism and explore the mechanisms and underlying reasons that drive learning within tourism contexts (Falk et al., 2012). Second, children have been absent from the current discourse on humour and tourism, and the direction of their learning experience has rarely been considered. However, adopting a bridging approach from the educational context appears to reveal various benefits of humour for children.

Humour in educational contexts has been recognised as a potential tool to enhance learning by affecting cognitive and affective aspects. It can foster a positive learning environment, improve motivation, and strengthen student–teacher interaction (Lovorn & Holaway, 2015; Petraki & Nguyen, 2016). In outdoor education, humour promotes emotional engagement and supports meaningful learning experiences (Hoad et al., 2013). Cognitively, it aids concentration, comprehension, and memory retention. However, effective use requires caution; as McGhee (2019) noted, humour should only follow concept mastery to avoid hindering understanding. While humour has been linked to engagement and learning, it may also generate discomfort, exclusion, or misunderstanding if poorly timed, culturally misaligned, or developmentally inappropriate (McGhee, 2019; Noon, 2017). These tensions highlight the need to examine humour not as an inherently positive tool, but as a socially negotiated practice requiring sensitivity and reflexive judgement.

Within this context, children's humour is closely intertwined with play and often emerges through playful interaction rather than as a separate communicative form (Bergen, 2019), suggesting that humour in child-focused settings is typically enacted through participative activities rather than occurring independently of them.

Humour-linked co-creation of the tourism experience

Co-creation occurs when both tourism providers and tourists come together to create and perform the tourism experience (Campos et al., 2016). Co-creation in tourism has been widely discussed as a process in which experiences are collaboratively shaped through interactions between providers and participants (Bertella, 2014). It typically emphasises tourists' active participation and their interactions with others during site visits or travel (Prebensen & Foss, 2011). This tourist-centric view aligns with creative tourism, where travellers engage in culturally embedded, hands-on learning experiences that stimulate creativity (Richards, 2010; Richards & Marques, 2012). Creative tourism can take various forms, such as discovery and edutainment (Richards & Marques, 2012). Such experiences may also be essential for children's learning because they engage multiple senses, encourage curiosity, promote experiential learning, and create lasting memories.

Active participation is central to children's tourism, with research highlighting diverse forms of engagement, including but not limited to safe and open play environments (Rhoden et al., 2016). Play serves as a key medium for co-creation, enabling learning and interaction with peers and surroundings (Wood, 2010). Humour, in particular, fosters a playful atmosphere that supports knowledge co-creation and enriches children's learning experiences (Kangas, 2010). McGhee (2019, p. 85) distinguishes between two forms of play: exploratory (non-humorous) play, which facilitates serious discovery and learning, and pretend play, which builds upon prior knowledge to enable 'indirect learning'. By engaging both cognitive and emotional processes, humour can establish a basis for effective and participative interpretation. Thus, incorporating humour presents a valuable strategy for fostering a playful environment for children, contributing to the

co-creation of knowledge and enhancing their learning experience (Kangas, 2010).

Children's humour naturally emerges through playful behaviours, highlighting the fundamental connection between laughter and play in childhood development. Peer play provides a fertile context for humour, often involving incongruity-based forms where unexpected behaviours elicit joy and intellectual engagement (Bergen, 2019; Singer, 2019). Examples include wordplay, nonsense rhythms, and pretend scenarios featuring taboo language or playful role reversals (Singer, 2019). These moments frequently lead to imitation and shared laughter, highlighting how humour is co-constructed in social play and integral to children's socio-cognitive development.

Table 1. Participants' profile.

ID	Gender	Activity type	Years of experience	Background education
TG1	F	Self-employed tour guide	12	Childhood education
TG2	F	Self-employed tour guide	5	Childhood education
TG3	F	Tour guide at nature school	6	Ecotourism-natural environment
TG4	F	Self-employed tour guide	3	Childhood education
TG5	F	Self-employed	12	Ecotourism
TG6	F	Tour guide at nature school	5	Ecotourism
TG7	M	Self-employed tour guide	8	Childhood education
TG 8	F	Self-employed tour guide	6	Environmental science
TG9	F	Self-employed tour guide	8	Ecotourism
TG10	F	Self-employed tour guide	4	Sport
TG11	F	Self-employed tour guide	10	Information management
TG12	F	Self-employed tour guide	7	Tourism planning
TG13	F	Tour guide at nature school	6	Ecotourism
TG14	F	Tour guide at nature school	10	Biology
TG15	F	Tour guide at nature school	6	Childhood education
TG16	F	Tour guide at nature school	7	Ecotourism
TG17	F	Self-employed tour guide	5	Persian literature
TG18	M	Self-employed tour guide	7	Tourism
TG19	F	Self-employed tour guide	6	Artistic performance
TG20	F	Self-employed tour guide	8	Biology
TM1	M	Tour manager and guide	9	Sport
TM2	F	Tour manager	7	Management
TM3	F	Tour operator	14	Art
TM4	F	Tour manager/ guide	7	Environmental science
TM5	F	Tour manager	5	Teaching
TM6	F	Tour manager	8	Education technology
TM7	F	Tour manager/ instructor	12	Ecotourism
TM8	F	Tour manager	10	Tourism marketing
TM9	F	Tour manager	3	Childhood education
TM10	F	Tour manager	7	Childhood education

Methods

Research paradigm

This research is based on the principles of constructivism. Humour is a social phenomenon and is perceived differently in various cultures (Pearce & Pabel, 2015). The constructivist paradigm acknowledges that individuals construct their understanding of reality based on their unique perspectives and social contexts (Jennings, 2010). This study also embraced reflexivity, recognising the researcher's subjectivity in interpreting data and shaping the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). The first author's familiarity with the Iranian cultural and tourism context supported deeper probing during interviews and informed the interpretation of how tour professionals employ humour to co-create experiences with children. Reflexivity enabled a critical examination of this interplay, ensuring transparency and a deeper understanding of how the researcher's positionality influenced the study. Consequently, constructivism facilitated an exploration of how tour guides engaged with humour as a social phenomenon, shaping their interactions with children and enriching the overall tourism experience.

Context of the study

The geographical scope of this study is Iran. According to the regulations set by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts in Iran, operating tours with children requires the presence of a child facilitator or a professional tour guide who specialises in children-based tourism. These facilitators obtain a certificate after completing specialised training. The Professional Guide for Children's Tourism is a course on tourism education that falls under the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts in Iran. This regulation implies that the research participants were highly trained professionals in working with children. Many of the tours in this study are specifically designed for groups of children, and this study focused on the tours rather than individual children.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with tour guides and tour managers who design and operate

tours for children aged 9–12 in Iran. The reason for selecting tour guides and tour managers who operate child-focused tours was to capture the perspectives of tourism professionals who recognise children as a distinct market segment and who are directly involved in designing, delivering, and overseeing tours, with a deep understanding of children's behaviours, needs, and preferences. Snowball sampling was adopted to conduct the interviews since there was no complete list of these operators available. Participants were recruited via emails or phone calls. Thirty interviews were conducted (including 10 tour managers and 20 tour guides) via Skype during April–June 2023. The audio-recorded interviews lasted between 25 min and 1 h depending on the participant's engagement and the depth of their responses. Table 1 shows the profile of the participants. Interviews were continued until saturation was achieved and further interviews did not contribute new information to the established themes.

The tour guides and managers were invited to discuss the motivations, barriers, and challenges of using humour on tours with children. They were also asked about their perceptions of the importance of humour in tours, the forms of humour they used, why and how they used it and the overall role of humour in shaping children's learning experiences.

Table 2. Perspectives on humour for children by tour guides and tour managers.

Participant role	Perspective	Example quotes from participants
Tour Guides	Positive	TG13: *I use humour, especially at the beginning when I see a child, when I feel like it is necessary to do this until the children themselves are the owners of the environment and settle.*
	Negative	TG4: *Sometimes, attempts at humour can feel meaningless and absurd, turning into something to laugh at rather than learn from. In my view, absurd humour is ineffective, especially when it comes to educating children.*
	Neutral	TG10: *Authenticity has a profound impact. Children aren't drawn to forced funny gestures or acts that don't align with your true character – they care more about who you genuinely are.*
Tour Managers	Positive	TM1: *In my opinion, the use of humour fosters joy that prepares an environment for learning.*
	Negative	TM3: *To my understanding humour means making fun of reality, when a child does not yet know what the reality is and has not fully understood reality, humour cannot be used to educate them.*
	Neutral	TM2: *I can't confirm or deny this (that humour is good or bad), it's very personal, it depends on the guide's character. Guides communicate differently with children, one guide might use jokes, the other might use storytelling, etc. everyone has their own way of communication.*

Data analysis

The interviews were conducted in Persian and then translated into English. The translations were double-checked by another Persian native speaker for accuracy. The interview transcripts were organised, coded, and analysed in NVivo, following the steps outlined by Jennings (2010): open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The transcripts were critically examined to identify initial codes. The frequency of ideas expressed by research participants was a crucial factor in establishing categories to create themes and sub-themes. The first author initially conducted the coding process, which was then reviewed and refined by the other authors to ensure accuracy and consistency. This collaborative process included merging codes, revising categories, and validating interpretations to enhance the rigour of the analysis.

Trustworthiness

To establish the trustworthiness of qualitative data, dependability, credibility and transferability are used as key criteria (Decrop, 2004). Dependability was achieved through clear and reproducible descriptions of how the study was conducted, including details on the interview questions, data analysis and ethical procedure. Credibility was achieved through verification of analysis and interpretation of findings which involved the research team working together to interpret the data collectively. Transferability was ensured by using thick descriptions inherent in participant perspectives, making use of quotes to illustrate findings and reflect participant voices.

Ethical considerations

Although children were not direct participants in this study, ethical considerations remained important given that tour guides and managers reflected on their professional practices involving children. Ethical approval was obtained from JCU's Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. H8718), and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and all data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

Findings

The first research objective was to examine how tour managers and guides use humour in child-focused tours, including how it is applied, why it is used, its

perceived outcomes, and associated challenges. To address this objective, we explored the participants' overall insight on whether their use of humour is pre-planned, spontaneous, or a mix of both, why they use humour with children and the outcome they think humour can bring to children and their tours, and finally the challenges of using humour for children.

Participants described humour as a potentially valuable but situational tool, whose effectiveness depended on children's age, context, and guide sensitivity, with spontaneous humour being the most prevalent. The interviews also indicated that tour guides' personality and their insight into and experience with humour into their use of humour. For example, tour guides with a more positive perspective towards humour felt more confident showcasing their sense of humour and were more likely to recall amusing stories from their tours. Table 2 displays these perspectives and relevant quotes from participants.

Perceived humour outcomes for children were categorised based on cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions (see Table 3). The responses were coded in NVivo, revealing that most of the 30 interviewees emphasised the cognitive benefits of humour over other types of benefits. Based on the findings from industry professionals' perspective, learning is the primary perceived outcome of humour for children. Additionally, humour uniquely contributes to children's positive emotions during on-site experiences.

In terms of challenges, the participants considered three distinct themes of challenges including child-specific, tour guide-specific, and context-specific challenges, as illustrated in Table 4.

The second research objective aimed to identify the most suitable forms of humour that are effective for on-site interpretation aimed at children. Figure 1 provides a visual overview of recurring humour-related terms identified in the interviews. The word cloud is used as an illustrative tool to highlight patterns in participants' language; however, thematic development was based on iterative qualitative coding and interpretation rather than frequency. Addressing the question of suitable humour forms, TG1 expressed: *I work with children aged 8–13, and I find humour to be highly effective, they particularly enjoy physical activities, play-based humour, funny stories, and role-play*.

The third research objective focused on the contribution of humour to co-creating on-site interpretation for children. The analysis identified four themes that were labelled as laughter-generated dynamics, humour-harmony bond, wildlife comedic interpretation and contextual playfulness (see Table 5). Sixty-six references mentioned laughter-generated activities as an important part of on-site interpretation for children. Contextual playfulness and wildlife comedic interpretation occurred specifically in the natural environment.

Table 3. Humour outcomes perceived by tour guides and tour managers.

Theme category	Sub-theme	Example quotes from participants
Cognitive	Learning Animal interpretation Attention Creative thinking Conveying educational messages Retention Self-development	TG17: *I believe that when you feel joy, learning occurs by itself. We are open to learning when we are happier.* TG1: *Humour is a good strategy while we are learning about animals, funny anecdotes or quirky facts about animals often get children laughing while learning.*
Affective	Positive emotion Cheerful environment Overcoming challenges in nature Ice-breaking activity Building connections	TM1: *If we consider humour as a way of creating affinity and friendship, it can be used as an icebreaker, which helps in the beginning of making a conversation.* TG1: *I use humour in different situations, especially in nature, that they are involved in or as they are doing something.*
Behavioural	General laughter Social bonding Dispute resolution	TG6: *Sometimes when a hostile atmosphere may arise between the children, I use humour to resolve the problem between the children.*

Table 4. Challenges of using humour, perceived by tour guides and managers.

Theme category	Sub-themes	Example quotes from participants
Child-Specific	Age Cultural background Personal characteristics Courtesy issues Derogatory humour The familiarity level with TG	TG9: *Considering what culture each child comes from and how well they understand humour, we are allowed to make a joke out of a problem.* TG10: *We avoid teasing and humiliating.* TG8: *We should be careful not to hurt children's self-confidence even when we use humour within a group!*
Tour guide-specific	Tour guide personality Concerns about boundaries Reference the rules Serious topics	TG10: *I am personally an analytical type, and since I know myself, when I want to have a workshop that's full of laughter, I would definitely step in as the second facilitator, not the main one.* TG16: *Sometimes young adolescents use negative humour, like teasing and mockery, and as a guide, you have to be cautious not to become entangled in such behaviour while still connecting with their sense of humour.*
Context-specific	Cultural values Dangerous situations	TG14: *If children are in danger, humour should not be used in any way.*



Figure 1. Forms of humour in tourism settings effective for on-site interpretation aimed at children.

TG6, a tour guide at a nature school, described great examples of this kind of humour with children, claiming that *when you are with children in nature, even their humour goes back to nature*.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the role of humour in providing participative interpretation for children and how it enhances their tourism learning experience. To achieve this aim, three research objectives were designed and explored based on tour managers' and tour guides' perspectives. This section addresses these objectives by relating the findings to the existing literature and illustrating the conceptual framework developed from the study findings (see Figure 2).

Tour managers' and guides' perspectives on the use of humour

In addressing the first research objective, which explored how tour managers and guides use humour in child-focused tours, including how it is applied, why it is used, its perceived outcomes, and associated challenges, the findings show that most participants view humour positively within their tours. Figure 2 presents tourism professionals' perceptions of the outcomes and challenges associated with using humour when interacting with children. The top section of the framework displays challenges related to using humour with children, including three categories: child-specific, tour guide-specific and context-specific (see Table 4). Child-specific challenges relate to characteristics of the children involved, such as their age and cultural background. The most prominent challenge in this category was the use of derogatory humour, which has the potential to harm children. This aligns with previous research cautioning against the negative impacts of certain types of humour on children (Noon, 2017).

Tour guide-specific challenges include concerns about establishing and maintaining boundaries when using humour with children, as well as factors related to the guides' own personalities. This finding aligns with prior tourism and humour research, which highlights the influence of a tour guide's personality on humour delivery (Pabel & Pearce, 2018). Context-specific challenges imply those associated with the tourism settings, which could impact the use of humour (cf. Pearce & Pabel, 2015). Participants were concerned about potentially dangerous environments that

Table 5. Participative humour-driven on-site interpretation strategies.

Theme category	Sub-themes	Example quotes from participants
Laughter-generated dynamics		
	Play-based humour Role-play and performance-based humour Spontaneous verbal humour Humorous storytelling and narrative	TG18: *I really like my tour to be fun and humorous, I use puppets and role-play. When we give them a role to play, they use their creativity to produce humour and laugh.*
Humour-harmony bond		
	Initial ice-breaking Group cohesion Conflict resolution Friendship and trust development Communication and engagement	TG1: *At the beginning of the tour, I usually start with a humorous comment or some joking as an icebreaker and to create a welcoming atmosphere.*
Wildlife comedic interpretation		
	Imitating animals' sound and movement Playful interaction to manage fear of animals Encouraging to observe and discover animal behaviour Funny reactions with animals	TG6: *For example, we are on our nature tour, we are talking about worms, the children are looking at the worms, … let's see how the worms walk on the ground, let's slither like worms. The guide performs the act, then the children will look, laugh a little, and then start moving like the guide. This is learning by doing! And it includes laughter and humour.*
Contextual playfulness		
	Empathy and connection with nature Mimicry and sound play Physical playfulness Personification and enactment	TG15: *Pouring water drops on children while passing a river or putting a worm on their hand to change their mood, making them laugh while offering some sensory experience.*

restrict their use of humour. This finding contrasts with existing literature, which suggests that humour is an effective strategy for engaging adults and conveying safety messages in adventure tourism settings (Pearce, 2009; Pearce & Pabel, 2015; Zhang & Pearce, 2016). This divergence highlights how attitudes towards the role of humour can vary depending on the audience's age and the broader context.

The bottom section of the framework in Figure 2 outlines the identified perceived outcomes of humour including cognitive, affective, and behavioural elements (see Table 3). These findings align with the existing education and humour literature, which recognise humour as a tool in the learning environment due to its cognitive and affective impact (Lovorn & Holaway, 2015; McGhee, 2019; Petraki & Nguyen, 2016). Even behavioural outcomes such as generating laughter, fostering social bonding, and creating stress-free environments can reinforce learning (Hoad et al., 2013). However, it should be acknowledged that the presented outcomes are only based on industry professionals' perspectives and need to be tested in future studies with children.

This study found that, unlike the adult tourism-humour outcomes identified by Pearce (2009), the benefits of humour for children extend beyond attention as a cognitive factor. The findings suggest that humour has the potential to empower children by creating an engaging and supportive environment that encourages creative thinking and problem-solving. TG2, a guide with a background in childhood education, mentioned: *Humour has a criticism in it, if you provide the child with humour, you are empowering them, and this sense of empowerment makes them bold. The joy of this ability is repeated when solving a problem, so this time, you are cultivating critical thinking and creative thinking in the child.* Through humour and the establishment of a positive emotional and social environment, students may find themselves better equipped to focus on the presented information (Rißland & Gruntz-Stoll, 2009).

Another point elicited from this study is that several tour guides and managers, especially those who had negative perspectives towards humour, such as TM3, expressed the idea that children *are very happy in nature and there is no need to do anything particular to make them happy*. McGhee (2019) argued that children naturally enjoy learning through play and exploration, making it a positive learning experience. In this context, humour serves as an extra source of enjoyment, akin to 'the icing on the cake', and can also help re-engage children who have become distracted or disengaged (p. 101)

Suitable forms of humour for children

The second research objective examined which forms of humour tour guides and tour managers consider appropriate and effective for on-site interpretation aimed at children. Humour for children is often expressed through play-based and participative activities rather than as a distinct or separate form (Bergen, 2019). The findings show that humour plays an important role when incorporated into activities popular with children, such as games, role-play and performances, humorous storytelling, and reading funny books. According to the participants, pretend play and playful behaviours, often supported by humour, help establish connections with children by encouraging creativity and shared engagement. These findings align with the existing

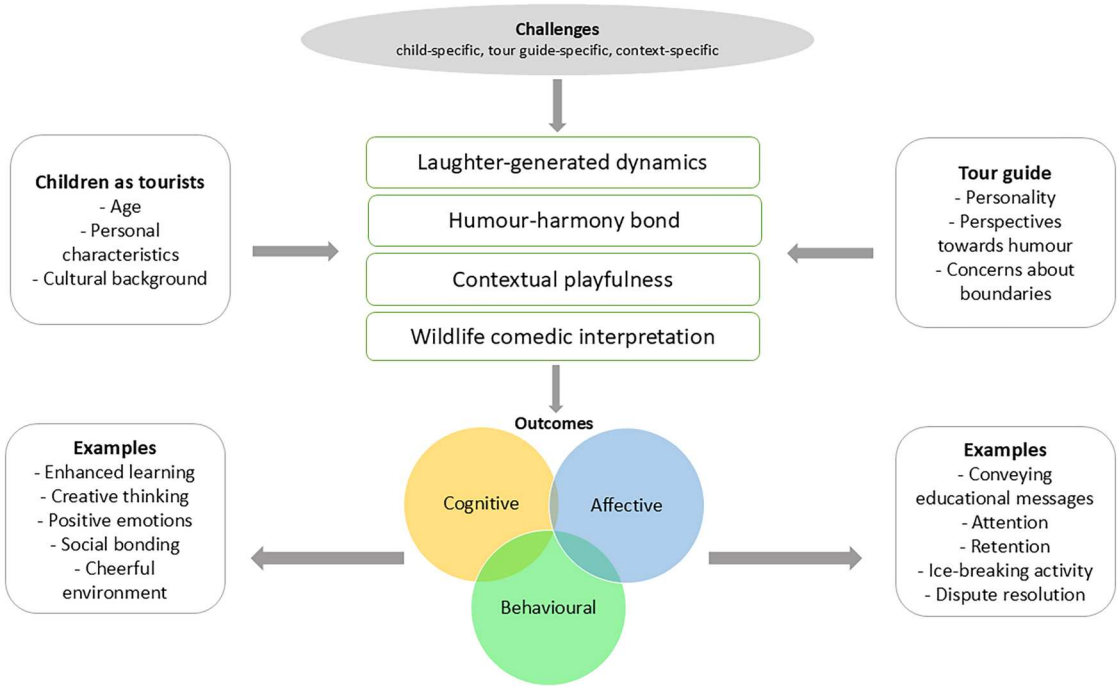


Figure 2. Humour-driven participative tourism interpretation for children.

literature on humour in early childhood, suggesting distinctions from adult humour, encompassing various forms such as wordplay, funny stories, sound play, clowning, incongruous acts, and amusing statements (Del Ré et al., 2020; Paine et al., 2021).

To use humour with children, it is important to consider their characteristics. From the interviewees' perspectives, suitable forms of humour are highly associated with age, which is also recognised in the literature (Bergen, 2019). Given that the interviews focused on children aged 9–12, participants generally agreed that from around age nine, children develop a stronger ability to understand and produce humour. As a result, they are more inclined to engage in humorous storytelling and role-play. This aligns with the humour literature indicating that children in this age group are cognitively developed enough to understand humour effectively (Jackson et al., 2021). Other characteristics of children, such as their cultural background, their travel history, and their affinity level with the tour guide/peers, are other important factors influencing their appreciation and production of humour.

Humour and co-creation of tourism interpretative experiences for children

The third research objective explored the role of humour in contributing to the co-creation of tourism interpretative experiences for children. Based on the presented findings, humour emerged as a mechanism that supports the co-creation of tourism interpretative experiences by encouraging active engagement and interaction. Children play a crucial role in shaping tourism interpretation, actively engaging in physical, mental, and social activities like play, storytelling, and role-playing. The findings suggest that humour contributes to participative interpretation by creating a playful and comfortable atmosphere that encourages children to move from passive listening to active involvement in activities such as role-play, storytelling, and physical interaction. The core of the framework (Figure 2) highlights participatory on-site interpretation strategies driven by humour (see Table 5), which align with dimensions outlined in previous co-creation research (Bertella, 2014; Ihamäki, 2012; Mathisen, 2018).

The first strategy, 'laugh-generated dynamics', reflects active participation that channels cognitive wit, emotional joy, and physical excitement through humour-based activities such as role-play, humorous storytelling, and movement. These activities can occur in any natural or cultural tourism context involving children. Pearce and Pabel (2015) recognised laughter as a co-creator of on-site experiences among adult tourists. In this study, tour guides provided several examples of funny storytelling or puppet shows in cultural contexts. Creative storytelling is also known to capture attention and add meaning to visitors' experiences (Ross & Saxena, 2019). Thus, humour expressed through

storytelling and role-play can encourage children to actively engage, thereby supporting participative interpretation. The second strategy highlights the 'humour-harmony bond', which conveys a social bond created by intertwining the threads of child-guide interactions and peer-to-peer relationships. Humour, whether spontaneous or planned, supports social bonding by creating moments of shared amusement and interaction. Adult tourists have been found to generate and collaboratively craft their own humour through social interactions (Pearce & Pabel, 2015; Stern & Powell, 2013). Thus, the interactive nature of humour cannot be underestimated and also applies to children who can create social bonds during participative interpretation.

The third strategy, 'contextual playfulness', refers to engaging with the immediate environment to create a joyful atmosphere. Participants described examples such as imitating the sound of the breeze or unusual noises in the woods and playfully interacting with elements like worms, all actions that generate laughter while helping children connect with the setting. Such nature-based play, enhanced by sensory experiences, often elicits children's laughter (Beery & Jørgensen, 2018). Thus, nature is a context where many playful encounters can happen for children. The final strategy, 'wildlife comedic interpretation', highlights humorous interactions with animals in natural settings, turning animal encounters into moments of humour-filled connection. As such, the co-creation occurs when tourists encounter wildlife during their visit (Bertella et al., 2021). Imitating animal vocalisation and physical action in the company of their friends as a part of nature tours (Kahn et al., 2018) is an effective way to generate laughter and evoke a sense of mirth among children.

Theoretical and practical implications

The theoretical contributions of this study are threefold. First, the findings extend the tourism-humour literature beyond adult-focused models by demonstrating that humour in child-focused tours operates as a co-creative and embodied practice rather than primarily as presenter-led entertainment. Unlike existing frameworks centred on visitor comfort and satisfaction (Pabel & Pearce, 2015, 2016, 2018; Zhang & Pearce, 2016), this study shows that humour supports interpretation by creating a playful and relaxed atmosphere that encourages children to actively engage through play, role enactment, and shared physical participation. Second, it contributes to interpretation studies by demonstrating that, in child-focused tours, humour supports interpretive learning goals by engaging children in participative and play-based activities. This clarifies how humour can be strategically integrated into child-focused interpretive practice. Third, the study proposes a framework that conceptualises four distinct humour-driven interactional strategies in child-focused tours: laughter-generated participation, humour-based relational bonding, context-embedded playfulness, and wildlife-mediated humour enactment. These strategies do not merely categorise activities; rather, they distinguish how humour reorganises guide–child interaction, participation structures, and interpretive engagement in ways not previously articulated in adult-focused tourism-humour models. Each strategy reflects a different way humour influences how interpretation unfolds: it can shift children from passive listening to active participation, reduce distance between guide and group, embed play within the surrounding environment, or turn wildlife encounters into shared, performative moments. Taken together, these patterns show that humour is not simply an add-on technique, but a way of shaping how participative interpretation happens in child-focused tours.

The significance of this study can be extended to practical implications for the industry by offering three valuable insights to tourism professionals. First, tour managers and those involved in tourism experience design for groups of children can benefit from the findings to design fun tour itineraries for young tourists. By incorporating suitable forms of humour, they can ensure that tours cater to the dynamics of groups, fostering shared enjoyment and interaction. Second, tour guides can apply humour in their interpretations in tailored ways to engage both groups and individual children. The humour-driven strategies to co-create interpretation can provide tour guides with ideas on how and where to use humour, whether to engage an entire group of children through wildlife comedic interpretation or connect with individual children based on the humour-harmony bond. Finally, educational experts and attraction site managers can also benefit from this study to develop educational programmes for children. Children enjoy the euphoria of engaging in activities, as they like to stay active and play (Carr, 2011). This study suggests that humour can contribute to engaging tours for children and support the educational goals of interpretation, while requiring careful consideration of children's age, context, and appropriate boundaries.

Conclusion

Based on an analysis of 30 interviews with Iranian tour guides and tour managers, this study argues that

children are important co-creators of their experience during on-site tourism interpretation. This research extends the tourism-humour literature by adding to the body of knowledge on the perceived outcomes of humour for children's learning. The authors argue that children actively engage in laughter-generated activities with tour guides to construct their own knowledge. As one of the first studies to address this research gap, it suggests that humour plays a key role in facilitating children's learning by engaging them cognitively, affectively, and behaviourally. The findings add value to the previous literature on tourism and humour (Pabel & Pearce, 2016; Pearce, 2009) by stating that children's cognitive experience with humour extends beyond mere concentration. The study also contributes by outlining four humour-driven strategies to create participative tourism interpretation for children.

The study encompasses several limitations. First, humour is a culturally specific phenomenon. This study and its findings have been developed based on Iranian tour guides' and managers' perspectives; therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to all contexts. Second, the findings on humour outcomes for children are only based on the industry practitioners' perspective. Therefore, future studies should involve children to verify whether humour contributes to their learning in tourism settings.

Disclosure statement

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