

<https://doi.org/10.22133/ijtcs.2025.515973.1209>

Analyzing Van Life as a Child-Centered Tourism Model in Iran

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Article Info

Received:

2025-03-29

Accepted:

2025-06-05

Keywords:

Experiential learning
Nature-based education
Child development
Outdoor pedagogy
Mobile family travel
Intercultural interaction

Abstract

This study investigates the developmental outcomes of *Van Life* as an emerging form of child-centered tourism in Iran. Van Life, defined as short-term, vehicle-based travel involving family participation and nature immersion, offers educational and emotional benefits for children. Despite its growing global appeal, this model remains largely unexamined in the Iranian context. Using a qualitative, exploratory-descriptive design, the study collected data from 15 families and 25 children aged 6–12 years who had engaged in Van Life-style travel. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and children's drawings and were analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that Van Life positively contributes to children's development in four domains: emotional (increased self-confidence and emotional regulation), cognitive (hands-on problem-solving and nature-based learning), social (strengthened family bonds and cultural openness), and environmental (awareness of sustainability and responsible behavior). Nonetheless, key barriers were identified, including inadequate infrastructure, cultural conservatism, and limited parental preparedness to support experiential learning during the travel. The study concludes that Van Life holds potential as a sustainable, inclusive, and educational tourism model for families in Iran. To address these limitations, this study recommends promoting environmental education, expanding support services, and designing policies that recognize the developmental value of child-centered tourism experiences.

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How to Cite:

Ziari, K., & Derakhshan, A. (2025). Analyzing Van Life as a Child-Centered Tourism Model in Iran. *International Journal of Tourism, Culture and Spirituality*, 8(1), 207-236.

Introduction

In recent decades, tourism has undergone significant transformation (Zhuravleva et al., 2024). These changes have profoundly influenced various sectors, including transportation (Setiawan et al., 2023), marketing (Irfan et al., 2017; Sashi, 2021), technology (Abouzeid, 2022), infrastructure (Setiawan et al., 2023), and education (Puerta-Guardo et al., 2023). One of the most notable developments in this evolving landscape has been the rise of child-centered tourism, which has become a central focus in many developed countries (Kondratska, 2021; Zavarika & Tuleninova, 2021). Countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Denmark have taken significant strides to promote tourism that addresses children's specific needs and rights (Hamer, 2019). Similarly, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and Canada have implemented policies to enhance child-targeted tourism infrastructure and services (Кирова, 2024; Kwong, 2024). These examples reflect a broader global shift towards recognizing children as active participants in the tourism process.

Despite Iran's vast potential for child- and family centered tourism, children's unique needs and interests remain largely overlooked within the national tourism framework (Shirazi & Shirazy, 2020). This neglect not only restricts children's access to meaningful educational and recreational experiences but also hinders the development of inclusive tourism models that benefit both families and local communities (Skorobogatova & Marakhovskaya, 2022). Therefore, there is a pressing need to explore alternative and innovative models that can address this gap.

One such model is the Van Life experience, a mobile, experience-based lifestyle in which individuals and families live and travel in vans or similar vehicles. Grounded in the principles of freedom, simplicity, flexibility, and adventure, Van Life offers an immersive and holistic way of engaging with the world (Alsenmyr, 2021). For children, this lifestyle provides opportunities to connect with nature, interact with diverse communities, and cultivate a wide range of developmental skills, including cognitive, emotional, social, and linguistic growth (Guo et al., 2023; Ionescu, 2021; Harvey et al., 2021; Ramsey et al., 2022; Burnham, 2021; Snow & Begic, 2022; Dushatova & Yuldashev, 2023; Saarinen & Krueger, 2022).

However, van life remains an underdeveloped concept in Iran. While the country possesses vast natural, historical, and religious attractions (Nargesi et al., 2018), institutional support for emerging tourism models such as Van Life has been minimal, and infrastructural barriers persist (Chin & Lo, 2017). Consequently, families interested in this form of travel often face significant logistical and cultural obstacles.

Conceptual developments in child-centered tourism have highlighted the pivotal role of mobile, participatory, and nature-based experiences in fostering children's cognitive, emotional, and social

growth. Among these experiences, the Van Life lifestyle—through its integration of experiential learning, family interaction, and immersion in natural environments—holds unique potential to support children's developmental capacities. However, existing policy frameworks in Iran's child-centered tourism largely overlook emerging and nontraditional lifestyle models. This oversight has not only marginalized the educational value of such experiences but also hindered the formulation of localized and sustainable models for family oriented tourism development. Accordingly, the present study is not merely a response to a research gap but an attempt to construct a theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding the developmental functions of Van Life in Iran, thereby enabling a critical rethinking of current child-centered tourism policies.

This study not only introduces the concept and characteristics of Van Life but also examines the opportunities and challenges of Van Life tourism for children and families in Iran. The objective of this study is to evaluate the key factors in the development of this tourism model for families and offer practical solutions to overcome existing barriers. Thus, this study can serve as a foundational step towards expanding the Van Life tourism culture for children in Iran, potentially paving the way for future developments in this field.

Literature Review

Child-Centred Tourism: Conceptual Foundations

Child-centered- tourism (CCT) is a specialized branch of family travel that treats children not as passive beneficiaries but as active co-participants- whose cognitive, emotional, and social needs must shape every stage of the tourism experience. This paradigm therefore prioritizes safety, inclusiveness, and agency, creating structured yet flexible settings that foster both guided and self-directed- learning (Nodirovna & Yakubovich, 2022; Ertaş et al., 2021; Grigorenko, 2022).

Unlike traditional family holidays—where itineraries and narratives are largely adult-driven—CCT intentionally involves children in choosing destinations, activities and themes that resonate with their interests and developmental stage (Canosa & Graham, 2022; Seraphin et al., 2023). For example, museums and heritage sites increasingly employ interactive exhibits that invite children to act as co-curators or storytellers, thereby transforming passive observation into embodied learning (Hamer, 2019).

Many countries have begun to institutionalize CCT through policies, infrastructure, and capacity building-. Germany and Australia run nation-wide nature-discovery- programs, while regional tourism councils in Japan routinely collaborate with local schools to deliver curriculum-aligned- field trips (Hanashima, 2024)These initiatives demonstrate how government support can scale up child-focused- design principles.

Historically, the concept of educating children through travel can be traced to 17th-century aristocratic ‘grand tours’, which framed mobility as a route to social maturity and cultural capital (Njoroge & Chemeli, 2022). By the early 20th century, Russian educators had integrated structured excursions into school timetables to merge scientific inquiry with experiential exploration (Bodrova et al., 2021). The post-war commercial boom— epitomized by attractions such as Disneyland—redefined children as both consumers and co-creators of themed experiences (Harrison, 2021; Tomić et al., 2018).

Contemporary CCT intersects with outdoor education, environmental ethics, and digital storytelling. Programs that blend cultural immersion, nature-based- learning, and creative expression— such as art mapping- and field journaling —serve dual recreational and pedagogical functions (Guo et al., 2023; Acar, 2014). In this light, children emerge not only as participants in tourism but also as agents of social learning and of intergenerational dialogue.

Despite these advantages, scholars caution that CCT may inadvertently (i) commercialize childhood by prioritizing themed consumption over authentic learning, (ii) reproduce social inequities when specialized infrastructure is confined to affluent regions, and (iii) silence children’s voices if adult facilitation becomes overly directive (Harrison, 2021; Tomić et al., 2018). Recognizing these tensions provides a balanced lens through which to interpret the benefits, as shown in Figure 1.

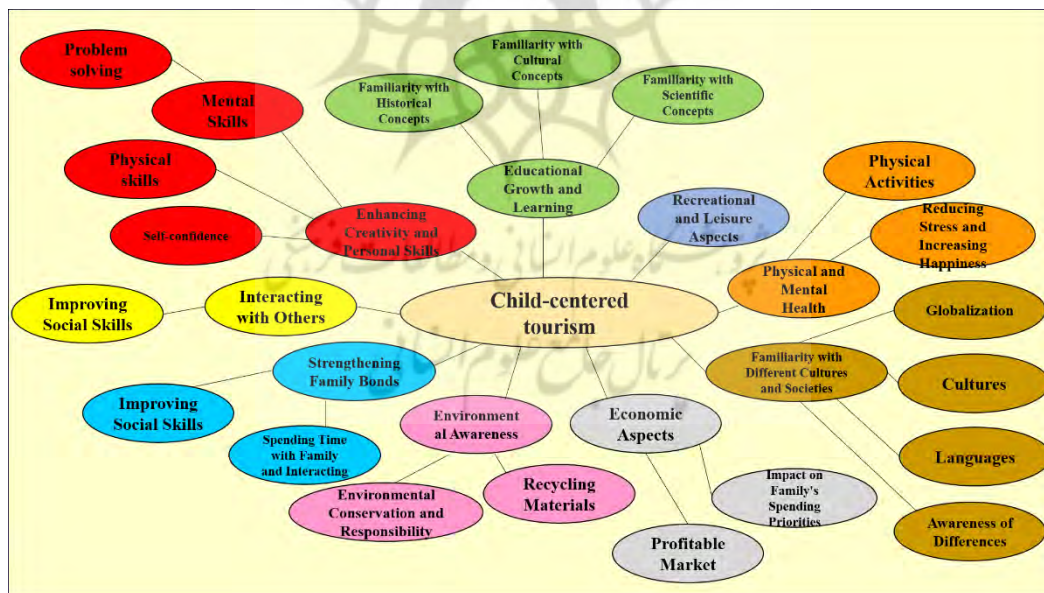


Figure 1. Dimensions and Benefits of Child-Centered Tourism (CCT)

(Akkaya, 2023; Alsenmyr, 2021; Mundet et al., 2024; Guo et al., 2023; Walpersberger & Gretzel, 2023; May, 2022; Muhs et al., 2024; Kerkkänen et al., 2024; Rodriguez, 2023; Roberts et al., 2019; Acar, 2014; Bialeschki et al., 2015)

Drawing on the reviewed literature, this figure outlines the multi-dimensional benefits—physical, cognitive, emotional, and social—of child-centered tourism. It supports the conceptual grounding of the proposed theoretical model.

Challenges in Child-Centred Tourism

While the theoretical underpinnings of CCT are well established, **implementation hurdles persist across cultural and institutional settings, limiting CCT's transformative potential. Key barriers identified in the literature include **(i)** limited professional awareness of the needs of children with disabilities, producing superficial or misaligned programs (Sari et al., 2022; Ertaş et al., 2021); **(ii)** cultural mismatches rooted in adult-centric assumptions that privilege passive consumption over interaction and learning (Akkaya et al., 2023); **(iii)** insufficient parental preparedness to scaffold children's learning during travel (Zhang & Gibson, 2021; Wu et al., 2021); and **(iv)** logistical and economic constraints—language gaps, shortages of trained staff, non-inclusive infrastructure, and high costs—that widen inequities in access to child-friendly destinations (Kim et al., 2020; Wardana et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023). These obstacles weaken the alignment between tourism practices and developmental goals and risk amplifying social inequalities.

In Iran, CCT research is still nascent. Tourism scholarship has prioritized economic or heritage dimensions, with the developmental and participatory aspects of children's travel largely underexplored (Pourjafarholi, 2023). Studies of rural and heritage tourism show minimal structured educational content for children (Sojasi Qeidari et al., 2021).

Without dedicated policies, professional training, and child-sensitive planning tools, tourism's experiential learning- promise for children will remain unrealized.

Van Life: Concept and Tourism Relevance

Van Life denotes a flexible form of mobile living centered on converted vehicles for multi-day itineraries through natural and cultural sites. Originating in the 1960s counter-culture, it has recently evolved into a family oriented- tourism option emphasizing minimalism, environmental awareness, and experiential learning (Alsenmyr, 2021; Muhs et al., 2024).

Clarifying lifestyle versus tourism. In this study, Van Life is framed as a **temporary, educational tourism practice** rather than a permanent lifestyle, aligning with formal definitions of tourism that stress voluntary, time-bound- travel. This distinction situates Van Life within CCT and addresses reviewers' concerns regarding conceptual ambiguity.

Iranian field observations were used. Although formal Van Life infrastructure is absent, observations during 2023-2024 show families in northern Tehran equipping personal vehicles for one- to seven-day- trips to sites such as Lavasan, Jajrud, and Fasham. Typical activities—camping, nature walks, and shared outdoor tasks—embody CCT values of active participation, family cohesion, and immersive learning (Pourjafarholi, 2023).

Developmental potential of the cells These trips expose children to real-life problem-solving and unfamiliar environments, fostering independence, environmental literacy and collaborative behaviour (Guo et al., 2023; Holland et al., 2018; Acar, 2014; Rodriguez, 2023; May, 2022; Walpersberger & Gretzel, 2023).

Institutionalization challenges. Scaling Van Life CCT requires addressing regulatory gray zones, limited child-specific services, and societal skepticism toward alternative family travel (Mohammadzadeh et al., 2023; Kőrös & Trentinné Benkő, 2022; Kholisah et al., 2024). Parents also need guidance to convert spontaneous experiences into structured developmental opportunities (Wu et al., 2021).

When integrated with safety protocols, educational support, and inclusive infrastructure, Van Life can become a sustainable, culturally adaptive model for child-focused tourism.

"Table 1 summarizes the main opportunities and challenges associated with Van Life as a tourism model for children. The analysis draws on both literature and field insights to offer a balanced perspective on the developmental, social, and infrastructural aspects of this model."

Table 1. Opportunities and Challenges of Van Life in Child-Centered Tourism

Dimension	Opportunities	Challenges
Cognitive Development	Hands-on learning, exposure to geography, biology, problem-solving [(Guo et al., 2023); (May, 2022)]	Lack of structured curriculum during travel [(Kőrös & Trentinné Benkő, 2022)]
Emotional Growth	Boosts self-confidence, resilience, and stress management [(Holland et al., 2018); (Acar, 2014)]	Disruption of routine may create emotional instability in some children [(Mohammadzadeh et al., 2023)]
Social Skills	Peer collaboration, intercultural communication, family bonding [(Rodriguez, 2023); (Walpersberger & Gretzel, 2023)]	Language and cultural barriers [(Kholisah et al., 2024)]
Environmental Awareness	Close contact with nature, eco-consciousness, sustainable habits [(Alsenmyr, 2021); (May, 2022)]	Inadequate waste management and legal ambiguity about mobile lodging [(Whaley & Abbott, 2023)]
Family Engagement	Strengthens family roles and participation in travel planning [(Wu et al., 2021)]	Parents may lack knowledge to translate travel into learning experiences [(Wu et al., 2021)]
Access and Equity	Low-cost alternative to traditional tourism; flexible scheduling [(Mundet et al., 2024)]	Infrastructure gaps, cultural resistance, and lack of supportive public policy [(Chin & Lo, 2017).]

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a multidimensional theoretical framework based on three well-established learning perspectives—Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, Dewey's Learning by Doing, and Vygotsky's

Social Interaction Theory—as well as the principles of sustainable tourism. Together, these perspectives allow for a comprehensive interpretation of how Van Life, as a mobile and nature-based travel experience, contributes to children’s development in the Iranian sociocultural context.

Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb)

Kolb views learning as a four-phase cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation [(Kolb & Kolb, 2018); (Murrell & Claxton, 1987)]. In this study, this model was used to analyze how children develop cognitive and adaptive capacities while navigating the Van Life setting. Examples include children managing unexpected weather or engaging with limited resources during short-term domestic trips, particularly common among urban families from Tehran, where decision-making, reflection, and adaptation are frequently observed [(Mechouat, 2024)].

Learning by Doing (Dewey)

Dewey argued that education must be based on direct experience with real-world challenges. In this context, children traveling with their families have been observed to plan routes, help with cooking, or assemble temporary shelters—practical activities that enhance their autonomy and critical thinking [(Jeffs & Ord, 2017)]. These learning modes closely align with the findings of Sojasi Qeidari et al. (2021), who noted similar developmental patterns among Iranian children visiting rural destinations.

Social Interaction Theory (Vygotsky)

Vygotsky’s theory emphasizes that learning is deeply rooted in social exchange, especially within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) [(Suardipa, 2020)]. In Van Life settings, children rely on parents, older siblings, or peer travelers to perform complex tasks, from navigating routes to interacting with unfamiliar communities to ensure their safety. These scaffolded interactions foster linguistic, emotional, and social development, as highlighted by Pourjafargholi (2023) in her research on family based tourism behaviors in Iran.

Van Life as a Child-Centered Tourism Model

Although Van Life has emerged globally as a lifestyle trend, this study positions it as a temporary, structured tourism experience suitable for families seeking alternative educational travel experiences. Within the Iranian context, many urban families (e.g., in Tehran) opt for short-term Van Life-style travel lasting from one day to one week. This form of travel offers opportunities for immersive learning, environmental interaction, and strengthened family bonds [(Rodriguez, 2023); (May, 2022)].

Sustainable Tourism as a Cross-Cutting Lens

The theoretical framework also integrates sustainable tourism theory to understand how children develop environmental and ethical awareness. Codes such as “eco-awareness,” “waste-consciousness,” and “resource restraint” frequently emerged from the interviews and observations. These findings are interpreted as early internalization of sustainability values through direct experience [(Amoiradis et al., 2023); (Eneanya, 2018)].

By aligning these learning theories with the goals of sustainable and child-centered tourism, this framework transforms Van Life into more than a travel format—it becomes a pedagogical tool for fostering children’s autonomy, resilience, and environmental consciousness within Iran’s evolving tourism landscape.

Consequently, the present study tests this framework through three guiding questions: RQ1—How do children enact Kolb’s experiential cycle during short-term Van Life trips? RQ2—In what ways do Deweyan “learning-by-doing” tasks and Vygotskian scaffolding jointly foster autonomy and social skills? RQ3—How is environmental awareness internalized as an outcome of sustainable tourism principles embedded in Van Life?

Research Methodology

This study employed an applied, exploratory, descriptive qualitative approach to examine the developmental outcomes of Van Life tourism for children in Iran. Fieldwork was deliberately conducted in two stages: an exploratory phase before 2023, which identified target families and refined the research instruments, followed by a main phase in spring–summer 2024, which collected the final data using the optimized tools.

Study Population and Sampling

The study population consisted of families from major urban centers—particularly Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz—who had engaged in short-term Van Life travel using campervans or modified vehicles. Given the limited number of families available within the target population, a purposive sampling approach was used to select 15 families and 25 children aged 6–12 years old. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) participation in at least one Van Life trip with children, (2) active parental involvement during the journey, and (3) willingness to engage in interviews and observational activities.

Due to the lack of formal databases, participants were identified through informal networks on Instagram and Telegram, where families shared their Van Life travel experiences. This method was chosen as a practical and valid alternative for identifying participants, considering the constraints of direct access to families. By interacting with users on these platforms, the research team identified

potential participants with firsthand experience of Van Life travel and invited them to participate in the study. All families treated Van Life as a temporary travel model, not as a permanent lifestyle.

The selection of families was based on specific criteria to ensure diversity in their experiences and accurate representation of the target population. The families selected for this study met the following criteria:

1. Active parental involvement in the Van Life journey.
2. At least one Van Life trip with children.
3. Willingness to engage in research activities, such as interviews and observations.

The research team interacted with participants during both phases of the study. In-depth semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes were conducted. Follow-up interactions were arranged to collect the children's drawings and clarify observational notes as needed.

Data Collection

Three complementary qualitative tools were used to collect the data.

1. **Semi-structured interviews:** These were conducted with both the children and their parents. The interview questions were open-ended and developmentally appropriate, designed to explore emotional responses, environmental learning, social interactions and problem-solving. Example questions included: "What part of the trip did you enjoy the most?", "Did you learn anything new about nature?", and "How did your child respond to new situations?"
2. **Participant observations:** Observations were made during or immediately after the trips. A structured checklist was used to document behaviors such as engagement with nature, social participation, and adaptive responses.
3. **Children's drawings:** These were analyzed using **visual content analysis**. The analysis focused on symbolic elements, emotional tone, color use, and depictions of key themes such as family, nature, and animals.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a three-step thematic coding process:

1. **Open coding:** Initial identification of concepts.
2. **Axial coding:** Grouping codes into thematic categories.
3. **Selective coding:** Identification of overarching patterns.

Given the modest data volume, the use of dedicated qualitative analysis software was deemed unnecessary, and data were analyzed manually in Excel spreadsheets. Structured coding matrices ensured consistency and traceability, and a high inter-coder agreement was achieved in line with

established qualitative reliability protocols. Visual data from the children's drawings were triangulated with interview insights to ensure thematic coherence.

Trustworthiness (Reliability and Validity)

Reliability

The coding was performed independently by two members of the research team. The consistency of the coding was evaluated using inter-coder agreement. The following table reflects the alignment between the coders and demonstrates the dependability of the thematic analysis.

Table 2. Inter-Coder Agreement

Agreement	Coder 1	Coder 2	Initial Code
Yes	Yes	Yes	Anxiety
No	Yes	No	Trust
Yes	Yes	Yes	Play

Validity

To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, multiple validation strategies were employed.

1. **Peer Debriefing:** The thematic structure was reviewed by academic colleagues for credibility and reduction of bias.
2. **Member Checking:** Synthesized interpretations were shared with a selection of participants (children and parents) to confirm the accuracy of the reported experiences.
3. **Triangulation:** Cross-verification was conducted using interviews, observations, and children's drawings to ensure consistency and depth across data sources.

The convergence of diverse qualitative tools and validation strategies confirms the rigor of this study. By grounding codes in real participant expressions and ensuring inter-coder reliability, the research achieved analytical trustworthiness. This mixed approach supports the credibility of the findings regarding the positive developmental impact of Van Life experiences.

Findings and Discussion

This study aimed to explore children's experiences with the Van Life lifestyle. Data were collected through field observations, semi-structured interviews, and analyses of children's drawings. These three methods were used complementarily to present a multidimensional view of children's emotions, behaviors, and experiences as they interacted with the natural and social environment. The collected data were processed using thematic and visual content analyses. Ultimately, four main themes emerged.

1. **Emotional:** Examination of children's emotions, such as happiness, calmness, and security.
2. **Cognitive:** Learning experiences from nature and daily challenges.

3. **Social and Cultural:** Interactions with family members, friends, and locals.
4. **Physical and Environmental:** Physical activities and environmentally responsible behavior.

Data Analysis

Although the results are thematically structured and supported by summary tables for clarity, narrative interpretation and illustrative quotes are provided below to ensure depth and contextual understanding.

Data analysis was conducted in three stages.

1. **Open Coding:** Initial concepts such as "initial anxiety," "joy of playing in nature," "friendship with locals," and "collecting trash" were identified.
2. **Axial Coding:** These initial concepts were grouped into dependent categories like "sense of security," "interaction with nature," and "social relationships."
3. **Selective Coding:** Main themes were identified, including "emotional experiences," "cognitive growth," "social connections," and "physical and environmental activities."

The codes were derived directly from the interviews and observational data. For instance, the code "initial anxiety" emerged from statements such as, *"At first, I was scared sleeping in the van, but later I liked it when I could see the stars,"* which later contributed to the theme of emotional resilience. Similarly, the open code "collecting trash" was grounded in children's observations, such as *"I saw my mom picking up garbage, so I did too."* These examples demonstrate how raw expressions are linked to broader emotional and environmental themes. By connecting open codes with real-life statements, this study ensured contextual accuracy and interpretive depth.

Table 3. Thematic Analysis of Data

Open Code	Axial Code	Final Theme
Initial Anxiety	Sense of Security	Emotional and Affective Experiences
Playing in Nature	Interaction with Nature	Environmental Learning
Friendship with Locals	Cultural Learning	Social and Cultural Connections
Fatigue after Hiking	Effort and Perseverance	Physical Activities and Adventure

Observation

Field observations were conducted during or shortly after the Van Life trips to capture the children's natural behaviors in authentic travel settings. A structured checklist guided the observation of interactions with nature, peer cooperation and adaptive responses to environmental stimuli. Observational notes were systematically recorded to ensure accuracy and traceability.

These behaviors reflect both environmental curiosity and social cooperation. Children were actively engaged in their surroundings and frequently mirrored the eco-friendly actions modeled by their parents.

Table 4. Observation Checklist of Child Behaviors

Behavior	Observed	Notes
Touching plants or observing animals	✓	“Child A gently touched a plant and asked about its name.”
Asking questions about nature	✓	“Why doesn’t this bird fly away? What kind of tree is this?”
Participating in group activities	✓	“Child A and Child B worked together to build a small shelter.”
Collecting trash or engaging in cleanup	✓	“Child A picked up trash around the campsite with a plastic bag.”

Table 5. Mapping Observed Behaviors to Themes

Observed Behavior	Axial Code	Final Theme
Touching plants	Interaction with Nature	Environmental Learning
Collecting trash	Environmental Behavior	Environmental Responsibility
Group shelter-building	Group Collaboration	Social and Cultural Connections
Asking nature-related questions	Inquiry and Curiosity	Cognitive and Emotional Engagement

This dual-layer analysis clarified how specific observed behaviors aligned with the broader thematic categories. This process contributed significantly to theme triangulation, alongside interviews and drawings.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both children and their parents to explore a range of experiences related to Van Life travel. The questions were designed to be open-ended and age-appropriate, focusing on emotional reactions, environmental learning, daily challenges, and social interaction. The interviews typically lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and encouraged participants to reflect freely and in detail.

Children were asked questions such as:

“What part of the trip did you enjoy the most?”,

“Did you learn anything new about nature?”,

and “How did you feel when you faced something new during the trip?”.

These questions elicited vivid narratives from the participants. For instance, a 10-year-old child stated:

“I was scared the first night in the van, but then I liked it—especially seeing the stars and hearing crickets.”

Another child reflected on this as follows:

“My parents picked up trash, so I did too. It felt like I was helping the earth.”

These responses informed initial open codes such as *“initial anxiety,” “connection to nature,”* and *“pro-environmental behavior”* **pro-environmental behavior**. Through axial coding, these codes were grouped into broader categories, such as *“sense of security”* and *“interaction with nature,”* which then shaped the core themes of the research.

Table 6. Thematic Development from Interview Data

Final Theme	Axial Code	Open Code	Sample Question
Emotional and Affective Experiences	Sense of Security, Joy	Initial Anxiety, Happiness	How did you feel about this trip?
Environmental Learning	Interaction with Nature	Playing in Nature, Observing Nature	Which part of the trip was most interesting? Why?
Physical Activities and Adventure	Overcoming Challenges	Fatigue, Perseverance	What challenges did you face, and how did you respond?
Environmental Responsibility	Environmental Behavior	Collecting Trash, Asking Questions	What did you learn about nature on this trip?
Social and Cultural Connections	Cultural Exchange	Making Friends with Locals	Would you like to go on a similar trip again? Why?

Drawing Analysis

Children’s drawings served as a visual reflection of their emotions, perceptions, and experiences during Van Life trips. The content analysis focused on recurrent motifs, spatial composition, color schemes, and symbolic representation. Common elements included depictions of family members, vehicles, tents, campfires, and natural features such as trees, birds, flowers, and the sun. Bright and warm colors, such as yellow, red, and blue, were frequently used, indicating positive emotions such as happiness, excitement, and calmness.

These visual cues revealed key themes, such as emotional attachment to family, enjoyment of nature, curiosity toward animals, and fascination with new places. The drawings also depicted moments of challenge and achievement, such as fishing or setting up tents, symbolizing children's engagement and confidence building through direct experience.

To enhance depth and contextual understanding, representative quotes were extracted from post-drawing interviews. For instance, one child explained, *“I drew the sun and my whole family because that day was really happy. We were all together near the fire.”* Another noted, *“I like being in nature. There were butterflies and flowers and a tent—it felt peaceful.”* Such reflections link visual expression to emotional meaning and developmental outcomes.

Table 7. Interpretation of Drawings

Interpretation & Meaning	Visual Characteristics	Drawn Elements
Joy, safety, and emotional bonding	Warm colors, family positioned centrally	Parents, siblings, campfire
Connection with nature and environment	Detailed animals, plants, bright colors	Trees, butterflies, sun
Engagement in active outdoor experiences	Scenes of fishing, hiking, movement	Tents, rivers, vans
Sense of wonder and calm during quiet moments	Night sky, moon, stars	Fire, van under sky

To clarify how each research question (RQ) was addressed through thematic analysis, Table 8 presents the alignment between RQs, key emergent themes, and illustrative data examples derived from interviews, observations, and drawings.

Table 8. Alignment of Research Questions with Emergent Themes and Illustrative Data

Research Question	Key Themes / Codes*	Supporting Data Examples (descriptive, no IDs)
RQ1 – Kolb’s Experiential Cycle	Concrete Experience · Reflective Observation · Abstract Conceptualisation · Active Experimentation	Child quote about tightening the tent during sudden heavy rain; field-note describing problem-solving under weather stress; drawing that shows a cloud, a tent and the solution devised
RQ2 – Learning-by-Doing & Social Scaffolding	Hands-on Task · Parental Scaffolding · Peer Collaboration	Parent interview excerpt explaining how the child traced the route on a paper map; observation note of children working together to cook an outdoor meal
RQ3 – Internalising Environmental Awareness	Eco-Awareness · Waste-Consciousness · Resource Restraint	Child quote about sorting rubbish into separate bags; drawing featuring the recycling symbol; field-note on the family’s deliberate reduction of water use

This table summarises the core thematic responses to each research question. Examples are drawn descriptively from field data to demonstrate how children’s experiences during Van Life were interpreted through the study’s theoretical lens.

Data Collection Methods (Green Nodes)

These include drawings, interviews, and observations, each of which gathered unique qualitative data from children.

Key Findings (Orange Nodes)

Key findings such as "happiness, calmness, and self-confidence," "environmentally responsible behaviors," "social and family interactions," and "learning sustainability concepts" were identified through the data analysis. These findings were directly derived from the data collection methods and were connected to the main themes.

Main Themes of the Research (Blue Nodes)

The following sections elaborate on each major theme, supported by narrative explanations, observational insights, and direct quotations to ensure analytical depth and contextual understanding.

These include the five main themes of this research:

- Emotional and Affective Experiences
- Environmental Learning and Awareness
- Social and Cultural Connections
- Physical Activities and Adventure
- Sustainable Tourism

These themes represent the key dimensions of the impact of "Van Life" on children.

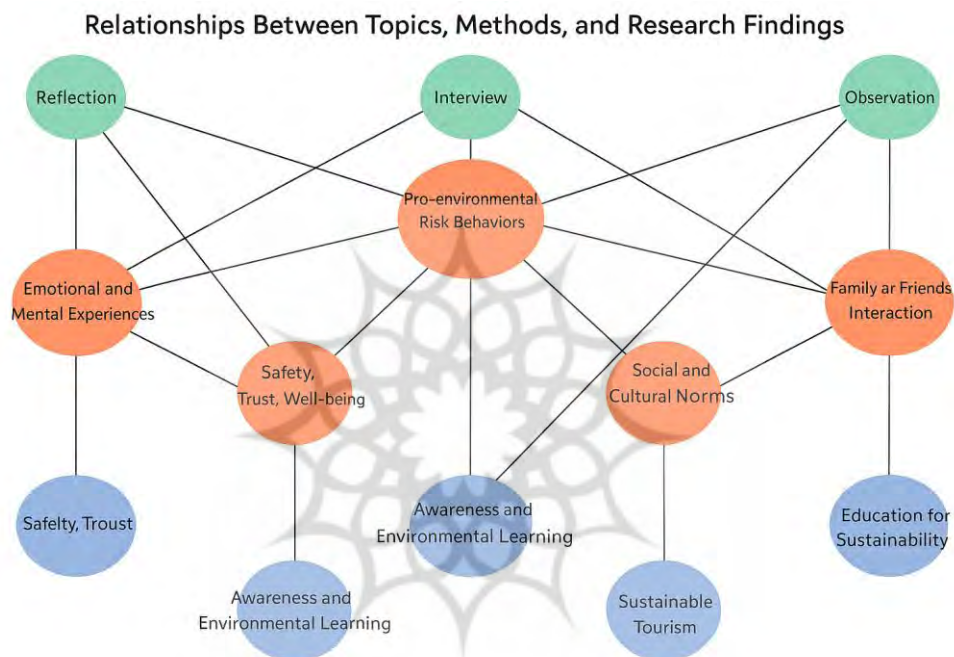


Figure 2: This figure illustrates the connection between the data collection methods, key findings, and the main themes of the research

The Role of Van Life in the Emotional, Cognitive, and Environmental Development of Children: Findings from Observations, Interviews, and Drawings

Emotional and Affective Experiences

Findings

- Children's drawings mostly depicted bright colors and images of families, friends, and enjoyable activities.
- Some children mentioned initial anxiety about the new environment during interviews, but their overall experience was positive.

Quote

A 10-year-old child said in an interview: "At first, I was scared sleeping in the van, but then I became happy because I could hear the crickets and see the stars."

Observation

During the trip, the children expressed joy through laughter and running while playing in nature and exploring new environments. The researcher also observed that children sought support from their families when overcoming their initial fears.

These findings indicate that Van Life positively impacts children's emotional development by fostering a sense of closeness to the family and providing opportunities for joy. The combined data from observations and interviews highlighted the strengthening of children's self-confidence in new environments.

Challenges and Solutions

Challenges: Initial anxiety due to new conditions.

Solutions: Providing a safe environment and emotional support from parents, along with planning activities to help children adapt to new situations is recommended.

Environmental Learning and Awareness

Findings

- Children's drawings depicted nature and environmental behaviors, such as trash collection and animal observation.
- In the interviews, the children discussed learning responsible behaviors. A 9-year-old child said, "I saw my mom and dad collecting trash, so I started doing it too. It felt really good."

Observation

During a forest trip, children asked many questions about animals' lives after observing birds. They were initially confused about trash collection but learned to do it with explanations from their families.

These findings show that children gained more environmental awareness through direct interaction with nature and learned responsible behavior. Observations also indicated that parents, as role models, had a significant influence on children's environmental learning in the home environment.

Challenges and Solutions

Challenges: Lack of prior knowledge of environmentally responsible behaviors or lack of motivation.

Solutions: Environmental education games should be designed, and families should be involved as role models.

Social and Cultural Connections

Findings

- In their drawings, the children mostly depicted scenes of collaboration with family members or playing with friends.
- During the interviews, the children discussed their experiences interacting with locals.

Quote

An 8-year-old child said, "I made a friend with a local girl who showed me how to play with leaves. It was so interesting."

Observation

During a trip to rural areas, the children received local foods from local families and described it as a unique experience.

These experiences indicate that Van Life provides an opportunity to strengthen family cooperation and experience cultural interactions. Observational data confirm that children show curiosity and attention when exposed to new cultural environments and easily interact with others.

Challenges and Solutions

Challenges: Children's unfamiliarity with new cultures may lead to withdrawal or social isolation.

Solutions: Encourage children to participate in group activities and create opportunities for cultural interaction.

Physical Activities and Adventure

Findings

- Children's drawings depicted scenes of walking, hiking, and camping.
- Children discussed physical challenges, such as fatigue or difficulty hiking.

Quote

An 11-year-old child said: "I got really tired when we were hiking, but when I reached the top and saw the view, all my fatigue went away."

Observation

On rainy days, children helped set up tents with their families and felt proud of their teamwork in overcoming challenges.

These findings show that physical activities in Van Life strengthen children's self-confidence and adventurous spirits. Observations indicate that children gain a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction by overcoming challenges.

Challenges and Solutions

Challenges: Initial resistance from children to challenges or fatigue.

Solutions: Small rewards should be offered for completing activities, and gradual training should be provided to children to face challenges.

Sustainable Tourism

Findings

Children discussed the importance of environmental conservation and positive environmental behaviors, such as trash collection, in their drawings and interviews.

Observation

During the trip, the children repeated responsible behaviors, such as collecting trash, after observing their parents' actions.

These data suggest that children learn sustainability concepts and natural resource conservation through direct interaction with nature and environmental education during Van Life.

Challenges and Solutions

Challenges: Limited general awareness of sustainable tourism and its impact.

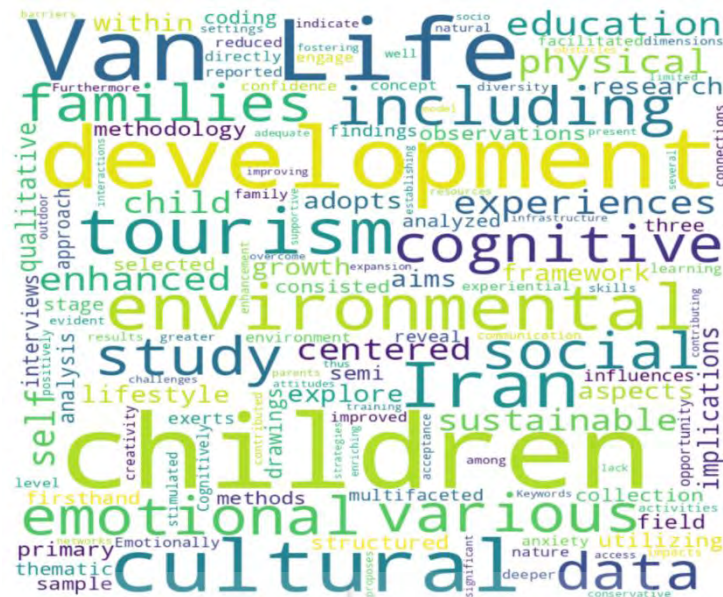
Solutions: Organizing workshops for families during the trip and providing relevant educational resources.

Overall, the data analysis shows that Van Life has positive effects on children by creating deep experiences in four main areas (emotional, cognitive, social, and environmental). The data from observations, interviews, and drawings indicate the following:

- Strengthening responsibility and closeness to the family
- Learning about environmental and responsible behaviors
- Enhancing social and cultural connections.
- Emotional growth and strengthening self-confidence by overcoming challenges.

Word Cloud Analysis

As illustrated in Figure 1, the word cloud highlights the prominence of terms such as “children,” “development,” and “environmental,” thereby confirming our four main thematic dimensions of emotional, cognitive, social, and environmental growth.



Discussion

Our observations show that children moved through all four stages of Kolb's learning cycle. They first faced real situations, thought about what happened, formed new ideas, and then tried those ideas on subsequent tasks. Even a short Van-Life trip was sufficient for them to practice this full cycle.

When children helped pitch the tent, cook meals, or read a map, they learned by doing, as suggested by Dewey. At the same time, parents and older siblings offered guidance, which Vygotsky called social scaffolding. The combination of hands-on tasks and family support boosts children's independence and teamwork skills.

Children talked about sorting rubbish, saving water, and looking after the plants. These small actions show that they were already adopting sustainable tourism values. The results suggest that even brief Van life experiences can build lasting respect for nature among urban Iranian families.

The findings of this study align with multiple theoretical perspectives that explain how Van Life experiences shape children's development. Drawing on Kolb's experiential learning model, Dewey's philosophy of learning by doing, and Vygotsky's theory of social interaction, the data demonstrate that

Van Life offers rich opportunities for emotional, cognitive, and social growth. These experiences are further situated within the framework of sustainable tourism and child-centered travel in the country.

Experiential Learning (Kolb)

Children's participation in activities such as hiking, nature observation, or navigating unfamiliar settings reflects Kolb's cycle of concrete experience, reflection, and adaptation [(Prezoto et al., 2023)]. For instance, managing challenges such as unpredictable weather or learning from limited resources allowed children to develop problem-solving skills and independence, particularly among urban families from Tehran [(Mechouat, 2024)].

Learning by Doing (Dewey)

Dewey's emphasis on direct experience was evident as children engaged in real-life tasks, such as setting up tents or preparing meals during travel [(Landorf & Wadley, 2022)]. These activities fostered autonomy and critical thinking, aligning with similar findings from Iranian rural tourism contexts [(Sojasi Qeidari et al., 2021)].

Social Interaction (Vygotsky)

Social development is fostered through cooperative interactions with parents, siblings, and local people. These scaffolded experiences supported the development of emotional regulation, communication, and cultural sensitivity within Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD; Barnett, 2019; Pourjafargholi, 2023).

Van Life as a Structured Tourism Model:

Although Van Life is globally recognized as a lifestyle, this study frames it as a short-term, child-centered tourism model in the context of Iran. For most participating families, it served as a temporary escape rather than a permanent lifestyle, providing structured learning in nature, strengthened family interaction, and exposure to cultural diversity [(Rodriguez, 2023); (May, 2022)].

Sustainable Tourism Lens

Finally, the findings illustrate the early internalization of sustainability values. Themes such as waste collection, resourcefulness, and respect for nature emerged in interviews and drawings, highlighting the educational impact of nature-based travel [(Amoiradis et al., 2023) (Eneanya, 2018)].

Together, these theories frame Van Life not only as a tourism format but also as an informal pedagogical tool that promotes holistic development, social resilience, and ecological responsibility in children.

Table 9. Data Analysis

Analysis	Data Collection Method	Findings	Theme
Children had positive and emotional experiences in Van Life through being with family and friends and participating in joyful activities.	Drawings, Interviews, Observations	The drawings depicted bright colors and images of family, friends, and enjoyable activities. Some children mentioned initial anxiety in interviews, but overall the experience was positive.	Emotional and Affective Experiences
Through interaction with nature and observing environmental behaviors, children learned concepts like nature conservation and environmental responsibility in a practical way.	Drawings, Interviews	Children drew images of nature and environmental behaviors like collecting trash or observing animals. In interviews, they talked about learning responsible behaviors.	Environmental Learning and Awareness
Social interactions in Van Life provide children with the opportunity to improve their social skills and benefit from new cultural opportunities.	Drawings, Interviews	Children in their drawings mostly depicted cooperation with family or playing with friends. They also talked about interacting with locals in interviews.	Social and Cultural Connections
Physical activities in Van Life strengthen children's self-confidence and adventurous spirit, helping them improve problem-solving skills and independence.	Drawings, Interviews, Observations	The drawings showed scenes of walking, hiking, and camping. Children discussed physical challenges and adventurous experiences.	Physical Activities and Adventure
These data show that through direct interaction with nature and environmental education, children learn sustainability concepts and natural resource conservation.	Drawings, Interviews, Observations	Children discussed the importance of environmental conservation and positive environmental behaviors like trash collection in drawings and interviews.	Sustainable Tourism

Conclusion

This study utilized observation, interviews, and analysis of children's drawings to examine the impact of the Van Life experience on various aspects of children's lives. The findings showed that Van Life, as a temporary travel and living style, can play a significant role in children's emotional, cognitive, social, and environmental development of children. The main findings of this study are as follows.

1. Emotional and Affective Experiences

- o The children's drawings and interviews revealed positive emotions, happiness, and emotional closeness to the family. Children enjoyed joyful experiences such as seeing stars at night or

hearing the sounds of nature. Moreover, by overcoming their initial fears of new environments, they gained more self-confidence.

2. Environmental Learning and Awareness

- o Direct interaction with nature allowed children to learn concepts such as trash collection, environmental conservation, and respect for nature. The children's drawings included images of animals and environmental behaviors, demonstrating direct learning from their experiences.

3. Social and Cultural Connections

- o Children benefit from interactions with their families, friends, and locals. These interactions were evident in both their drawings and interviews, where the children shared experiences of engaging with local food, games, and traditions.

4. Physical Activities and Adventures:

- o Experiences such as hiking, setting up camp in adverse conditions, and navigating difficult paths strengthened children's self-confidence and fostered their adventurous spirits. Many children expressed feelings of pride and satisfaction after overcoming physical challenges.

The results of this study provide numerous practical recommendations for tourism planners, parents, and policymakers.

- **Designing Child-Centered Van Life Trips:** Special travel packages can be designed to include interactive activities such as environmental education, group games, and cultural experiences.
- **Creating Appropriate Natural Spaces for Children:** Campsites and natural areas with educational and recreational facilities can provide safe and attractive environments for experiencing Van Life.
- **Encouraging Parents to Take Adventure Trips with Children:** Families can plan Van Life trips to provide more interactive opportunities for children and support the development of their social and emotional skills.
- **Designing Environmental Education Programs in Travels:** These programs can include activities such as trash collection, identification of local plants and animals, and learning sustainable behavior.
- **Encouraging Cultural and Social Interactions:** Activities such as playing with local children, visiting local markets, and participating in regional customs can enrich children's experiences.

This study showed that Van Life, as a temporary travel and living style, has significant effects on children's growth and development. By being in natural environments and interacting closely with family, friends, and locals, children gain opportunities to learn new skills and enhance their emotional and cognitive development. Children's drawings and interviews revealed that these trips strengthened their self-confidence, created a sense of responsibility, and increased their feelings of happiness and

calm. Social and cultural interactions during these trips help children develop the ability to accept differences, respect other cultures, and improve teamwork skills.

Experiencing activities such as camping, hiking, and facing natural challenges allowed children to expand their adventurous spirit and experience success and pride in overcoming obstacles. Furthermore, environmental learning through direct interaction with nature transforms children into more responsible and environmentally aware citizens. These findings highlight the importance of interactive and educational travel in children's lives.

Van Life, as an informal educational opportunity, provides a platform for multifaceted child development, which is often less visible in formal educational programs. By offering opportunities for hands-on and experiential learning, this travel style helps children learn complex concepts tangibly and practically. Additionally, strengthening family bonds during these experiences plays a key role in children's psychological wellbeing.

In conclusion, this study shows that Van Life is not only a travel method but also an effective educational and developmental tool that can contribute to children's growth. The findings offer valuable insights for developing sustainable, child-centered tourism policies and programs, helping families and planners create memorable and constructive experiences for children.

Theoretically, this study expands the application of experiential and sociocultural learning theories by situating them within an underexplored cultural context— family based Van Life tourism in Iran. While the existing literature has addressed experiential learning in Western outdoor education settings, this study demonstrates how mobile, short-term nature-based travel can serve as an informal yet structured educational space for Iranian children. It highlights the interplay between environmental immersion, family interaction, and cultural adaptation, reinforcing the relevance of Kolb, Dewey, and Vygotsky's frameworks in non-Western contexts. Moreover, by linking sustainability behaviors to child-centered travel, this study contributes to evolving perspectives on the role of children as active agents in sustainable tourism development.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Despite the valuable results of this study, there are some limitations that should be addressed in future research.

1. Sample Diversity:

Collecting data from a more diverse group with a larger population in terms of geography and culture could enhance the generalizability of the findings.

2. Combination of Research Methods

Combining drawings with in-depth interviews and longer observations could lead to more comprehensive and precise data.

3. Duration of the Study:

Conducting longitudinal studies to examine changes in children's behavior and attitudes after several Van Life experiences could provide more stable results.

4. Cross-Cultural Analysis

Comparing the experiences of children from different cultures and regions could help clarify the impact of cultural differences on the results of this study.

5. Age Range Limitation:

The findings of this study are limited to children aged 6–12 years and may not be generalizable to other age groups, such as younger children or adolescents. Future research should examine the effects of Van Life on different age ranges.

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