

RESEARCH NOTE OPEN ACCESS

Where Are the Children in Tourism Empirical Research?

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ABSTRACT

This research note offers an updated review of Poria and Timothy's (2014) call to better integrate children into tourism research. It critically examines the empirical literature on children in tourism, focusing on how children are represented, studied, and valued within the field. The review identifies two key dimensions: first, research addressing children's tourism experiences, especially those related to cultural and educational activities; second, studies exploring the economic, political, and social impacts of tourism on children. Based on these insights, the note proposes a future research agenda. More broadly, it argues that research on children in tourism contributes to a wider movement, positioning tourism as a space for justice, voice, and inclusion.

1 | Introduction

When Poria and Timothy (2014) wrote their research note entitled "Where are the children in tourism research" a decade ago, children as a cohort were "absent from the academic discourse" (Poria and Timothy 2014, 93). Within a decade, academic research has moved from one extreme, with research on children being quasi non-existent since the voice of children was not considered that important (Cullingford 1995), to a considerable increase in research in tourism focusing on children, who are now viewed as central to academic research (Canosa et al. 2019). Empirical studies, rather than theoretical ones, have significantly increased. This rise occurs despite the ethical precautions necessary, such as obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and protecting the welfare of child participants, which are crucial to uphold in research involving children (Canosa and Graham 2016).

This research note thus critically discusses the current state of empirical academic literature on children in tourism, with a focus on the "why" and "how" of this research. The paper first highlights the discursive formation around children in tourism and the connectors between children and the tourism industry. It examines how children's roles and experiences within tourism

are now acknowledged as pivotal, influencing family travel decisions, marketing strategies, and destination development. Second, the research note points out the benefits of conducting research focusing on children as participants, emphasizing on the unique insights they offer into their own experiences and the broader impacts on their development and well-being. Finally, the research note highlights a gap in literature, identifying areas where further research is needed to fully understand and support children's engagement with tourism. This includes ethical considerations, methodological challenges, and the implications of cultural and social contexts on research outcomes.

From a theoretical perspective, this research is timely and necessary to map the current state of academic inquiry on children in tourism. As Viglia et al. (2024) argue, one reason for stagnation in certain areas of tourism research—including research on specific groups such as children and youth—is the absence of a coherent methodological foundation. This fragmentation undermines both the reliability and the specificity of findings. By providing a systematic overview of empirical studies in the field, this study contributes to the consolidation and methodological maturation of this body of knowledge. From a managerial standpoint, the findings are meaningful for practitioners—especially Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) seeking

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to engage more effectively with the children's market. Despite children's growing influence on travel decisions, their specific needs and expectations remain poorly understood (S raphin and Grande 2024). This limited understanding hampers the development of tailored experiences and products that could serve as a competitive advantage. The same gap is observed across other sectors of the tourism industry, including indoor and outdoor hospitality (Grande and S raphin 2025; Lahouel and Montargot 2020).

By taking stock of a decade of empirical studies on children in tourism, this research note not only helps consolidate a fragmented field but also reframes children as active stakeholders whose perspectives can drive both theoretical innovation and more inclusive tourism practices. This shift has important implications for researchers, policymakers, and tourism professionals seeking to build more just, responsive, and sustainable tourism systems.

2 | Methodology

To assess the role of children in the empirical literature in tourism, a lexicometric analysis was conducted. In the context of a systematic literature review, such an analysis helps identify key terms and recurring concepts in the examined articles. It provides a structured and in-depth method for synthesizing and interpreting existing knowledge in a specific field (Illia et al. 2014).

Data collection was carried out in three stages. First, we searched Google Scholar for all articles that dealt with tourism and had the keywords "children," "child," "kids," or "adolescents." We selected Google Scholar as our primary database because it is recognized as the most comprehensive source of academic literature across disciplines. A recent comparative study by Gerasimov et al. (2024), which analyzed over 17,000 scholarly records across five major bibliographic sources (Google Scholar, Web of Science, Scopus, Crossref, and DataCite), found that Google Scholar outperformed the others in terms of coverage. Given the interdisciplinary and emerging nature of research on children in tourism, such comprehensiveness was especially important to avoid omitting relevant contributions. Consistent with the principles of systematic literature reviews, we excluded book chapters and conference proceedings, focusing solely on English-language articles. Second, we reviewed all articles to retain only those adopting an empirical perspective, resulting in 67 articles. Third, we retrieved the abstracts of these articles.

For analysis, each article was initially coded based on several criteria: the empirical approach employed (qualitative versus quantitative), the demographic profile of the participants (children, adolescents, young adults, adults), the nationality of the participants, and the sample size. Then, using the Iramuteq software, an interface for qualitative analysis of textual data leveraging the statistical processing power of R, we analyzed all collected abstracts to reveal underlying meanings. Specifically, three analyses were conducted: (1) a similarity analysis to unveil word interdependence, (2) a descending hierarchical classification to identify main lexical worlds or semantic universes, and (3) a factorial correspondence analysis to understand interactions between lexical worlds.

3 | The Current State of Children in Tourism Empirical Research

3.1 | An Overview

Initial descriptive analyses already provide very interesting information (Table 1). In terms of methodology, 37% of studies use a qualitative method, while 63% adopt a quantitative approach. The populations surveyed vary: 39% of studies focus on children, 30% on adolescents, and 32% on adults, with some articles including multiple groups. Geographically, the research is distributed as follows: 39% in Europe, 8% in North America, 44% in Asia, and 9% in Oceania. No articles were conducted in South America or Africa. These data highlight a predominance of quantitative methods and a strong representation of Asian and European studies.

In addition, Figure 1 presents the main journals that have published research on children in tourism, offering insight into where this emerging body of work is being disseminated.

3.2 | Discursive Formation Around Children in Tourism

The rhetoric, arguments, and metaphors shaping the perception and understanding of a particular group are often referred to as a discursive formation (O'Regan et al. 2022). In tourism studies, children have long been peripheral actors in both academic inquiry and industry practice. However, recent literature

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics.

Category	Detail
Methodology	
Qualitative	37%
Quantitative	63%
Surveyed population	
Children	39%
Adolescents	30%
Adults	32%
Average sample size	
Qualitative research	From 14 interviews to 900 informal discussions
Quantitative research	From 25 to 8718
Continent of study	
Europe	39%
North America	8%
South America	0%
Asia	44%
Africa	0%
Oceania	9%

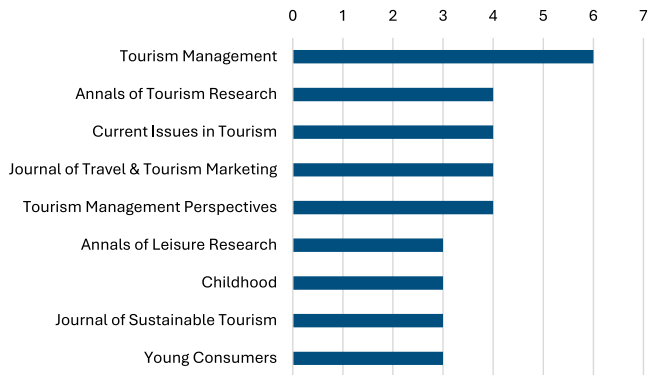


FIGURE 1 | Main journals publishing empirical research on children in tourism.

reflects an evolving discursive shift, where children are no longer viewed merely as passive subjects accompanying adults, but as active stakeholders in tourism—both as consumers and as individuals impacted by tourism-related dynamics (Poria and Timothy 2014; Koščak et al. 2023; Kwong 2024). This discursive formation appears to operate along three main dimensions.

First, children are increasingly recognized as agents within tourism, particularly as consumers and co-decision-makers. Research shows that children influence family travel choices regarding destinations and activities (Xu and Kahl 2018), making them central to the decision-making unit. Additionally, tourism is increasingly depicted as having positive developmental impacts on children—enhancing well-being, intercultural awareness, and learning, particularly through school trips,

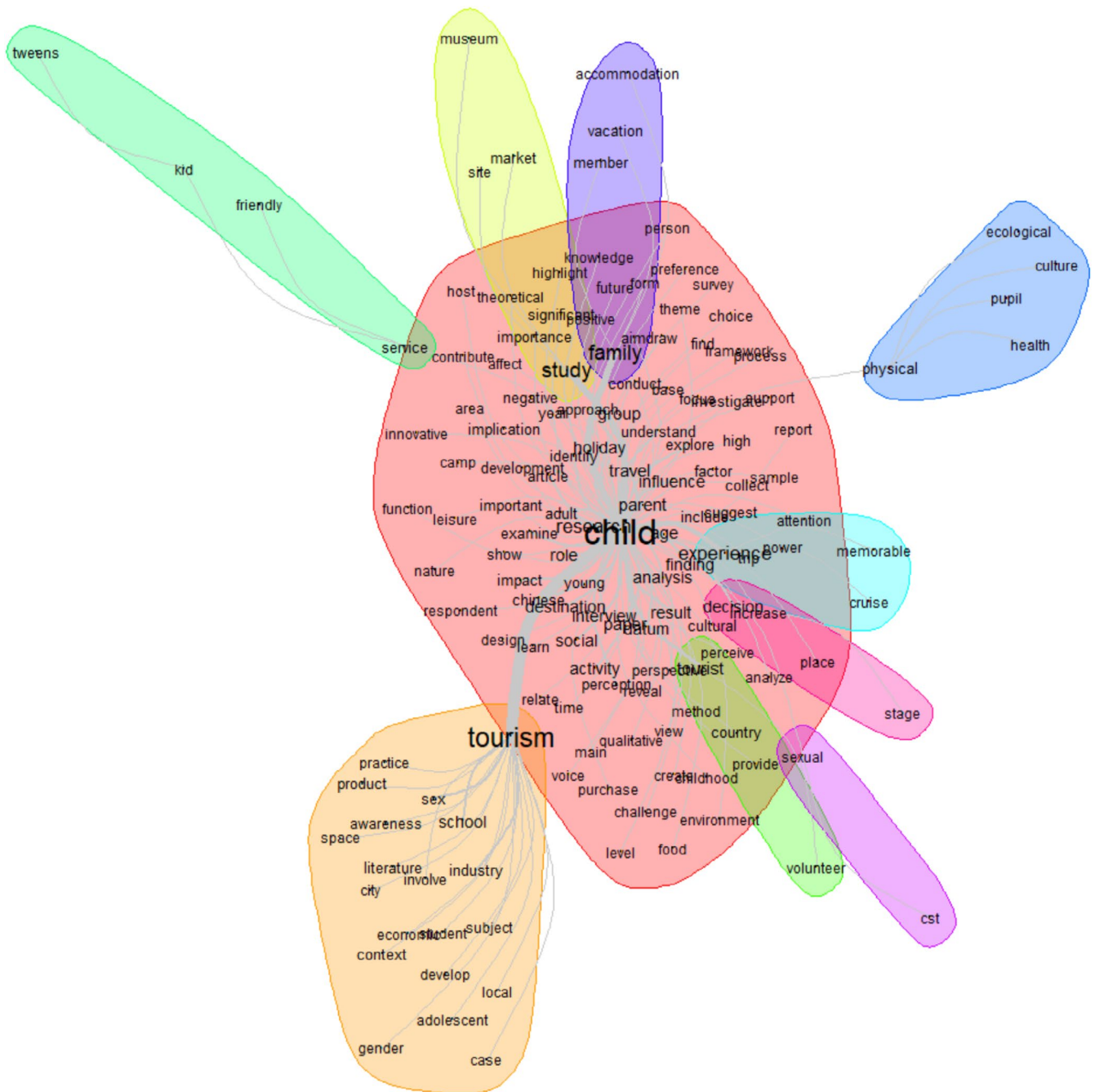


FIGURE 2 | Discursive formation around children and tourism.

volunteering experiences, and family holidays (Cripps 2022). In these contexts, families and schools are repeatedly identified as the primary mediators linking children with tourism systems (Canosa et al. 2019). However, the discursive formation also acknowledges negative framings, especially where tourism intersects with child vulnerability, including child labor and sexual exploitation (Wen et al. 2020). These darker aspects of tourism reveal how children are also constructed as victims, calling for stronger ethical safeguards and child protection frameworks.

Second, a growing number of studies emphasize children as future stewards of sustainable tourism, focusing on their environmental attitudes, ecological behavior, and early sensitization to nature and cultural heritage (Mandić et al. 2023). In this framing, children are not only consumers or dependents but also proactive actors in long-term sustainability. This strand of literature positions tourism as a pedagogical space, where children's values, behaviors, and perceptions are shaped in ways that will influence the industry's future (Séraphin and Chaney 2023).

Third, an important, though less examined, dimension of discursive formation lies in how childhood is spatialized in tourism environments. Certain spaces are constructed as more appropriate or legitimate for children. Drawing on Francis and Lorenzo's (2002) typology, child-friendly tourism spaces can include institutional spaces (e.g., theme parks, sport centers), public spaces (e.g., beaches, parks), "found" or natural spaces (e.g., urban wilderness, waterfronts, forests) and innovative spaces (e.g., city farms, town trails). These environments are often framed as safe, educational, or play-oriented, reflecting adult-driven discourses of what constitutes "appropriate" child experience in tourism (Holloway and Valentine 2004). However, such framing also risks limiting

children's agency by reinforcing normative expectations of passive, protected, or consumerist childhood.

In sum, the discursive formation around children in tourism (Figure 2) is marked by tensions between agency and vulnerability, and between inclusion and protection. A more critical engagement with these narratives is essential if the field is to move toward a truly child-inclusive tourism research agenda.

3.3 | What Is Existing Empirical Research Telling Us

A hierarchical classification reveals five distinct classes (Figure 3). The analysis was based on the Reinert method, with a chi-square threshold of 40 ($\chi^2 \geq 40$) used to determine the most characteristic words within each class. This ensures that only terms significantly associated with each lexical world are retained in the interpretation. Class 4 (representing 23.26% of the corpus) encompasses research focused on personal experiences and cultural impacts. It explores how children learn and participate in local activities, with an emphasis on cultural effects, including specific contexts such as Chinese culture. Equivalent in size to Class 4, Class 5 includes studies that address the theme of children from a leisure perspective. It focuses on recreational and play activities, while analyzing gender differences and discussing theoretical implications and analytical perspectives in this area. Class 3 (20.93% of the corpus) consolidates research on the role of parents in decision-making. It describes how parents influence tourism choices and purchases, considering various information and factors, and examining how children also participate in this process. Class 1 (16.28% of the corpus) examines the extent to which the literature has addressed

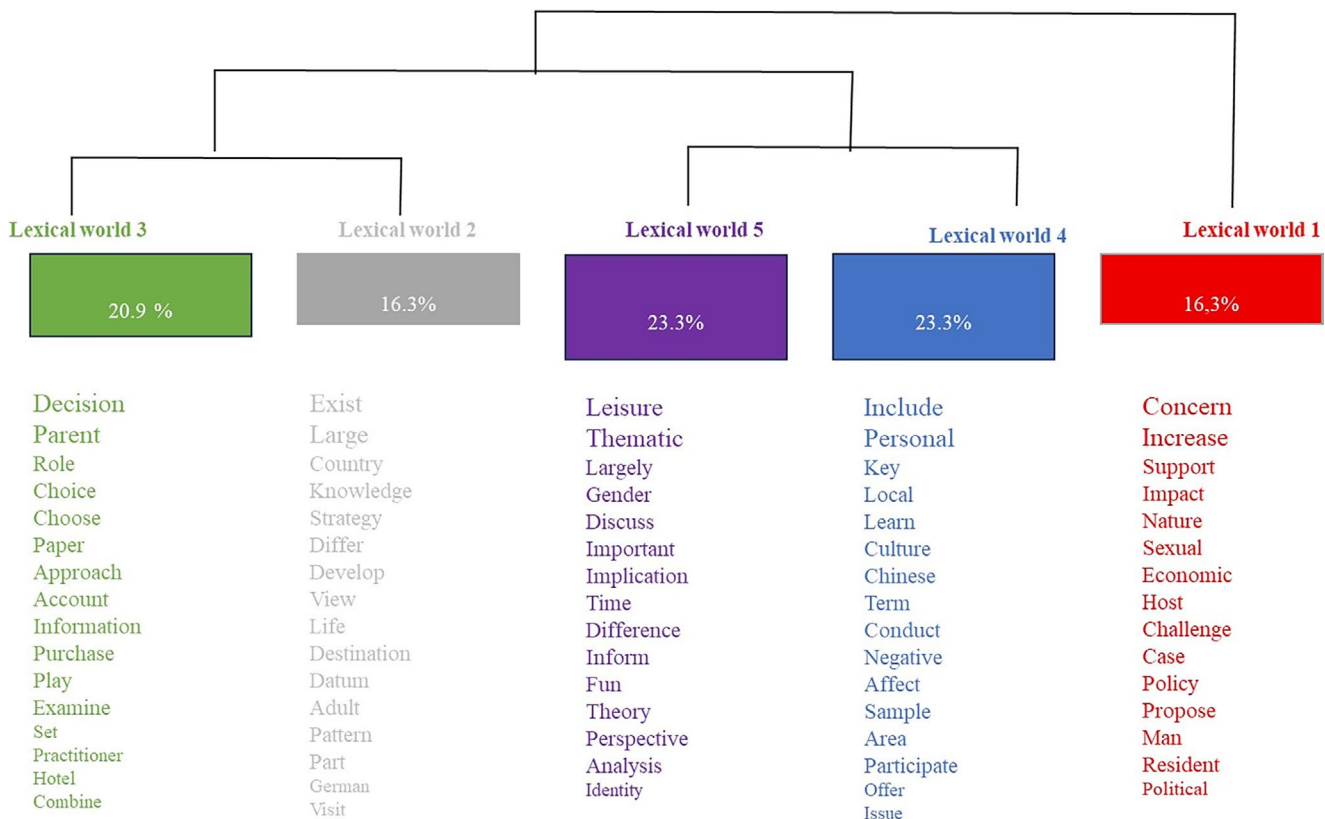


FIGURE 3 | Classes of research on children in tourism.

national contexts and development strategies. This class compares tourism development practices and approaches in different countries, considering existing knowledge and analyzing the impacts on the lives of children and adults in various destinations. Finally, Class 2 deals with social problems and the impacts of tourism. It explores economic and sexual concerns, challenges for host communities, and policies implemented to support and protect children from the negative effects of tourism.

3.4 | How Empirical Research Is Structured

Principal Component Analysis reveals two main dimensions of empirical research on children in tourism (Figure 4). The first dimension (Factor 1), represented on the vertical axis, explains 32.31% of the total variance and focuses on children's tourism experiences, particularly in cultural and/or educational contexts. It encompasses terms related to learning, education, leisure, entertainment, and personal development. The second dimension (Factor 2), shown on the horizontal axis and accounting for 26.52% of the variance, highlights the economic, political, and social impacts of tourism on children, including more problematic aspects such as those associated with child labor and sex tourism. Together,

the two dimensions explain 58.83% of the total variance, suggesting a robust structure. No rotation method was applied to the PCA, as it was used for exploration and visual purposes in accordance with standard procedures in textual data analysis. The clear opposition between the two axes highlights a key tension in literature: between understanding children as active agents in tourism and addressing their vulnerabilities in the face of broader systemic issues.

4 | Discussion and Conclusion

Because research impacts society (Jafari and McCabe 2024), it is legitimate to question whether this change of attitude toward research in tourism involving children is about advancing our understanding of the tourism industry and its stakeholders, or if we have gone too far in terms of the volume of publications focusing on children, especially concerning the long-term sustainability of the tourism industry. Conducting this type of research should not be based on the idea of transferring the responsibility of sustainability entirely to children or even sharing it with them.

Instead, future research on children in tourism should be organized around three key thematic directions. First, scholars should

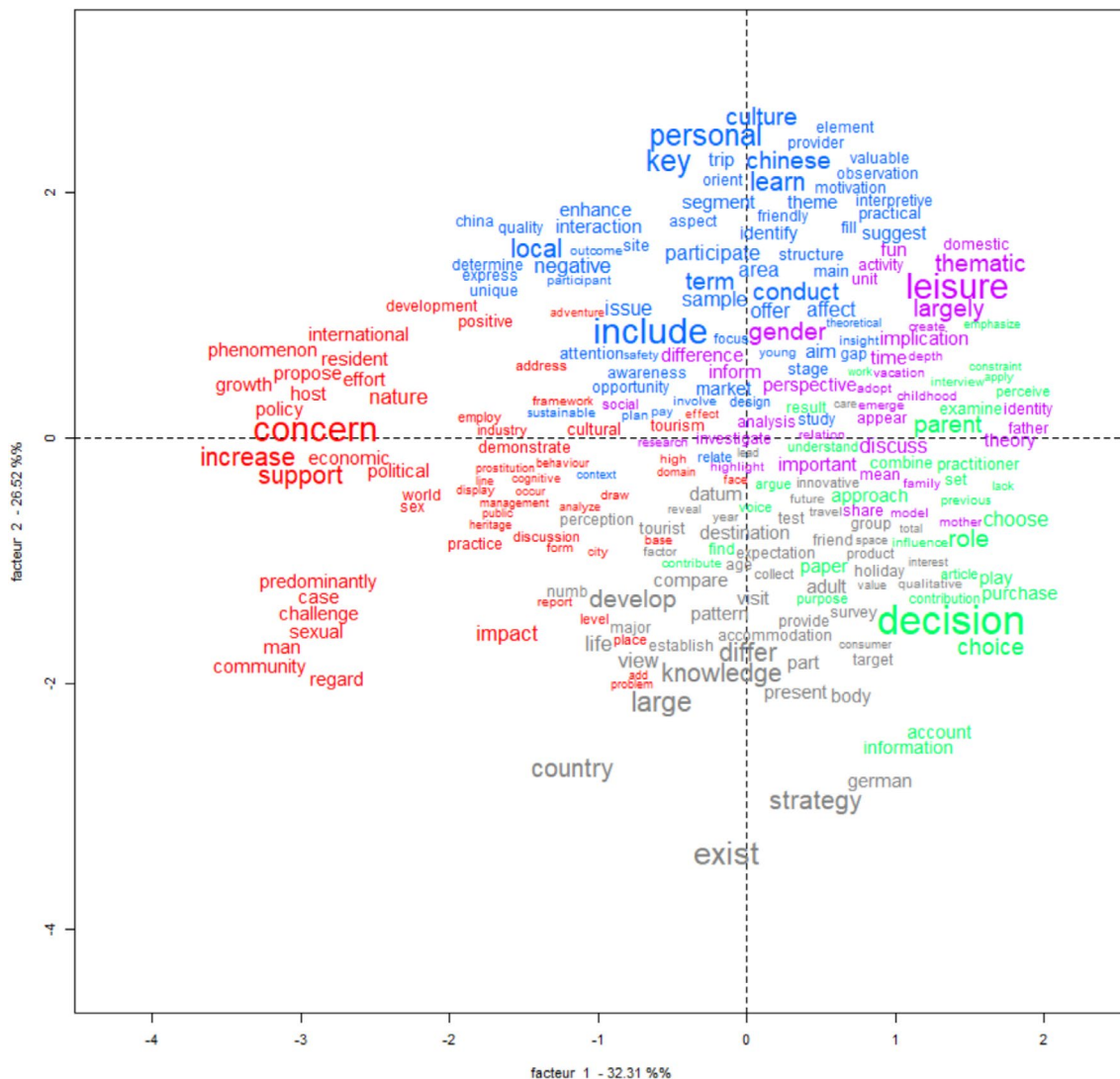


FIGURE 4 | The structure of empirical research on children.

address the significant geographical and methodological imbalances identified in the current literature. It would be particularly valuable to explore populations from underrepresented regions such as South America and Africa, where children's tourism experiences remain largely undocumented. Additionally, there is a need for more mixed-methods research that combines the depth of qualitative approaches with the generalizability of quantitative ones—a methodological gap consistently noted in the existing body of work. Finally, cross-cultural comparisons of children's tourism experiences are scarce, despite their potential to reveal how cultural and social contexts shape children's perceptions, agency, and outcomes within tourism. Second, scholars should investigate how children are positioned within the tourism industry. That is, what role do they play and how central are they perceived to be? Existing research tends to remain vague, often simply asserting that children's voices should be heard (Koščak et al. 2023; Kwong 2024), while still portraying them as seen but not heard (Stone 2022). Third, more attention should be paid to the decision-making process surrounding tourism products and services designed for children. Because the industry still has a limited understanding of this segment, offerings often fail to align with their actual needs (Grande and Séraphin 2025; Lahouel and Montargot 2020). Fourth, future studies should explore the long-term impact of childhood tourism experiences on adulthood. Building on the concept of the “adult inner child,” Séraphin and Chaney (2025) show how early holiday memories shape adult perceptions and emotional needs. Understanding how family holidays influence adult well-being and potentially support personal healing processes opens promising avenues for further inquiry.

A decade later, this study responds to Poria and Timothy (2014) by providing an updated version of their research. To summarize, academics have now adopted the view that children are the best informants about themselves. They have also embraced the perspective that children's voices ought to be heard, as this contributes to the advancement of knowledge and makes the study of tourism more inclusive. This research note clarifies where the field currently stands, what remains underexplored, and how future studies can meaningfully advance both theory and practice. By offering a critical synthesis of the literature and identifying concrete directions for research, it provides scholars with a clearer agenda and supports practitioners—such as DMOs—in better understanding and serving young tourists. More broadly, research on children in tourism can be seen as part of a wider agenda that positions tourism not merely as leisure, but as a vehicle for justice, voice, and inclusion (Orea-Giner 2025).

Author Contributions

Hugues Seraphin: conceptualization, writing – original draft, reviewing and editing. **Damien Chaney:** methodology, software, data curation, reviewing and editing.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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