Young Children's Vacation Experience: Through the Eyes of Parents

Abstract: The travel industry has witnessed remarkable development of the children's market in recent decades; however, relevant academic research remains scarce, especially with younger children. By adopting a netnographic approach, this study explores young children's (0–4 years old) holiday experiences through the eyes of their parents. Research findings revealed parents' preferred types of destinations for family vacations. Two broad themes were identified from analyses of parents' accounts: enjoyment of nature and social development. Findings are discussed in the context of relevant literature, and industry recommendations are provided.

Key Words: Holiday Experience, Young Children, Netnography

1. Introduction

Families have been identified as playing an important role in the success of the tourism market (Carr, 2011; Shaw, Havitz, & Delemere, 2008). Aderhold (2003, cited from Gram, 2005) claimed that families, particularly those with children, generally take a vacation at least once a year even if holidays are not considered a necessity. According to the US Family Travel Association (2018), about 79% of respondents plan to travel with their children in the coming year. The value of children has been increasingly recognized by the tourism industry, and children have emerged as a major target audience in the family market (Kang, Hsu, & Wolfe, 2003). For example, Club Med has started offering Children's Clubs for kids of different age groups, providing chances for children to indulge their curiosity and meet new playmates (Club Med, 2015).

Similarly, tourism researchers have come to acknowledge the importance of children in the decision-making process around family vacations (Carr, 2011; Gram, 2007; Shoham & Dalakas, 2005; Kang et al., 2003; Thornton, Shaw, & Williams, 1997; Beatty & Talpade, 1994; Darley & Lim, 1986). Children have been found to exert certain influences on their parents in terms of travel planning, vacation patterns, purchase decisions, and travel activities (Carr, 2011; Kang et al., 2003; Cullingford, 1995). In addition to indirect influences, children also have their own preferences and desires when traveling (Gaines, Hubbard, Witte, & O'Neill, 2004; Cullingford, 1995). Yesawich's survey (2007) reported that nearly three-quarters of children expressed a desire to participate in activities in which they were exclusively interested while on holiday.

In addition, though children have little buying power in the current market, several studies have clarified their extent of influence over their parents during family trips (Khoo-Lattimore, delChiappa, & Yang, 2018; Yung & Khoo-Lattimore, 2018; Carr, 2011; Lehto, Choi, Lin, & MacDermid, 2009; Shoham & Dalakas, 2005; Thornton et al., 1997). From a tourism industry perspective, an understanding of parents' preferences for family travel destinations provides tourism promoters valuable opportunities to develop an appropriate family-friendly image, which can further enhance tourism development in a given area. To attract the family market, tourism practitioners should seek to better understand family members' preferences and desires, particularly those of younger members. Parents are placing more importance on entertaining their kids as well as relieving themselves from everyday care during holidays; accordingly, studies of family tourism with children would be helpful to academia and industry. However, tourism professionals have only recently begun to not the paucity of knowledge around child tourism, particularly in terms of younger markets' travel needs, experiences, and preferences (Poria &

Timothy, 2014; Carr, 2011; Small, 2008).

The dearth of academic research concerning children's holiday experiences is presumably due to several factors. First, children are mostly marginalized due to their subordinate position in societies (Corsaro, 2015) and therefore largely considered passive participants during family vacations; that is, their experiences are merely one component of their parents' enjoyment (Carr, 2006). According to Poria and Timothy (2014), no conceptualization exists of children's tourism behavior in the current body of literature, making it difficult for researchers to contextualize children's experiences. To implement studies on children's travel, tourism scholars must become familiar with child psychology and developmental theory (Poria & Timothy, 2014). This view is supported by Carr (2011) and Nickerson and Jurowski (2001), who pointed out that children are not a homogeneous group in the midst of different developmental stages; rather, their activities and behaviors should be studied relative to their ages and cognitive abilities in tourism contexts.

Although children's travel in academia has been under-researched for reasons discussed previously, some scholars contend that children are active agents in society and should be examined independently from adults in tourism studies (Khoo-Lattimore, Prayag, & Cheah, 2015; Carr, 2011; Shaw et al., 2008; Nanda, Hu, & Bai, 2007; Bakir, Rose, & Shoham, 2006; Thornton et al., 1997; Howard & Madrigal, 1990; Darley & Lim, 1986). Some work has explored children's travel experiences, motivations, and desires in the contexts of early childhood (ages 7–11) and adolescence (ages 12–17) (Carr, 2006; Cullingford, 1995). However, younger children have been largely disregarded in tourism research. A potential explanation is that young children cannot consciously express their desires and perceptions given underdeveloped cognitive abilities (Carr, 2011; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). On the other hand, scholars may encounter obstacles to working directly with children, such as ethical concerns requiring permission from multiple parties prior to undertaking a study (Poria & Timothy, 2014).

In contrast to the tourism literature, researchers in other fields (e.g., developmental psychology, sociology of childhood, or children's geography) recognize the value of early childhood, which is believed to establish the fundamentals of literacy along with cognitive and social functioning (Appleton et al., 2000). As tourism is deemed to play an important role in children's development (Carr, 2011; Wu, 2011), young children should not be marginalized in terms of their travel experiences. Consequently, the objective of this paper is to understand young children's vacation experiences by assessing the nature of the destination, what children do, and how they behave during travel following the methodological procedure of netnography. Piaget's developmental theory is applied to identify children's stages of development.

2. Children's Travel

It is widely acknowledged that tourism plays an important educational role in individuals' development by broadening their horizons (LaTorre, 2011; Steves, 2009) and serving as a platform for formal and informal learning (Minnaert, 2012; Scarinci & Pearce, 2012; Jackson, 2012; Morgan, 2010). Travel exposes people to diverse cultures and sights, effectively emphasizing learning (Falk, Ballantyne, Packer, & Benckendorff, 2012). According to Stone and Petrick (2013), the benefits of tourism vary among age groups. For adults and seniors, advantages generally pertain to self-development (Scarinci & Pearce, 2012; Alexander, Bakir, & Wickens, 2010) and learning new things (Inkson & Myers, 2003). For youth, travel can enrich school-based learning

by contextualizing the formal learning environment (Bos, McCabe, & Johnson, 2015). Beyond the classroom, travel also presents youth with modes of learning including personal development, professional growth, and intercultural awareness (Falk & Dierking, 2010; Falk, Storksdieck, & Dierking, 2007). International travel has been found to contribute to teenagers' general skills (Scarinci & Pearce, 2012; Coetzee & Bester, 2009). Among children, tourism offers activities for optional learning and knowledge development (Falk et al., 2012). Byrnes (2001) suggested that tourism can expand children's visual field and help them cultivate social skills, such as patience and flexibility. The benefits of tourism for children are closely tied to family travel because their parents recognize the educational implications of traveling (Stone & Petrick, 2013).

Wu and Wall (2016) suggested that travel experiences vary within families because different generations of family members possess unique characteristics and educational backgrounds. Scholars have investigated disparities in vacation experiences among children and parents. For example, Schänzel and Smith (2014) indicated that children expect socially interactive and entertaining experiences at tourism attractions. Therkelsen and Lottrup (2015) found that recreational experiences and sensory activities are more memorable for children. Similarly, Kozak (2016) highlighted that children often prefer engaging facilities rather than cultural attractions such as museums. Parents tend to be more concerned about educational outcomes and the formation of a social identity while traveling (Therkelsen & Lottrup, 2015; Schänzel & Smith, 2014). They also generally favor cultural and historical destinations (Carr, 2006). Carr (2011) argued that individual family members' vacation experiences, especially children's, deserve more attention from researchers.

The tourism industry has acknowledged the lack of studies examining children's travel preferences and attitudes (Poria & Timothy, 2014; Carr, 2011; Nickerson & Jurowski, 2001). Indeed, childhood is an important period during which every human experiences substantial growth. Children's cognitive competence and social development are constantly changing in childhood (Harris & Butterworth, 2002), suggesting their holiday perceptions and desires should be surveyed in various ways based on children's developmental stages. Childhood holiday experiences should also be examined across different age groups (Carr, 2011).

According to Piaget's (1999) developmental theory, children under 2 years old are at the sensorimotor stage and feel the world mainly through sensory experience and moving activities. However, children in this stage start to socialize as consumers by indirectly expressing their wishes, preferences, and desires (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001). Preschool children, between 2–7 years old, are in the preoperational stage and are considered to have limited cognitive capacity; therefore, young children tend to be logically inconsistent and have difficulty explaining cause and effect (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Children in the preoperational stage can process information involving symbols and pictures and begin to participate in imaginative play. They are easily attracted by loud music and bright colors (Šramová, 2014), which enables others to observe their responses to different types of stimulation (Lemish, 2007).

Carr (2011) noted that preschool children may not have unique motivations or desires around tourism activities. However, they can still influence family vacations simply through their presence, regardless of their limited cognitive capabilities and language skills. Short journeys are recommended for preschool-aged children, as they become bored easily. In addition, safety should

be a top priority (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007).

Piaget (1970) framed the period from age 7 to the beginning of adolescence as a stage of intellectual development in which children establish major logical operations. They are aware of their surroundings and learn to reason verbally. Cullingford (1995) enriched child-centered tourism research with specific references to children's holiday experiences and perceptions. He mentioned that children have strong preferences about different travel modes and destinations (Cullingford, 1995); hence, understanding their needs and attitudes is important for industry marketers and practitioners. From a parental perspective, given that education and experience play central roles in children's cognitive abilities during middle childhood (Harris & Butterworth, 2002), knowing what one's children truly want will help to ensure a positive vacation experience for the entire family.

Children in this developmental stage also tend to be more interested in things that are familiar (Blichfeldt, 2007). Cullingford (1995) found that children between ages 7 and 11 preferred to stay at well-developed hotels and resorts with an array of entertainment options rather than explore new and adventurous locales such as tropical rainforests. Simple play areas, such as beaches, swimming pools, and parks, are especially appealing to them (Carr, 2011; Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). Furthermore, family togetherness has been identified as another part of children's ideal holiday experience (Wu, Wall, Zu, & Ying, 2019; Therkelsen & Lottrup, 2015), suggesting that primary-school children remain attached to familiar people or activities. Therefore, the optimal choice for young school-aged children on holiday may be a destination that offers amenities similar to those available at home.

However, these findings do not necessarily imply that children are not able to recognize or become interested in changes to their routine while on holiday. On the contrary, children have shown great curiosity about cultural differences between destinations and their place of residence, the nuances of which can shape their perceptions of the world (Cullingford, 1995). Primary-school children were found to expect mysterious and complex experiences, especially in city destinations (Croce, Elmi, Fioretti, & Smorti, 2018). Furthermore, children may express a desire to escape from daily life due to the increasingly heavy burden of homework and structured school activities (Carr, 2011; Cullingford, 1995). They expect freedom to play and to make friends (Rhoden, Hunter-Jones, & Miller, 2016). Radic (2017) also mentioned that children consider co-creational experiences to be memorable, such as those constructed through interactions with their parents or other people. These studies indicate that children prefer to participate actively in travel activities. Interestingly, children like to shop by themselves during trips even though the prices are not accessible to them (Cullingford, 1995). Similarly, the interaction between staff and children is important in children's holiday experiences (Khoo-Lattimore & Yang, 2018; Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2015; Nickerson & Jurowski, 2001). Primary-school children have mentioned other relevant factors, such as friendly people, good food, and nice weather, when describing their ideal destinations (Cullingford, 1995).

When children enter adolescence (between 12 and 17 years old), they possess stronger logical thinking and scientific reasoning and are considered to be in an early stage of adulthood (Coleman & Hendry, 1989). Therefore, tourism researchers believe adolescents begin to build their own motivations and expectations about traveling (Decrop, 2005). In line with this notion, the UK's

largest independent tourism operator, Cosmos, decided to listen to adolescents regarding their motivations and desires for packaged tours (Addley, 2000). Erikson (1968) proposed that children struggle to establish their own coherent identity and reject identity diffusion, which may explain why most teens who participated in Cosmos's club confessed that they disliked the required "T-shirt uniform" and "controlled groups."

Given adolescents' desire to be treated like adults, grown-up leisure and tourism activities appear highly enticing to them (Small, 2008). Furthermore, adolescents reportedly seek more independence and freedom from their parents during holidays (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). These findings are supported by Cosmos's study, which revealed that teenagers would prefer to select packaged activities on their own and to have their own bedroom keys (Addley, 2000). However, adolescents still appreciate the holiday experience with their parents despite their eagerness to become autonomous. Unlike children in general, adolescents who are motivated by a desire to relax and shed their responsibilities are most likely to take journeys (Carr, 2011). Adolescents also gravitate towards beaches, parties, and physical activities while vacationing (Carr, 2006). Cosmos listed teenagers' top activities as being water-based, including swimming pools, water polo, and banana boats (Addley, 2000). These pleasure-oriented activities are somewhat similar to those of primary-school children, although unlike children younger than 12, adolescents also prefer to explore new places and things (Carr, 2011). Carr (2006) also pointed out conflicts in holiday desires between adolescents and their parents. While some parents consider a fully developed resort where children can keep busy to be ideal, adolescents have made it clear that organized recreational time at hotels or resorts is not preferred (Carr, 2011; Addley, 2000).

Children's holiday motivations and desires are clearly unique during different developmental periods. Such distinctions can render the development and management of children's products challenging in a tourism context. Additionally, as more children are traveling with their families, attention should be given to the differences in their holiday preferences to create a pleasant experience for all family members, especially for multigenerational families. However, the good news for tourism marketers is that children tend to be more satisfied with a destination compared to their parents (Nickerson & Jurowski, 2001). As parents are largely influenced by their children in terms of where to go and what to do, targeting kids may facilitate the marketing of destinations to families. Children's travel motivations and preferences across age groups are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Children's tourism motivations and preferences.

	Motivation	Preferences
Preschool children (ages 2–5)	--	Short trips

Early school children (ages 6–11)	To play with children of a similar age To have fun To relax/escape	Beaches Swimming pools Adventure parks Entertainment Familiar things/environment Different culture Shopping Nice weather, food, and people
Adolescents (age 12–17)	To relax To get away from responsibilities To be independent To explore new things To play with friends	Water-based activities Beaches Adult-like activities Parties Nightclubs (non-alcoholic) Shopping

Nevertheless, the scarcity of tourism studies concerning children presents a major gap in the field. In addition to the ignorance of preschool-aged children (Carr, 2011) due to a series of research barriers including data collection (Nickerson & Jurowski, 2001), studies on children's tourism have largely been conducted through the lens of consumer behavior and focused on pre-trip behavioral aspects such as motivation, perception, preferences, and attitude; on-site experiences and interaction with the destination are lacking. The intended contributions of most research have been pragmatic and involved destination marketing and management, namely by incorporating children to deconstruct family decision-making. However, previous studies have argued that children are merely learning to become consumers and passively influence family travel, especially young children. The incorporation of children's roles in the pre-trip stage, though necessary and valuable, may therefore only offer conceptual and ambiguous contributions to the commercial world. Moreover, Small (2008) claimed that tourism studies involving children offer broader social value, thus highlighting the need to understand children's tourism from various perspectives.

3. Methodology

Informed by the philosophical assumptions of constructivism, a qualitative study following the methodological procedure of netnography was employed to elaborate on children's preferences and activities while traveling. The approach, originally formulated by Kozinets (2002), enables the researchers to access a rapidly growing group of participants from diverse backgrounds. It also facilitated representative sampling due to the decentralization and democratization of tourism information (Hannam, Butler, & Paris, 2014; Mkono & Markwell, 2014).

The growth of user-generated content (UGC) sites, through which tourists can discuss their holidays, provides an unprecedented opportunity to better understand tourists' experiences. According to the netnographic procedure outlined by Kozinets (2002), qualified online communities relevant to the research topic were identified in the first step. Due to the researchers' limited language capabilities, only narratives in Chinese and English were acquired and analyzed.

For narratives in Chinese, Mafengwo (www.mafengwo.cn), one of the largest Chinese travel UGC sites hosting detailed travel diaries, was chosen to collect Chinese UGC about travel experiences. With over 40 million registered users, Mafengwo has become China's largest UGC travel site. Users gather information, share their experiences, and post useful comments about their trips. Mafengwo offers over 21 million reviews of over 200 destinations worldwide (Mafengwo, 2018). The site sees approximately 3 million users daily, and each published note on the site is read roughly 12,000 times. For data collection in this study, *qinziyou* (translated as "traveling with children") and *ertonglvyou* (translated as "child tourism") were used in keyword searches to identify qualified travel blogs published after 2010. Purposive sampling was used in accordance with the research purpose. Fifty posts by 39 members, consisting primarily of narratives with few pictures, were selected as data sources.

Mafengwo was chosen over other major online travel agents/platforms (e.g., Ctrip or Fliggy) because the other sites often contain trip-related Q&A. Similarly, travel blogs, rather than websites such as TripAdvisor or Expedia, were chosen as English-language information sources when investigating children's travel experiences. To gather narratives in English, the keywords *traveling/vacation with kids/children/baby* and *blog* were searched on Google.com; the first 20 entries appearing after each search were reviewed. Considering the study objectives, blogs from parents with children older than 4 were excluded. Thirteen online travel blogs were ultimately selected, appearing on lists of the Top 25 Travel Blogs on Circle of Moms (www.circleofmoms.com) and the Best Family Travel Blogs on Red Tricycle (redtri.com). Fifty-seven posts published on these five travel blogs after 2010 were selected.

Mafengwo and the travel blogs both met the criteria of being well-visited, substantial, data-rich, and interactive. Data collection was performed from November 2014 to October 2018. NVivo 10 was utilized to organize data and facilitate textual analysis. Blogger profiles are listed in Table 2. Among the 52 bloggers, only 5 were fathers; mothers appeared to devote more effort to documenting and sharing family vacation experiences.

Table 2. Blogger profiles.

	Blogs	Bloggers	Mothers	Fathers	Child's gender		Child's age when traveling	
					Girls	Boys	Youngest	Oldest
Chinese	50	39	36	3	17	22	13 months	4 years
International	57	13	11	2	6	12	2 months	4 years

The rich textual information collected via netnography was used as a proxy for experience (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Following the tradition of grounded theory, textual data were analyzed through a three-stage coding process suggested by Glaser and Strauss (2011). Data analysis generally begins with a thorough reading of all texts to familiarize researchers with the data and to develop a holistic understanding of the topic of interest. The researchers began with a randomly selected narrative for open coding and proceeded to another random narrative upon completion. No prior categorization of the data was enforced. Salient information categories were identified through line-by-line reading, and categorical saturation was achieved with a constant comparative

approach. The researchers tried to use NVivo codes where applicable to ensure the reliability of data analysis. After a small set of categories was generated from the text, axial coding was carried out to formulate a smaller set of higher-level concepts based on underlying uniformities in the original set of categories or properties. Finally, selective coding was conducted when more abstract thematic patterns were identified, and the hierarchy was then finalized.

The process of reading and decoding was based on the original language of the texts. Some texts were translated from Chinese into English during the manuscript-writing process. Considering the inductive nature of this study, the strategy of triangulating analysts was employed: the first and second authors conducted data analysis independently to aid in creative generation of theory under conditions of ambiguity and flexibility (Glaser & Strauss, 2011). Codes and categories identified by the two researchers were constantly compared and discussed until a consensus was reached. Ultimately, 92% interpretive convergence was achieved, which is considered acceptable (Saldana, 2009). The trustworthiness of accounts was enhanced through a final product read by the third author as a peer debriefer (Cresswell, 2007). The overall trustworthiness of results was confirmed through constant comparison, multiple decoding rounds, a detailed description of the findings, and peer debriefing.

4. Young Children's Experiences with Tourism Destination
Selection and Type of Destination

The past three decades have witnessed increasing adult control and surveillance of children, especially pre-teenagers (Gill, 2008). Parents are taking primary responsibility for children on behalf of the wider community (Parton, 2006) and are therefore making key decisions, including around access to and use of space beyond the home. Analyses of narrative posts revealed how parents deliberately set a series of rules to select destinations and the types of spaces they perceived as appropriate for their children. A destination's distance from home, parents' knowledge and previous experiences, and destination facilities emerged as major considerations.

Distance from home was the most frequently mentioned rule. According to the chosen blog posts, the longest flight time cited was 6 hours, which a female blogger from the Middle East considered "an easy flight to manage with an excitable toddler and placid baby." For some parents who would not be flying, choosing a closer destination seemed more important. For example, a Chinese mother described her process of deciding to take her 1.5-year-old son to Dalian:

> "Since we were going to Jilin where my mother lived, we planned to have a vacation with our son nearby. The ideal place for us is somewhere we can watch the waves, enjoy the fish, and play games on the beach. It seemed quite easy, but we got hung up with selecting the right place. Qingdao had been the first choice. However, we had to give it up, as a 24-hour ride from Jilin would be too much for our little son. Finally we chose Dalian, which was only a 7-hour ride."

Adults who preferred traveling abroad suggested that a 1- to 2-hour flight was ideal, particularly for children under 2 or for those traveling for the first time. For example, one 17-month-old toddler had been to many domestic cities (e.g., Sanya, Xiamen, and Qingdao), none of which were more than a 2-hour flight from his hometown. According to a Chinese mother whose daughter was a frequent flyer, the first outbound journey she chose for her 18-month-old was to Jeju Island; the destination was only 1.5 hours away and was considered the best overseas destination for first-time baby travelers.

Parents' knowledge and previous experiences were similarly important. Some parents expressed loyalty to a particular destination; for example, one father was especially interested in Taiwan and explained his intentions to visit again with his family:

"Two years ago, my wife and I went to Taipei for the first time thanks to a more flexible individual travel scheme. The hospitality of local people impressed us a lot, and the 5-day trip was just too short for us. Now, we are eager to go there again with our 3-year-old daughter who will attend kindergarten soon this year."

Carr (2011) supported the notion that parents' prior favorable travel experiences could influence subsequent travel activities, noting that parents hope to provide their children with equally positive experiences. Even though adults may have been unsure of their travel decisions at first, they often prioritized pleasant memories, as mentioned in an American mother's blog regarding a trip in Disneyland with her 1.5-year-old son:

"We took Hudson to Disneyland for the very first time this past Sunday. I thought we would hold out until he was four or five–or at least asking to go–but I realized recently that I wanted the experience of seeing his reaction to it all, having not yet really been exposed to anything Disney. I grew up in Long Beach, just 12 miles from Disneyland, so it was a familiar (and fond) part of my childhood. And over the holidays, looking through old photo albums and seeing myself there as a toddler made me start thinking about how I was looking forward to being on the other side."

Freysinger (1994) reinforced that parents engage in certain travel activities with their children to recall enjoyable moments from their own childhood. A key reason parents may choose to visit a relatively familiar destination with their children is to reduce the time spent on travel planning. A familiar destination can also alleviate parents' concerns about exploring with a younger child:

"Given that this is the first time for our child to travel abroad, we decided to go to Taiwan again, as my husband and I have been there twice. We feel confident taking our daughter to such a familiar place."

A Chinese mother who had visited Phuket Island three times claimed that "travel guidelines were truly useless for her" even when traveling with her 1-year-old son. Similarly, a mother who had recently given birth explained why she and her husband chose Sanya as their first family trip destination:

"My husband and I have a deep connection to Sanya. We went to this city many times before getting married. We have stayed in many hotels and are quite familiar with the transport. There was no doubt to choose Sanya as our first travel destination with the baby. We hope the trip will go smoothly, so our familiarity with Sanya will be helpful."

Contemporary children encounter an increasing amount of structure, such that activities occur in formal, time-regulated spaces (Rasmussen & Smidt, 2003). This trend is exemplified by parents' attaching significance to destinations' facilities and services. Bloggers spoke highly of spatially well-organized destinations such as Singapore and Hong Kong, stating these places were "child-friendly". Researchers have found that parents prefer to take family vacations in spaces with clear boundaries such as resorts (Brey & Lehto, 2008) and hotels. Parents in the current study also spoke positively about hotels' and resorts' amenities and facilities. Microgeographical details, such as locations with infant rooms, high chairs, and elevators, were mentioned frequently:

"[Singapore's] public places are all equipped with infant rooms and elevators, which are really convenient for

families with babies. We don't need to fold and unfold the strollers repeatedly."

 "The hotel has a free indoor and outdoor playground for children. Our son spent two days at [the indoor playground]!"

Consequently, islands and urban cities with well-developed tourism industries were the most welcoming destinations. Forty-seven families recorded their children's experiences in urban cities. Although 27 bloggers described the hotels where they stayed, only 8 mentioned children's activities in so-called "kids' clubs" at the hotels. Sixteen families took their children to theme parks, the most popular of which was Disneyland.

Young Children's Experiences at the Destination

Two broad themes emerged from travel blog analysis: enjoyment of nature and social development. Given Piaget's assertion that children between 2 and 4 years old are self-centered and still developing the ability to reason, the authors were not surprised that interaction with nature constituted the most important travel experience. Scholars have discovered that a sensory experience is much more important than mere visual enjoyment for children during holidays (Gram, 2005). Indeed, parents in our study noted that their children were fond of playing in sand and water. As one mother explained, "Kids always enjoy spending an afternoon on a good beach, playing in the sand and paddling in the shallow warm water." As a result, islands and seaside destinations became the most welcoming locales for families in this study based on blog analysis. In fact, nearly every child had spent time on the beach according to parents' descriptions:

"My son has special preferences for the beach…"
"We had stayed at the seaside watching my daughter playing in the sand for half a day. However, she still insisted on staying on the beach when we decided to go to Ocean Park."

Although some children were afraid when encountering the sea for the first time, they soon fell in love with swimming with their parents' encouragement. Similarly, children who had been to the seaside before were extremely happy to return to the ocean again. As a mother of two young boys said,

"We came to the beach on the very first day since it was quite close to our hotel. The older brother enjoyed himself as soon as he arrived at the beach. This was the fifth time he had seen the blue water, so he was happy. However, the younger boy was terrified and wept. He couldn't even walk on the beach. My husband carried him to the end of the boardwalk and let him touch the water. He finally fell in love with the sea after a while."

Even when families did not stay at an island for holidays, water games such as swimming or cruising were still their preferred activities and appeared to delight their children. One mother described her family's cruise experience and her 1-year-old son's behavior on the boat:

"Our 3 days cruising with Indochina Sails around the beautiful Halong Bay were perfect—a memorable experience and a definite highlight of the trip. [Our son] Luca loved every minute of it and joined in every activity—from captaining the ship, to jumping off the boat for a swim, to owl-spotting in caves and even kayaking. His energy never ceases to amaze [us]."

Younger children seemed to show a particular preference for swimming whether in a

swimming pool at a hotel or in the sea under their parents' watchful eye. For example, a mother described her young daughter as "crazy" when she discovered the hot tub in their resort room. For the next few days at the hotel, her daughter spent most of the time in the swimming pool. Another little boy even stayed in the public pool until he fell asleep.

Animals appeared to be another source of enjoyment for young children on holiday. When discussing animals in travel notes or blogs, parents often mentioned that their children were thrilled to touch them, feed them, and take pictures with them. In fact, children account for 37% of visitors to wildlife attractions (Turley, 2001; Nickerson & Jurowski, 2001). Most children in our study were animal lovers as well. One mother recommended Sri Lanka as an ideal family destination to her blog readers for its various forms of wildlife that entertained her child:

> "Our toddler also enjoyed feeding the tiny fish that came into the shallows with the tide. … I think the biggest highlight for us, especially the kids, was the amount of wildlife we were able to see: Sri Lanka has an astounding variety of mammals, birds, amphibians, and reptiles."

Regardless of where children could observe live animals, their excitement never failed to impress their parents. One family had no plans to visit wildlife attractions, but their little boy was highly interested in playing with the cat in their homestay. Sometimes, children were even interested in fake animals; for example, one little boy played with a crocodile statue for an hour, and another baby girl slept with a sheep doll in the hotel for several nights. A mother from the United States described her older son's reaction in Chinatown to watching a lion dancing:

> "Hudson was excited to spot the lions that sit at [Chinatown's] gate—icons familiar from his *Pete and Larry* book. And when we arrived, he had us laughing: He asked if they'd bite off his hand, like at the Mouth of Truth in Rome.…"

Enhancing children's social skills has emerged as a major reason for parents to take their children on family vacations (Li, Wang, Xu, & Mao, 2017), with previous studies indicating that travel contributes to children's social development (Li et al., 2017; West & Merriam, 1970). Although preschool-aged children are highly dependent on their parents, they also like to play with peers of a similar age. As previously discussed, children between 6–11 years old have strong preferences for playing with their friends. Younger children tend to exhibit more egocentrism and are in the early stages of peer interaction. As a mother wrote in her travel notes when discussing her son's holiday experience in Sabah,

> "In an unfamiliar environment, [our son] often observed other kids at first and then tried to join them cautiously."

Another mother found that her little boy had great fun chatting with other children of a similar age:

> "And while Phil and Rod chatted away about bikes and their components [ad] nauseum (Zzzzzz....), myself and [our son] Luca had a lovely chat with Rod's two boys - Aidan (7) and Dylan (3)…"

Many hotels in this study offered a kids' club for family travelers. The swings and slide were the most welcoming play facilities for younger children. Parents noted that these areas helped occupy their kids and allowed parents to enjoy their holidays as well. Although preschool-aged children were too young for most games at theme parks, such as rollercoasters and bumper cars,

they still had great fun with other forms of entertainment. For example, a couple had planned to first take their son to Disneyland when he was 4 or 5 years old, but they initially visited when he was 2. The mother expressed some anxiety prior to the trip, but she later admitted she should not have been worried; her son enjoyed himself in other parts of Disney:

> "Everything was exciting to him—from the horses on Main Street to the ducks hanging out around the castle—his excitement was enough."

Similarly, a mother at Universal Studios in Singapore found her young son was happy when he saw cartoon figures in the park even though he was too small to play games there. Children's activities in destinations generally involve attention to detail and prolonged engagement. They are easily attracted to their favorite things and can participate in a given activity for an extended period of time. Parents frequently mentioned their young children were immersed in certain games for a long time and had no intentions of leaving. When something truly interested them, they expressed their excitement freely:

> "Even the mussel shells were special to him: here, he had us laughing when he started to rub the shiny shell against his cheek saying 'I love it. I love it.'"

> "Hudson was quite thrilled and looked [around] intensely. I asked if he was okay and he told me that's the face he makes 'when I very interested.' Fair enough! He'd point to passing boats and exclaim[,] 'Those boats are fast! But not as fast as ours… Right [, Daddy?!]'"

Parents appreciated their children's complete absorption with details, which enhanced their own travel experiences to a certain degree. Some parents even commented on their blogs that traveling with their children helped them to rediscover nature and themselves.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The research described in this article was intended to understand young children's (0–4 years old) vacation experiences by assessing the nature of their destination and children's engagement while visiting. Analysis of text and narratives on parents' blogs or online notes revealed the rules parents imposed on the types of destinations and children's engagement with those destinations.

Children's holiday experiences appeared to be sensory-oriented based on the findings of this study. As mentioned in parents' descriptions, younger children preferred to play with nature, such as by playing in the sand and water or with animals and toys. Children were also unconsciously engaged in social development when playing with same-aged peers. Child-centered attractions (e.g., theme parks and kids' clubs at hotels or resorts) were also appealing modes of entertainment for young children. According to these findings, children's activities at vacation destinations were characterized by a keen interest in details; they remained easily entertained by favorite objects or activities for hours. Therefore, parents could maintain their children's attention through different tasks before younger children became bored and fussy. Similarly, younger children appeared to have no patience for objects or activities that did not interest them, which influenced their parents' decisions about where to go and what to do during family holidays.

Our analysis indicated that the boundary between ordinary (home) and extraordinary (destination) is blurred for families with young children, as most vacation activities were similar to those at home. Travel serves as an extension of everyday life for young children, highlighting a

unique aspect of children travelers in early stages of development. In response to the notion that contemporary children's daily lives are spent in spaces structured by adults' choices and views (Leverett, 2011), parents in this study imposed a number of rules upon destination selection, including the distance from home, parents' prior knowledge about and experience with the destination, and destination facilities. Travel destinations, as an extension of the home environment, constituted another carefully chosen space in which children could fulfill specific, predetermined, and adult-dominant outcomes. However, young children showed agency in consuming the spaces that were deliberately selected for them, as many parents stated that their children "insisted" on doing something that was not planned. Children's preferences for social activities with peers and their agency in participating in unplanned activities echoes Bakan's (1966) account regarding the duality of human existence. Children demonstrate communion by participating in group activities on one hand and express the modality of agency via self-assertion, self-expansion, and self-protection on the other. Compared with the home environment, which falls under adults' strict control, tourism destinations offer safe, relaxed, and diversified spaces that can empower children's transition between communion and agency as individuals and offer children more freedom to construct a space of their own.

This research marks one of the first attempts to examine young children's travel activities and experiences. Children's experiences during holidays are not homogenous across developmental stages, indicating that younger children's travel needs should be explored individually. The findings of our study enrich the body of literature on children's tourism by addressing children's vacation behavior during the sensorimotor and early preoperational stages, while extant studies have largely focused on children over 4 years old. The study also contributes to new social studies of childhood by focusing on vacation experiences from a spatiotemporal perspective that has otherwise been lacking in the literature. Our findings provide evidence of the institutionalization of children's space and agency in their spatial practices, suggesting that children should be studied as active agents in their own right.

This study also bears some practical merits. One important implication is the recognition of children as valuable contributors to family travel destination selection. Our research presents a fresh perspective for the tourism industry to rethink children's roles in deciding where to go and what to do.

Findings from this study offer implications for exploring potential programs and activities that cater to families with young children. Within the last decade, numerous vacation professionals in travel marketing have offered suggestions for where to take younger children and how to make family travel more pleasant with less stress (Nickerson & Jurowski, 2001). Our findings should be useful given that enhancing children's social development has been acknowledged as a primary motive for parents when planning tourist activities. Tourism operators should therefore consider developing tourist experiences that enable children to play and socialize, thus enhancing family travelers' satisfaction.

To appeal to the family market, tourism practitioners should strive to better understand family members' preferences and desires, particularly those of younger children, given parents' increasing focus on entertaining their children while relieving themselves from constant childcare responsibilities while on holiday. Thus, facilities and activities that appeal respectively to adults as

well as younger children are essential in destinations aimed at entertaining families with young kids.

Meanwhile, because parents enjoy quality time with their younger children, immersive activities in which children and parents can participate together are also important. Children aged 0 to 4 are in a developmental stage where they require extensive care and attention from caregivers. Knowing young children's needs while traveling enables their parents to plan family vacation activities more wisely, which can contribute to positive parent–child relationships.

This article is limited in the following aspects. First of all, due to their cognitive abilities, young children's travel experiences were examined solely via their parents' narratives, and children's opinions were only accessed through parents' observations. Netnographic research has certain shortcomings as a relatively new approach to tourism studies. First, the authenticity of data generated from online sites remains unverified (Mkono, 2012), as users may conceal information or even lie in their narratives. The researcher in this study, as a passive observer, was unable to replicate bloggers' content, which further complicated the acquisition of definitively relevant data. Finally, because data in this study consisted of online users' texts, the richness of data was limited by the absence of face-to-face interactions. Therefore, future studies on children's holiday experiences using netnographic analysis should employ mixed methods. For example, semi-structured interviews with parents who travel frequently with younger children could be conducted in addition to observations to complement a netnographic approach. In addition, holiday experiences of families with young children from different cultures and the experiences of preschool-aged children in cognitive development stages other than sensorimotor and preoperational warrant further investigation. A longitudinal study exploring how childhood travel contributes to early development offers another avenue for future research.

Moreover, because experiences may differ across generations of family members, several studies have investigated how family-oriented tourist attractions (e.g., theme parks, zoos, and museums) can be improved to provide families better experiences. For example, Lamb (2010) suggested that Christchurch facilities should improve their accessibility and foster a sense of being welcoming and safe for families to have a more enjoyable experience. Based on findings related to children's entertainment expectations when traveling, Wu, Holmes, and Tribe (2010) recommended that museums should offer interactive and memorable activities to provide children with enjoyable experiences.

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