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# Young children encountering death: epistemic emotions at the Hô Chí Minh Mausoleum

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## ABSTRACT

Understanding death presents a significant challenge for young children, as it is a complex and multifaceted concept. The Hô Chí Minh Mausoleum in Hanoi, Vietnam, serves as a culturally significant tourism site and provides a valuable context for examining how young children engage with death. Drawing on in-depth interviews with parents, this study analyses parent-child conversations about death to explore how such interactions may influence children's emotional responses and developing understanding of death. Thematic analysis of these conversations identified six interrelated epistemic emotions: awe, surprise, excitement, interest, curiosity, and confusion. These epistemic emotions often arise when children encounter unexpected or ambiguous information that challenges their existing experiences and understandings. This study highlights the ways in which parent-child conversations support the co-construction of new understandings by introducing children to historical narratives and cultural traditions, and by guiding their interpretation of death within broader socio-cultural contexts.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

The interplay of death and tourism presents complex cultural, historical, and ethical dimensions, shaping how sites associated with death are experienced and interpreted (Sánchez-Aguirre et al., 2024; Seger-Guttmann et al., 2025; Su & Yu Park, 2023). Yet despite the centrality of death to tourism's cultural milieu, research on death-related tourism remains relatively sparse. Pratt et al. (2019) acknowledged 'the limited amount of death-related tourism literature' (p. 2), while Heng (2022) observed that 'the role of the dead and their bodies in the study of deathscapes is varied but not extensive' (p. 404). This scarcity is particularly pronounced in research examining the physicality of the dead body itself as a geographic space and cultural site in its own right (Stone & Morton, 2022; Young & Light, 2016). The corpse and its associated artefacts play a crucial role in influencing how societies construct memory, perform rituals, and engage with death (Kong, 1999; Sidaway & Maddrell, 2010). Through their materiality, the dead remain socially and symbolically present, serving as sites where political narratives, cultural values, and social identities are reinforced and articulated (Biers & Clary, 2024; Foltyn, 2008; Sørensen, 2009). It is within and around the body that multiple layers of meaning are negotiated, making it an essential yet underexplored dimension of death-related tourism studies.

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Although children do visit sites associated with death, their presence remains largely overlooked in tourism studies, often due to persistent assumptions about emotional vulnerability and perceived limited developmental capacity (Kerr & Price, 2016; Powell et al., 2018). These assumptions contribute to a gap in our understanding of how children engage with, make sense of, and emotionally respond to tourism experiences involving death. While some adults support the educational value of introducing children to historical events, others express concern about whether such experiences are appropriate or meaningful for those who may not yet be developmentally prepared to process the historical or emotional significance of these sites. This highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of how children engage in conversations about death, particularly within tourism contexts. Such insights can inform more sensitive and developmentally appropriate practices that recognise children's agency and their capacity to comprehend and navigate emotionally complex environments.

This study examines the perceptions and experiences of young children (aged 4–8 years) visiting the Hô Chí Minh Mausoleum, a culturally and historically significant site in which the embalmed body of Hô Chí Minh is displayed. The Mausoleum was selected for its presentation of the corpse, which places tourism in direct encounter with death. The body serves not only as a focal point for remembrance but also as a site through which cultural meaning, political ideology, and spatial significance are constructed and communicated. Despite growing interest in children's understanding of death, limited research has examined young children's emotional responses to death within the tourism context. In particular, the ways in which children's encounters with sites associated with death are related to their conceptualisations and emotional understandings of death remain largely unexplored. This study aims to gain insight into how young children emotionally engage with abstract and complex subjects within such settings. This study contributes to childhood tourism studies by demonstrating how the spatiality and materiality of the dead actively shape young children's experiences, expanding both theoretical and methodological understandings of children's engagement with sites of death.

## Literature review

### *Understanding death in early childhood*

Understanding death is a cognitively and emotionally complex process (Slaughter, 2005), involving the recognition of five biological subcomponents: inevitability (all living entities will eventually die), universality (death applies to all living entities), irreversibility (death is final and cannot be reversed), cessation (death entails the permanent breakdown of all biological and psychological functions), and causality (death results from a variety of causes) (Jaakkola & Slaughter, 2002; Longbottom & Slaughter, 2018). Research suggests that children acquire an understanding of the biological subcomponents of death at different rates, progressively contributing to a more mature and integrated understanding of death (Jingjing & Fuyan, 2024; Kenyon, 2001; Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007). Most children between the ages of five and seven demonstrate an emerging understanding of death, particularly regarding the subcomponents of universality, irreversibility, and cessation (Panagiotaki et al., 2018; Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007; Slaughter & Lyons, 2003). While children as young as 5 years may understand that death is inevitable and irreversible, a more complete understanding of its universality and the cessation of bodily functions typically develops between six to seven years (Jingjing & Fuyan, 2024; Mahmoodashiri & Khodabakhshi-Koolaei, 2020). Children typically understand the cessation of physical processes (the body ceasing to function), before they comprehend that the mental processes also cease with death (thoughts and emotions). Causality which involves recognising the complex biological processes leading to bodily breakdown tends to emerge later in development (Bering & Bjorklund, 2004; Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007). By the age of ten, most children have a mature understanding of all five subcomponents of death (Harris & Giménez, 2005; Menendez et al., 2020; Panagiotaki et al.,

2018). Mastery of these biological subcomponents is widely accepted as essential for the development of a mature understanding of death (Slaughter, 2005).

Beyond biological understanding, children's interpretations of death are shaped by their socio-cultural contexts, including religious and spiritual beliefs, highlighting the intersection of cognitive development and cultural socialisation (Mahmoodashiri & Khodabakhshi-Koolaei, 2020; Rosengren et al., 2014). Their concepts of death may integrate both objective biological knowledge and subjective, culturally influenced perspectives, such as religious and spiritual explanations (Kenyon, 2001). While children may recognise that bodily processes cease upon death, they may simultaneously hold beliefs that psychological or spiritual processes persist beyond death (Legare et al., 2012; Panagiotaki et al., 2018). Such beliefs may include the notion that the deceased retain the ability to think, experience emotions, or maintain some form of connection with the living. Additionally, children may conceptualise the spirit or soul as continuing to exist independently of the body in an alternative realm, thereby endorsing notions of an afterlife. This dual understanding is observed among both religious and non-religious children, although it tends to be more prevalent among those with religious backgrounds (Harris & Koenig, 2006; Menendez et al., 2020). These understandings reflect the complex interplay between biological knowledge and culturally influenced beliefs about death during childhood.

### ***Making sense of death in cultural context***

Understanding death poses a significant challenge for young children, as it is a complex, multidimensional concept. It integrates biological understanding, emotional preparedness, socially and culturally constructed beliefs, personal experiences, and spiritual or religious interpretations (Slaughter, 2005). The layered nature of this concept requires children to integrate information across multiple domains, making the process of understanding death particularly challenging. Children's understanding of death, together with the rituals and meanings associated with it, is shaped by their cultural and social environments (Rosengren et al., 2014). Vygotsky (1978) emphasised that learning and development are fostered through interactions with more experienced others and influenced by the cultural–historical context in which the individual is situated. From this perspective, children acquire both knowledge and emotional understanding through guided participation with adults, caregivers, and peers. Extending this view, Rogoff (2003) highlights the importance of social participation in culturally structured activities. Through interactions with parents and other adults, children are guided toward what is considered culturally significant, enabling them to co-construct meaning and develop culturally relevant interpretations of their experiences. Central to this process is the role of cultural tools like language, symbols, artifacts, and rituals which mediate learning and shape how children come to understand complex concepts including those related to death.

Recognising that cultural–historical theory places particular importance on interactions with more experienced others in shaping children's development, studies have paid close attention to the content of children's questions and the ways in which parents respond to them (Gutiérrez et al., 2019; Rosengren et al., 2014). Parent–child conversations are especially critical in shaping young children's emerging understanding of death (Menendez et al., 2020), particularly because many aspects of death are not directly observable. While some elements, such as the cessation of bodily functions (for example, a dead animal no longer moving), are visible and concrete, other aspects are abstract and less observable through direct experience (for example, existence of an afterlife). In these instances, children must rely heavily on the information and explanations provided by adults to make sense of such unobservable aspects of death (Harris & Koenig, 2006). In the context of death, parent–child conversations function not merely to transmit factual knowledge but to scaffold children's understanding of culturally embedded concepts such as death, commemoration, and spiritual belief. Thereby, learning is situated not only within the child's cognitive capacities but also shaped by the norms, values, beliefs, practices, and expectations that guide interpretation and meaning-making.

### ***Children as young tourists***

To meaningfully understand childhood tourism, particularly in the context of heritage sites, it is essential to consider three interrelated complexities that shape young tourists' experiences. First, it is essential to examine children's conceptual understandings of death, which vary according to cognitive development, cultural context, and personal experience. This complexity is compounded by the fact that much of the tourism associated with death is underpinned by frameworks that assume a mature, adult understanding of death. However, such assumptions overlook the developmental realities of childhood. Children with an incomplete understanding of death may struggle to comprehend the content presented at sites associated with death (Patterson, 2007). Moreover, even when children demonstrate cognitive awareness of death, they may still lack the cognitive capacity to meaningfully engage with the content. Thus, children's experiences of death in tourism contexts cannot be assumed to mirror those of adults; rather, they require frameworks that account for developmental nuance and emotional sensitivity.

Second, while much of the existing literature on emotional geographies in tourism has focused on adult experiences (Nawijn & Biran, 2019), there remains a gap in understanding how children emotionally engage with institutional, non-personal encounters with death, such as those found in memorials, museums, and historic sites. The complexity arises from increasing concerns about their emotional vulnerability when confronted with death-related content (Kerr & Price, 2018). Unlike adults, who may process such experiences through cognitive reflection, historical knowledge, or culturally informed mourning practices, young children may lack the emotional preparedness needed to fully contextualise what they encounter. The concerns about their emotional vulnerability highlight the importance of recognising that their experiences are shaped not only by their stage of development but also by broader social and cultural contexts. It is essential to consider how children interpret and interact with death-related contexts in ways that reflect their distinctive modes of exploration and meaning-making, while also recognising their emotional capacities and fostering developmentally appropriate, meaningful engagement. Investigating these dimensions is crucial for deepening our understanding of how children experience, interpret, and derive meaning from commemorative spaces. Such inquiry reveals that children's emotional responses may differ significantly from those of adults, highlighting distinctive ways of experiencing and interpreting death in the context of tourism.

Third, research involving young children in tourism often centres on the methods used to generate meaningful data. This complexity emerges from the fact that children are typically accompanied by adults, and their experiences at such sites are frequently interpreted through the perspectives of these adults. Methodological approaches must therefore recognise the competence of children and their capacity to reflect on their own experiences, particularly when supported by responsive adults, who provide space for children to express themselves. Research affirms that children are active social agents who shape and are shaped by their social contexts (Christensen & Prout, 2005). From this perspective, children are viewed as co-constructors of meaning through their diverse interactions (Rogoff, 2003) and with support, can share their experiences, expectations, and understandings (James & Prout, 2014). Pursuing such research is essential for recognising and valuing children's perspectives, while also for challenging adult-centric interpretations and uncovering how they navigate, interpret, and negotiate meaning within the complexities of adult-child dynamics and the broader social contexts surrounding death (Kronaizl, 2019; Menendez et al., 2020).

The Hô Chí Minh Mausoleum offers a distinctive, context-specific case for examining how young visitors make sense of death and remembrance within a setting where cultural meaning, political ideology, and ritual practice are intertwined. As a site of national significance, the Mausoleum provides a tourism context to gain insight into how children navigate the spatial, symbolic, and affective dimensions of the site. In particular, this study seeks to understand how emotional encounters contribute to children's meaning-making around death and remembrance. The research question is: How do young children emotionally respond to the experience of visiting the Hô Chí Minh

Mausoleum? Examining young children's conceptualisations of death contributes to broader discussions on childhood tourism by enhancing our understanding of how death is communicated, experienced, and interpreted by young children within culturally and politically significant settings.

## Methods

Young children, accompanied by their parents, visited the Hồ Chí Minh Mausoleum, providing the context for this research. The Mausoleum, located in Ba Đình Square, Hanoi, attracts large numbers of both domestic and international visitors and is widely recognised as a site of national importance in Vietnam. The Mausoleum contains the embalmed body of Hồ Chí Minh, displayed in a glass sarcophagus, for public viewing. The Mausoleum also serves as a site for official ceremonies, particularly during commemorative events that honour Hồ Chí Minh's life and his contributions to the nation's history.

This research adopted an interpretive approach to examine the role of parent–child conversations in shaping young children's understanding of death and their emotional responses to death-related experiences (Patterson, 2007). In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents who visited the Mausoleum with their young children. In total, 19 parents participated in this study, accompanied by 23 young children. For the purpose of this study, the term 'young children' is specifically defined as individuals aged 4–8 years old. The semi-structured interview schedule consisted of questions centred on how parents explained the concept of death to their young children. Parents were asked to recount these conversations and to describe their children's emotional responses to the information provided. They were also asked to explain how they framed the significance of the Mausoleum, including how their narratives about the site and its meaning may have shaped their children's understanding of death, memory, and national commemoration. By eliciting information from parents, this approach provided valuable insights into young children's emotional engagement and meaning-making processes when encountering death-related experiences within the context of a commemorative site. Parents were assigned a random number (for example, Parent5) and ethical approval was granted by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

The interviews were analysed using inductive thematic analysis to identify patterns across the data, capturing the meanings parents attributed to their children's experiences and emotional responses during the visit to the Mausoleum (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytic process followed these phases: (a) reading each interview to become familiar with the data; (b) generating initial codes by making descriptive notes using parents' own words; (c) identifying initial themes by selecting text excerpts to illustrate the main idea of each theme; (d) reviewing themes by identifying recurrent patterns across the interviews; and (e) defining and labelling the themes. This process enabled the emergence of patterns, the categorisation of subthemes, and the identification of the key themes. To ensure rigour, two researchers independently analysed the data and, through group discussion, reached consensus on the codes, themes, sub-themes, and labels, ensuring that the content was suitably represented. In cases of contradictions, the team re-evaluated the data and redefined the themes accordingly.

## Findings and discussion

The Mausoleum is a highly specific tourism site, as it houses the embalmed body of Hồ Chí Minh. The accessibility and visibility of the embalmed corpse shape the way it is perceived (Schwartz, 2015). The architectural features, spatial layout, and ceremonial practices of the Mausoleum shape the emotional atmosphere and influence the overall tourism experience. For young children, the Mausoleum presents multiple striking and unfamiliar elements associated with death, often evoking a range of epistemic emotions. Children's emotional responses have been thematically grouped into six interrelated epistemic emotions: awe, surprise, excitement, interest, curiosity, and confusion.

These emotions typically arise in response to unexpected or extraordinary events (Goćłowska et al., 2021; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014; Pérez et al., 2023).

### ***Navigating the unknown: awe, surprise, excitement, interest, curiosity, and confusion***

Awe often arises when individuals encounter something perceived as vast, extraordinary, or beyond ordinary experience (Goćłowska et al., 2021; Pérez et al., 2023). For young children, viewing the embalmed body of Hô Chí Minh can elicit awe as the experience involves a sense of physical extraordinariness. As one parent described, ‘He thought it was fascinating to see a dead body that looked like it was just sleeping’ (Parent8). This encounter may evoke awe as children attempt to reconcile what they see with their existing understanding of death. Another parent reported, ‘When entering the Mausoleum, my child asked me if that was the real body of President Hô Chí Minh’ (Parent1). The sight of the embalmed body is both striking and perplexing, capturing a moment of uncertainty and wonder. The child’s need to verify whether the body was real suggests a struggle with the idea of preservation. This is further reinforced by the question, ‘My child also asked how long Uncle Hô had been there’ (Parent10). These questions highlight a sense of wonder regarding the body’s longevity, potentially evoking feelings of amazement at the idea that something can endure beyond normal expectations of death. Children’s questions suggest disbelief at how the body defies the typical appearance of death, which intensifies the sense of awe.

Beyond the embalmed body itself, children were also drawn to the Mausoleum’s imposing architecture, solemn atmosphere, and military presence. Awe often evokes a sense of smallness in relation to something vast, extraordinary, or beyond one’s usual experience. One child questioned, ‘... why the place was so large ...’ (Parent3). This question reflects an attempt to understand why such a vast space is dedicated to a single individual. The grand architecture, high ceilings, and solemn atmosphere may intensify children’s feeling of being small, thereby amplifying the awe-inspiring quality of the experience (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Piff et al., 2015). Children were also struck by the disciplined, ritualistic behaviour of the guards. Awe may be elicited by structured, ceremonial displays that convey a sense of importance, order, and reverence. As one parent described,

He asked about the team of soldiers standing guard, they stood for a long time solemnly. There were two rows of soldiers, four for the inner circle and eight for the outer circle. They stood in shifts, for a long time and solemnly like statues. (Parent1)

Such formal displays are rarely encountered in children’s daily lives. The disciplined stillness and uniformity of the guards challenge expectations of normal behaviour, thereby evoking a sense of awe. The combination of Hô Chí Minh’s historical significance and the grandeur of the Mausoleum likely intensify the emotional response. Children may perceive that they are witnessing something extraordinary and significant, deepening their awe.

### ***Excitement***

Excitement is characterised by a high-arousal, positive emotional response to something new, stimulating, or unexpected (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014; Silvia, 2006). At the Mausoleum, children’s excitement often emerged from the novelty of the experience such as large crowds, the presence of formal guards, and the overall sense of importance surrounding the site. One parent recounted, ‘My children were all excited’ (Parent18). Another parent elaborated, ‘My child was very excited before visiting Uncle Hô’s mausoleum. As you know, the process of moving in, lining up outside, and storing belongings was taken very seriously’ (Parent10). For young children, excitement before entering suggests a sense of anticipation, likely arising from the unfamiliarity of the rituals, the novelty of the experience, and the significance of the site as a place of national importance (Vogl et al., 2020). The formality of the entry procedures directs children’s attention to social rituals, and

excitement thus serves to amplify their perceptual engagement with both the procedural and symbolic elements of the Mausoleum.

Some parents emphasised the historical and cultural importance of Hồ Chí Minh to their children. One parent shared, '... I explained to him that President Hồ Chí Minh was the leader of Vietnam' (Parent1), while another remarked,

I explained to my children that Hồ Chí Minh's body was treated differently because he was special. Unlike ordinary people who are buried or cremated, his body was intentionally preserved so that every Vietnamese person could visit him for generations to come. It's truly one of a kind. (Parent8)

This framing may heighten children's sense of excitement when encountering his embalmed body. One parent noted, 'When he saw the glass case inside the Mausoleum containing the body of President Hồ, he was very excited' (Parent1). The opportunity to see the preserved body of the nation's leader may transform the visit into a once-in-a-lifetime event: '... visiting his mausoleum was an obvious must' (Parent10). The act of viewing Hồ Chí Minh's embalmed body is both historically significant and physically extraordinary, potentially intensifying children's emotional responses. Importantly, rather than a singular impactful encounter, parents described a recurring experience that continues to elicit strong emotional responses from their children: 'Every time we visited Uncle Hồ's mausoleum, the children always felt excited, even though they had been there many times' (Parent19). This suggests that the Mausoleum is not only historically significant but also emotionally sustained, with repeated visits reinforcing affective engagement over time.

### **Interest**

Excitement often overlaps with interest, as both emotions motivate individuals to explore and make sense of novel or complex phenomena (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014; Silvia, 2006). In the context of children's visits to the Mausoleum, interest was elicited by the unfamiliar and culturally specific practice of embalming. As one parent observed, '... he is interested in why President Hồ Chí Minh's body is placed here' (Parent1), suggesting that the child's interest was triggered by the novelty and perceived uniqueness of the embalming practice within its broader cultural context. Interest serves to sustain engagement and prompts further exploration of information. Parents played a crucial role in maintaining this interest by offering explanations that helped contextualise the site's distinctiveness. As one parent explained, 'This is very rare because not everyone who dies is embalmed' (Parent5), framing the uniqueness of the embalming practice as an exception to normative funeral customs. Another parent emphasised the site's national importance, stating, 'This is also a very special thing in Vietnam' (Parent1), thereby positioning the rarity and symbolic meaning of the embalmed body within a broader socio-cultural narrative.

Many parents build on their children's interest as an opportunity to transmit knowledge and foster deeper understanding. In such instances, children were not merely passive recipients of information, rather they were actively guided in interpreting the Mausoleum's significance within a broader cultural and national context. As one parent described, 'I explained to my son that there are many soldiers guarding Uncle Ho's body' (Parent9), positioning the guards as part of a ceremonial expression of national reverence. Another parent reported, 'I explained to him that Hồ Chí Minh is the pride of national history... who is highly respected by everyone' (Parent1), framing Hồ Chí Minh as a figure of collective admiration. By drawing attention to the presence of guards, parents implicitly positioned the Mausoleum as a site of historical significance and reverence. The act of guarding the body of the leader symbolises protection, which children may come to associate with reverence, authority, and historical importance (Harper, 2010; Tung, 2014). As such, parents supported the development of epistemic interest by encouraging children to interpret unfamiliar cultural practices not as anomalies, but as meaningful and intentional aspects of the commemorative space.

## Curiosity

Curiosity is often aroused by unexpected information or events that reveal gaps in one's understanding (Loewenstein, 1994; Silvia, 2006). At the Mausoleum, children's curiosity may be elicited by unexpected or ambiguous information about death, highlighting knowledge gaps that prompt them to ask questions, seek explanations from adults, or attempt to make sense of the experience on their own. Parents recalled their children asking broad questions: 'He was also curious about how long Uncle Hô would remain there and whether he would stay there forever' (Parent17) and 'she was quite curious by asking why Uncle Hô is resting there, why his body lies in a glass case with dim lights, why there were military guards' (Parent3). Such questions reflect children's curiosity in response to unfamiliar and conceptually complex encounters involving the display of death. Epistemic curiosity is widely recognised as valuable for learning as it fosters active exploration and the acquisition of new knowledge (Litman et al., 2005; von Stumm et al., 2011).

Some children were curious about the ceremonial behaviour of the guards themselves. One parent recounted,

My child asked how they stood there and if they needed to drink water, I also explained to my child that they were trained, practiced, then as the tour guide explained, what were the standards to be a guard in terms of physical appearance, moral character, and other factors to be selected ... (Parent1)

Curiosity is triggered by observing something unfamiliar and remarkable in the stoic, unmoving guards. This curiosity reflects the children's desire to understand a situation that challenges their everyday experiences and expectation. The parent's response enhances this learning experience by providing explanations about the training and selection standards for the guards, linking the guards' observable behaviour to more abstract concepts such as discipline, moral character, and physical criteria. This, in turn, highlights children's active efforts to navigate the symbolic aspects of the Mausoleum, illustrating that young tourists do not passively absorb history but instead engage with it through observation and inquiry.

Many Vietnamese children grow up hearing stories of Hô Chí Minh as a revered national figure, shaping their early understanding of history. These narratives, often shared by grandparents or older relatives who lived through significant historical events, create a sense of intrigue and anticipation about visiting the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum: 'My in-laws were soldiers back in the old days ... They often shared stories about Uncle Hô, so my child ... was curious about Hô Chí Minh's Mausoleum' (Parent3). For children who have been exposed to such accounts, visiting the Mausoleum is not merely a passive experience, but rather the culmination of their curiosity, a tangible opportunity to see for themselves the leader they have heard so much about. As one parent reflected, 'I hope the trip has satisfied my child's curiosity and desire to visit the Hô Chí Minh Mausoleum and see the preserved body of President Hô Chí Minh' (Parent1). The parent's framing of the visit as an opportunity to 'satisfy' curiosity highlights how young children construct knowledge through exploration and direct encounters. As such, this curiosity is both cultivated within the family and fulfilled through direct experience. The visit serves not merely as an educational outing but as an opportunity for the children to bridge the gap between the stories they have heard and the physical reality of the site. The embalmed body of Hô Chí Minh becomes a focal point for this curiosity, reinforcing the connection between familial storytelling and historical commemoration.

## Confusion

Confusion arises when individuals encounter contradictory, ambiguous, or unexpected information that does not easily align with their existing knowledge or experiences (D'Mello & Graesser, 2014). Some young children may have understanding of death-related practices, such as funerals involve family gatherings. As one parent recalled, 'About 2 years ago, my children's grandmother died and they have returned to my hometown to attend the funeral. I also just explained that when grandma passed away, they would not be able to see her again' (Parent18). For these children,

their understanding of death is based on prior experiences involving burial was a key part of the process. The Mausoleum, however, introduces practices that may appear contradictory to this understanding, thereby challenging their existing understanding of death. This can lead to confusion, as illustrated by this parent, 'After seeing Uncle Hô lying there, my children asked why he was lying there but did not get taken to be buried . . . they just felt confused' (Parent18). This parent further elaborated, 'I understand that my children had a comparison as to why their grandmother died, they could no longer see her, but in the case of Uncle Hô, everyone could still see him' (Parent18).

Confusion may also emerge when children encounter new information that highlights gaps in their existing knowledge (Fayn et al., 2019; Vogl et al., 2020). When confronted with unfamiliar death practices, such as an embalmed body being displayed in a public, ceremonial space rather than being buried, children may struggle to reconcile these differences, resulting in a sense of confusion: 'The confusing part for him revolves around the guards and management in the mausoleum and why Uncle Ho's body is placed here, why so many people come to visit' (Parent1). As such, confusion can serve as a bridge between uncertainty and learning, encouraging children to seek clarification and construct new understandings to resolve their confusion (D'Mello et al., 2014; D'Mello & Graesser, 2014). One way to resolve such incongruity is through the exploration of new knowledge (Litman et al., 2005). In these instances, children may attempt to make sense of the site's cultural and historical significance. This interpretive process often requires adult support. As one parent reported, 'I explained that it was the place where Hô Chí Minh's body was kept after he passed away, so that people from all over could come to visit and pay tributes to him' (Parent18). Through such guidance, adults help contextualise unfamiliar commemorative practices, supporting children as they navigate the socio-cultural meanings of the site.

## **Fear**

Although fear is not typically classified as an epistemic emotion, it is nevertheless worthwhile to consider in the context of young children's experiences with death, particularly in relation to their experiences with sites such as the Hô Chí Minh Mausoleum. Fear is among the most commonly reported emotional responses to the concept of death (Moore & Williamson, 2003). Notably, children as young as 5-years of age have reported experiencing fear in relation to death (Muris et al., 2000). For some young children, death can be an overwhelming and emotionally complex concept, particularly when it involves the loss of a loved one:

... when my father passed away, my son witnessed, for the first time, the moment of death ... as my father passed away at home. He was both scared and sad, and he cried a lot. It was a mix of emotions having to witness that event. He understood that his grandfather would no longer be present in our lives. (Parent11)

This may indicate an emerging awareness of the irreversibility of death (Jaakkola & Slaughter, 2002; Longbottom & Slaughter, 2018), a realisation that may evoke fear alongside sadness. It highlights the tension between emotional responses (sadness) and the uncertainty surrounding death (fear), which may be intensified when it is witnessed directly (Slaughter, 2005).

The corpse has the capacity to evoke fear (Verdery, 1999). However, children's emotional responses at the Mausoleum appeared to be guided more by epistemic emotions rather than fear. According to one parent, 'I don't think my child was scared at all' (Parent10). Similarly, another parent observed, 'I haven't seen them feel scared when they see Uncle Hô's body' (Parent19). These responses also seemed to be shaped by social and environmental cues: 'she didn't see anyone there being fearful and that could explain why she didn't have any fears either' (Parent3). At the Mausoleum, adults engage in rituals of remembrance, which collectively create a ceremonial atmosphere that may mitigate fear in young visitors. Particularly, pre-visit framing played a protective role in emotionally preparing children for the experience: 'I didn't notice any clear signs of fear from my child. Part of the reason is that I had already explained to them what

to expect ...' (Parent11). The controlled setting of the Mausoleum, shaped by the adult behaviours, ceremonial protocols, and parental guidance, appears to foster an environment in which children could engage with the concept of death without experiencing it as emotionally distressing. Rather than eliciting fear, this atmosphere may contribute to a more composed or even detached understanding of death. Thus, early parent–child conversations about death are critical not only for fostering children's cognitive understanding of death, but also for mitigating the fear and anxiety that may be associated with it (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007).

### **General discussion**

For young children, death and commemoration are often abstract concepts, yet the Mausoleum provides a tangible encounter with these ideas. The preservation and display of the embalmed body of Hô Chí Minh are central to the broader narrative of history, collective memory, and national identity (Foltyn, 2008; Hüwelmeier, 2021; Marouda, 2013). Within this context, children encountered a setting that was complex, unfamiliar, and not readily understood. Such experiences frequently give rise to a range of epistemic emotions, including awe, surprise, interest, curiosity, and confusion (Fayn et al., 2019; Gocłowska et al., 2021). These emotional responses are central to learning, as they signal moments of epistemic disruption and facilitate the development of new understandings (Pekrun et al., 2017). In this way, the Mausoleum functions not only as a site of cultural and historical significance but also as an affective space in which young visitors encounter unfamiliar and emotionally charged experiences that may prompt developmental shifts in their understanding of death and remembrance. These experiences are situated within broader cultural contexts and symbolic spatial structures, positioning the Mausoleum as a socially mediated site where children's responses to death, ritual, and memory are shaped and negotiated through a dynamic interplay between personal engagement and collective cultural narratives.

Unlike other methods of bodily disposal, such as burial or cremation, which tend to disperse or transform the body, embalming preserves the bodily materiality in a lifelike state. Therefore, the corpse retains a striking physical resemblance to the living, with its overall appearance preserved. For many young children, encountering Hô Chí Minh's embalmed body may evoke a surreal experience, confronting them with an unusual sight that challenges their emerging understanding of life and death. Epistemic emotions provide children with an awareness of the limits of their knowledge, particularly in the presence of discrepancy, incongruence, or conflict. This is especially evident when they are confronted with abstract concepts or complex cultural symbols, such as national remembrance. At the Mausoleum, this awareness may involve directing attention to specific aspects of the experience, including viewing the embalmed body, encountering the formal setting, or observing and participating in ritualised behaviours. For many children, these unexpected and unfamiliar aspects of the site elicited a mixture of surprise and awe, often associated with heightened interest, curiosity, and confusion. These epistemic emotions may promote a search for new information as children attempt to resolve uncertainties in their knowledge (Horstmann & Herwig, 2015; Noordewier & Breugelmans, 2013; Renninger & Hidi, 2016).

Children's conversations with more knowledgeable parents about what it means to be dead and the significance of the person commemorated at the site are central to how they make sense of death within tourism contexts. Through such conversations, children are not only introduced to historical narratives and cultural traditions, but also supported in interpreting the concept of death within broader socio-cultural narratives. Emotionally charged encounters can prompt children to actively engage in meaning-making processes, such as asking questions, seeking clarification, or reflecting on their observations, thereby constructing new understandings that bridge gaps in their existing knowledge. Through open and direct communication and age-appropriate information about death, children are encouraged to articulate their thoughts, express uncertainties, and receive guidance, enabling them to co-construct new understandings with their parents while enhancing both their biological and cultural awareness of death (Fredman, 2018). Parents' accounts of these

conversations reveal not only the content of their explanations but also their children's emotional responses, offering valuable insight into the interactive nature of meaning-making. Importantly, these exchanges are shaped by socio-cultural contexts, as broader beliefs, practices, and rituals surrounding death influence the kinds of questions children ask and how parents interpret and respond to them (Rosengren et al., 2014).

### **Implications and directions for further research**

Tourism sites play a significant role in shaping young children's early perceptions of death, particularly in contexts where death is commemorated. This research has important theoretical implications for tourism studies by extending emotional geographies of tourism beyond predominantly adult-centred perspectives (Nawijn & Biran, 2019). Young children may engage with these sites from a different emotional standpoint, often experiencing a mixture of epistemic emotions such as awe, surprise, interest, curiosity, and confusion as they attempt to make sense of unfamiliar and abstract concepts, such as death and memorialisation. While not typically classified as 'basic' emotions such as happiness, sadness, anger, or fear (Siedlecka & Denson, 2019), epistemic emotions possess affective, cognitive, and motivational dimensions that influence both behaviour and learning. Understanding epistemic emotional responses provides valuable insights into the ways in which young children engage with, make meaning of, and emotionally navigate encounters with sites associated with death. In particular, examining how children develop emotional relationships with memorial sites contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how visitors across age groups engage with, interpret, and emotionally respond to these spaces. It highlights the evolving nature of emotional engagement and the ways in which these spaces are experienced across different life stages in tourism contexts.

At tourism sites associated with death, the presence or absence of fear may influence how young children process and make sense of death. Fear of death can disrupt their developing understanding of death (Ellis et al., 2013; Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007), creating emotional barriers to engagement. However, the Mausoleum embedded within broader social and cultural narratives of national pride, honour, and respect, appears to mitigate fear in young children. Frequently attuned to the emotional cues of surrounding adults and ritual practices, children are often guided by a prevailing emphasis on reverence, aligning their emotional responses with collective memory and commemorative intent rather than fear. Their observations and questions indicate an active effort to make sense of death within a non-personal, institutionalised setting, where learning is mediated through state symbolism and rituals rather than personal grief or fear. These findings support the perspective that children's early experiences with death-related sites are not necessarily associated with negative emotional responses (Kerr & Price, 2018). Many children express a desire to see the body, ask questions, and understand the significance of the site. Such behaviours indicate an openness to exploration and meaning-making. The absence of fear appears to facilitate this process, shaping how young children interact with and seek understanding about death, memorialisation, and the broader cultural practices embedded within such commemorative spaces.

The findings of this study have important implications for tourism sites, where epistemic emotions are likely to arise (Pekrun et al., 2017; Pérez et al., 2023; Silvia, 2006). Memorials and museums often seek to educate children while fostering emotional engagement, yet their effectiveness depends on how young visitors process and respond to unfamiliar and complex concepts like death. When exhibitions successfully elicit positive epistemic emotions, children may be more inclined to ask questions, explore further, and construct meaning from their experiences. However, if these emotions shift toward fear, such engagement may be hindered. Understanding how young children navigate epistemic emotions can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of exhibitions and educational settings. By evaluating how young visitors respond to various stimuli, site managers can design developmentally appropriate exhibits that support children's ability to process complex themes, making these sites not only places of remembrance but also

spaces for educational experiences. These insights can inform tourism and heritage policy by emphasising the importance of child-inclusive interpretive strategies and exhibition designs informed by developmental psychology. In curriculum design, the study highlights the value of integrating site-based learning that prepares children for emotionally and cognitively complex content. Collaborations between heritage institutions, schools, and families can help scaffold children's understanding of death-related themes before, during, and after visits, enhancing learning while reducing distress. Age-appropriate pre-visit materials and post-visit discussion prompts or reflective activities can further support children in making sense of what they encounter and deepen their understanding.

The findings of this study suggest that epistemic emotions may co-occur or arise sequentially as young children engage with tourism sites associated with death. Future research could further explore the dynamics of epistemic emotions, for instance, which epistemic emotions are more likely to emerge first, and how they influence subsequent emotional and cognitive engagement when children encounter unfamiliar or complex concepts. The main limitation of this study centred on young Vietnamese children in the specific context of the Hồ Chí Minh Mausoleum. While the findings offer valuable insights, they may not be directly generalisable to other age groups, cultural contexts, or memorial sites. Comparative studies across diverse cultural and historical contexts could explore whether the sequencing or co-occurrence of epistemic emotions varies according to prior knowledge, cultural perspectives on death, or differing interpretations of memorial sites. The unique spatiality and ritualised atmosphere of the Mausoleum may have particularly shaped the children's responses, raising important questions about how site-specific characteristics drive affective engagement. An additional avenue for future research could investigate whether children's epistemic emotions differ when engaging with such sites virtually rather than in person, given the more mediated and potentially less immersive nature of digital experiences. Understanding these differences is especially important as digital technologies become more common in educational and commemorative contexts.

## Conclusions

This study has highlighted how young children's visits to sites of death and commemoration such as the Hồ Chí Minh Mausoleum are shaped by a dynamic interplay of developmental understanding, emotional engagement, cultural context, and adult mediation. Rather than viewing children as passive observers, the research highlights their capacity to actively make meaning through emotional, embodied, and exploratory modes of engagement with complex heritage spaces. By focusing on young children's epistemic emotions, this study contributes to ongoing conversations on national identity, memory, and affect, offering a perspective from early childhood that has been largely absent from tourism research. It highlights the importance of developing methodological and theoretical approaches that move beyond adult-centric interpretations and instead recognise young children's distinctive ways of thinking, feeling, and remembering when engaging with tourism sites. For tourism researchers, this work opens critical avenues for examining how early childhood both shapes and is shaped by tourism encounters. As the field continues to explore emotional geographies of tourism, greater attention must be given to how young children co-construct meaning in heritage and memorial contexts. This research encourages tourism scholars to incorporate young children's perspectives into studies of heritage interpretation, visitor experience, and affective learning. In doing so, it opens a path toward developing a construct-specific framework that captures young children's affective and interpretive responses to sites of death and commemoration, thereby contributing to the theorisation of early childhood experiences within tourism.

## Author contributions

CRediT: **Emma Dresler**: Conceptualization.

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