

Storytelling-Based Cultural Heritage Engagement for Children at Historical Tourism Sites: A Literature Review for Creative Industry Development

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ABSTRACT

Historical tourism sites contain cultural, architectural, symbolic, and social meanings that may be difficult for school-age children to interpret through factual explanation alone. This narrative literature review examines how storytelling can support heritage engagement among children aged approximately 6–12 years and how this engagement can inform creative-industry development. Fourteen academic and institutional sources published between 1990 and 2025 were purposively synthesized across five themes: heritage interpretation, child-centered learning, site-based experience, digital and transmedia storytelling, and creative-industry pathways. The reviewed literature indicates that oral, visual, performative, digital, and gamified storytelling can support imagination, emotional connection, inquiry, and cultural awareness when narratives are linked to authentic places and participatory activities. Potential creative outputs include educational tours, children's publishing, animation, games, augmented and virtual reality, workshops, performances, and culturally grounded merchandise. The article proposes a five-stage framework connecting heritage resources, child-centered narrative design, site-based experience, creative production, and cultural engagement outcomes. Its contribution is to integrate educational, heritage, and creative-industry perspectives while emphasizing historical accuracy, community participation, child safeguarding, accessibility, intellectual property, and fair benefit sharing. Because the review is narrative and based on a limited purposive corpus, the framework requires further testing through site-specific empirical studies

Keywords: Cultural Heritage Storytelling; School-Age Children Children; Historical Tourism Sites; Digital Storytelling; Creative Industry

INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage is not only a collection of monuments, artifacts, buildings, and historical landscapes; it is also a living source of identity, memory, values, and community knowledge. Historical tourism sites allow children to encounter the past through physical spaces, visual symbols, stories, rituals, and collective

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memories. However, conventional explanations that emphasize dates, names, and chronology may not be sufficient to create meaningful engagement for young audiences.

This review focuses on school-age children, approximately 6–12 years old. The range is used as an analytical boundary rather than a universal developmental category because reading ability, attention span, cultural background, and prior knowledge vary considerably within it. Younger children generally require shorter narratives, concrete characters, repetition, and sensory cues, whereas older children can engage with multiple perspectives, historical ambiguity, inquiry, and more complex moral questions.

Storytelling is relevant to heritage interpretation because it can translate cultural information into narratives that are easier to follow, imagine, discuss, and remember. The ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites emphasizes public understanding, meaningful experience, authenticity, inclusiveness, and connections between people and heritage places (ICOMOS, 2008). For children, these principles can be operationalized through character-based narratives, guided exploration, visual media, play, questions, and participatory tasks.

Heritage storytelling also has implications for creative-industry development. Cultural knowledge, symbolic resources, artistic expression, and creative labor can be transformed into educational services, cultural media, tourism experiences, and locally produced goods (UNESCO, 2022). Nevertheless, commercialization creates responsibilities concerning historical accuracy, community ownership, intellectual property, representation, and the distribution of benefits.

Previous studies have examined storytelling in museums, heritage tourism, digital media, and cultural learning, but these strands are often discussed separately. Existing research frequently addresses general tourists or youth rather than school-age children, while creative outputs are commonly listed without explaining the actors, ethical safeguards, and value-creation process that connect heritage interpretation to production. This article therefore asks: (1) how can storytelling support school-age children’s heritage engagement; (2) which storytelling forms are appropriate for historical tourism sites; (3) how can these experiences generate responsible creative-industry outputs; and (4) which ethical, cultural, and child-protection principles should guide development? The article contributes an integrated framework linking heritage resources, child-centered narrative design, site-based experience, creative production, and cultural engagement outcomes.



Figure 1. Conceptual framework of storytelling-based cultural heritage engagement for children.

METHOD

This study employed a narrative literature review because the topic crosses heritage studies, tourism, children's education, museum learning, communication design, digital media, and creative-industry studies. The purpose was not to calculate effect sizes or claim exhaustive coverage, but to synthesize conceptual relationships, identify patterns across heterogeneous sources, and develop a framework for practice and future research.

The review corpus was assembled purposively through iterative searches of scholarly search engines, publisher webpages, and institutional repositories. Search combinations included "heritage storytelling," "children AND historical sites," "museum education AND storytelling," "digital storytelling AND cultural tourism," "youth engagement AND heritage," and "creative industries AND cultural heritage." Backward searching from relevant publications was also used to identify foundational works and international guidance.

Sources were included when they addressed at least one of the following: heritage interpretation through narrative; children's or youth cultural learning; site-based or museum experience; digital or transmedia storytelling; cultural tourism; or creative-industry development. Sources focused only on destination marketing without interpretive or educational relevance were excluded. Foundational publications were retained for theoretical framing, while work from 2020–2025 was prioritized for current digital and tourism developments. The final analytical corpus comprised 14 academic and institutional sources published between 1990 and 2025.

The corpus contains conceptual books and charters, narrative and systematic reviews, qualitative case studies, and quantitative tourism research. Evidence directly involving school-age children remains limited; therefore, findings from adult tourist and youth studies were treated as indirect evidence and were not generalized automatically to children. The term "children" in the synthesis refers primarily to the 6–12-year age range, while studies using broader categories are identified as such.

The sources were coded thematically using five analytical categories: (1) storytelling as heritage interpretation; (2) children's cognitive, emotional, sensory, and social engagement; (3) site-based narrative experience; (4) digital and transmedia storytelling; and (5) creative-industry pathways and ethical governance. Recurring concepts, contrasts, limitations, and relationships were compared across sources. The resulting framework is a conceptual synthesis rather than a statistically validated model.

Table 1. Core literature and its contribution to the review

Source	Design/context	Population or focus	Contribution to the review
ICOMOS (2008)	International interpretation charter	Heritage sites and visitors	Principles of accuracy, access, authenticity, participation, and sustainable interpretation.
Falk and Dierking (2016)	Museum-learning framework	Museum visitors	Explains learning through personal, social, and physical contexts.
Nabil (2021)	Conceptual review and practice guidelines	School children	Supports oral storytelling and fact-based fiction in extracurricular heritage programs.
Cahyani et al. (2023)	Cultural-tourism case study	Heritage organization and audiences	Shows how digital storytelling can extend cultural communication beyond the physical visit.

Source	Design/context	Population or focus	Contribution to the review
Campos et al. (2023)	Heritage-tourism study	Tourists and guides	Highlights interaction, memorability, and co-created heritage experience; evidence is indirect for children.
Leong et al. (2024)	Survey of 499 heritage tourists	Adult cultural-heritage tourists	Links historical storytelling, guide interaction, authentic place, and educational, emotional, and experiential value.
Kuswardani et al. (2025)	Qualitative observation, interviews, and documentation	Children at historical-tourism activities	Identifies voice, expression, visual aids, cultural values, curiosity, and identity as engagement elements.
Kasemsarn and Nickpour (2025)	Systematic literature review	Youth and social-media cultural tourism	Synthesizes multimedia, social-platform integration, participation, and cultural authenticity; requires adaptation for younger children.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Storytelling as Heritage Interpretation

Storytelling can support heritage interpretation by connecting architecture, artifacts, inscriptions, landscapes, and historical events with human motives, conflicts, skills, beliefs, and everyday life. A site becomes more intelligible when children can relate physical evidence to people and actions. However, narrative accessibility should not be confused with unrestricted fictionalization: the reviewed literature supports creative adaptation only when the distinction between documented history, community memory, legend, and invented narrative is made clear.

For school-age children, narrative design should be matched to developmental needs. Children aged approximately 6–8 generally benefit from simple plots, repetition, concrete visual symbols, short episodes, and direct participation. Children aged approximately 9–12 can engage with multiple viewpoints, cause-and-effect relationships, evidence-based questions, and ethical dilemmas. These age bands are indicative rather than rigid, and programs should also account for language proficiency, disability, prior knowledge, and cultural background.

Nabil (2021) shows how oral storytelling performance can communicate heritage to school children through extracurricular and out-of-school programs. Kuswardani et al. (2025) further identify vocal intonation, facial expression, and visual aids as elements that can strengthen children’s attention and cultural understanding. Taken together, these studies suggest that heritage storytelling is most useful when factual knowledge, performance, and opportunities for response are combined rather than delivered as a one-way explanation.

Children’s Engagement with Cultural Heritage

Children’s heritage engagement includes cognitive, emotional, sensory, social, and creative dimensions. Cognitively, narratives can organize historical information and symbolic meanings. Emotionally, they may support empathy and curiosity. Sensory elements such as sound, movement, images, costumes, and handling replicas can make abstract information more concrete. Socially and creatively, questions, drawing, role-play, and retelling allow children to negotiate meaning rather than remain passive recipients.

Museum-learning theory emphasizes that meaning emerges through the interaction of personal, social, and physical contexts (Falk & Dierking, 2016). At historical sites, the child’s prior knowledge, the guide or teacher, peers and family, the atmosphere of the place, and the objects encountered all shape interpretation. Storytelling can connect these contexts, but its impact should be evaluated through observable indicators such as attention, questions, recall, interpretation, participation, and respect for the site.

The reviewed literature therefore supports a multimodal approach rather than a single “best” storytelling form. Oral narration may be suitable for direct emotional connection; visual stories can support comprehension and memory; performance can encourage embodied participation; digital media can provide layered information; and games can structure exploration and problem solving. Selection should be based on learning objectives, age, accessibility, site rules, available staff, and the cultural sensitivity of the material.

Table 2. Forms of storytelling for children at historical tourism sites

Storytelling Form	Example at Historical Sites	Children’s Engagement	Creative Industry Potential
Oral storytelling	Guided story delivered by a guide, educator, or local storyteller	Listening, imagination, emotional connection	Storytelling tour package
Visual storytelling	Illustrated maps, story cards, picture books, object images	Visual memory and symbolic understanding	Children’s books, comics, visual guidebooks
Performative storytelling	Puppet show, costume narration, role-play, mini theatre	Participation and embodied learning	Performance tourism and creative workshops
Digital storytelling	Audio guides, QR stories, animation, AR characters, mobile apps	Interactive learning and media engagement	Digital content, apps, AR/VR experiences
Gamified storytelling	Quest trail, treasure hunt, clue cards, heritage passport	Exploration and problem solving	Board games, digital games, heritage trails

Historical Tourism Sites as Narrative Learning Spaces

Historical tourism sites can function as narrative learning spaces because children encounter cultural evidence in its spatial context. Walking through gates, courtyards, streets, ruins, museums, and landscapes allows narrative sequence to be associated with location, movement, observation, and atmosphere. This relationship between story and place distinguishes site-based learning from classroom explanation or stand-alone digital content.

Studies of general heritage tourists indicate that storytelling, guide interaction, and authentic place can contribute to memorable and co-created experiences (Campos et al., 2023; Leong et al., 2024). These findings are useful for designing children’s programs, but they are indirect because the participants were not primarily school-age children. Adaptation therefore requires shorter activity cycles, clearer learning goals, safeguarding, and evaluation methods appropriate to children.

A child-centered heritage trail may begin with a question, mystery, character, or mission. Each station can provide a short narrative episode, an object or architectural clue, and a task such as observing, comparing, drawing, choosing evidence, or retelling. The activity should not reward speed alone; it should encourage careful looking, respectful behavior, and the ability to distinguish historical evidence from imaginative reconstruction.

Digital and Transmedia Storytelling for Children

Digital and transmedia storytelling can combine narrative with images, audio, animation, augmented reality, virtual reality, mobile applications, and social media. Digital media can provide language options, audio description, enlarged details, alternative perspectives, and pre- or post-visit learning. Its role should be to deepen children's relationship with the physical site rather than displace observation of the place itself.

Kasemsarn and Nickpour (2025) identify multimedia engagement, social-platform integration, participation, and cultural authenticity as key dimensions of youth-oriented digital heritage storytelling. Because their framework addresses youth and social media broadly, application to younger children requires additional safeguards: parental or teacher mediation, minimal data collection, age-appropriate interface design, advertising-free learning environments, accessible alternatives, and clear limits on screen use.

Possible applications include QR-code story trails, child-friendly audio guides, animated object biographies, augmented-reality characters, interactive maps, and digital heritage passports. Cahyani et al. (2023) indicates that digital storytelling can extend cultural communication beyond a physical visit. Nevertheless, technology should be selected only when it adds interpretive value, can be maintained locally, and does not create exclusion for children without devices, connectivity, or digital confidence.

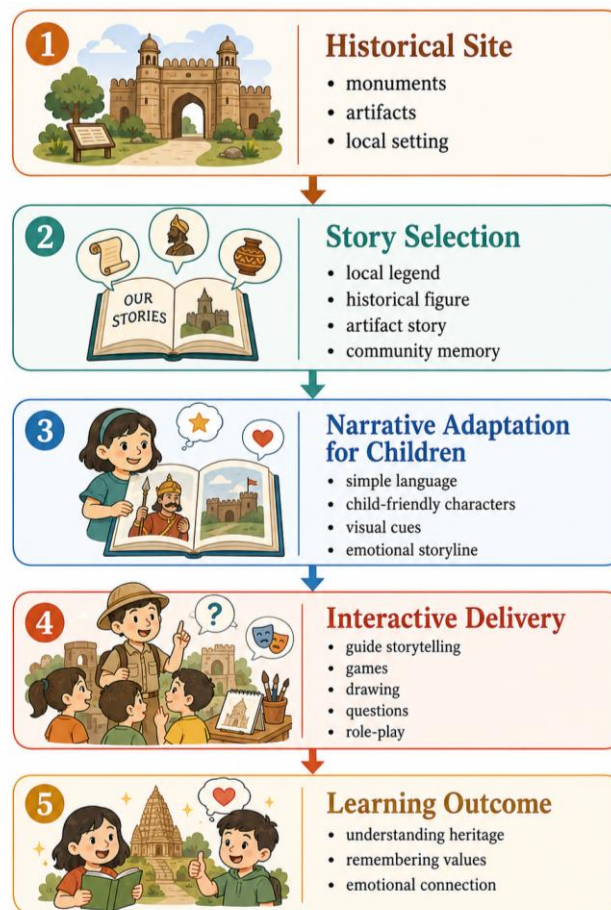


Figure 2. Storytelling process at historical tourism sites for children.

Creative Industry Development from Heritage Storytelling

Storytelling-based heritage engagement can provide a foundation for creative-industry development when historical sites are treated as sources of cultural knowledge rather than raw material for unrestricted commercialization. The value-creation process begins with research and community validation, continues through narrative and experience design, moves into media or product production, and is completed through delivery, evaluation, maintenance, and reinvestment in heritage and local capacity.

This process involves multiple actors: cultural custodians and local communities validate knowledge and representation; historians and heritage managers assess accuracy; educators and child-development specialists adapt learning goals; storytellers, illustrators, performers, designers, and developers create media and experiences; tourism operators and schools organize access; and local artisans produce culturally grounded goods. Collaboration is necessary so that creative outputs do not separate symbols from their meanings or exclude the communities from which the stories originate.

The experience-economy perspective explains how value can emerge from meaningful and memorable experiences rather than products alone (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). For historical sites, however, commercial value should be balanced with public education and conservation. Practical models may combine ticketed storytelling tours, school partnerships, publishing and licensing, workshops, digital services, and locally made merchandise. Agreements should clarify intellectual property, attribution, quality control, revenue sharing, maintenance costs, and the proportion of income reinvested in community participation and heritage preservation.

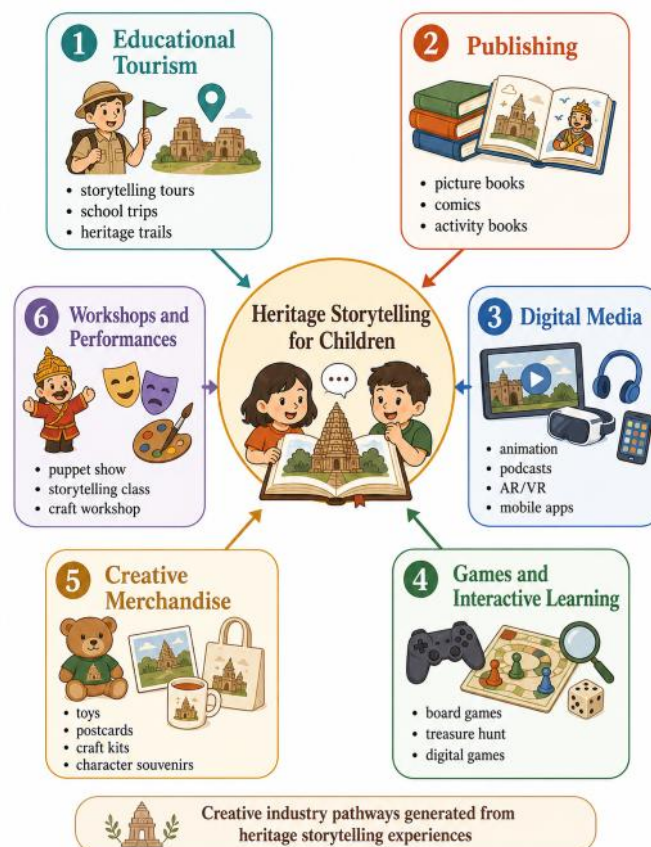


Figure 3. Creative industry outputs from heritage storytelling for children.

Table 2. Creative industry opportunities generated from heritage storytelling

Heritage Resource	Storytelling Transformation	Creative Output	Engagement Outcome
Historical building	Story of past inhabitants, builders, or guardians	Guided storytelling tour; illustrated site map	Spatial imagination and historical curiosity
Local legend or folklore	Character-based adventure and moral conflict	Comic, animation, puppet show	Emotional connection and moral learning
Artifact or museum object	Object biography and hidden story	Audio story, AR scan, activity worksheet	Observation and inquiry
Traditional craft	Artisan narrative and making process	Workshop, craft kit, merchandise	Skill learning and cultural appreciation
Historical route	Quest or mystery trail	Gamified map, digital passport	Active exploration and memory

Ethical and Cultural Considerations

Storytelling for children at historical tourism sites must balance creative accessibility with cultural and educational responsibility. Creative adaptation may make heritage easier to understand, but it should not erase uncertainty, flatten cultural diversity, convert sacred or traumatic histories into superficial entertainment, or present legend as verified fact. Sensitive topics require consultation, contextual explanation, and alternatives for children who may find particular content distressing.

Ethical development should include: verification of historical claims; participation by local communities and cultural custodians; clear differentiation among history, oral tradition, legend, and fiction; avoidance of stereotypes; age-appropriate language; accessibility for children with disabilities; informed involvement of parents, teachers, or guardians; privacy and data minimization in digital applications; safe movement and supervision at sites; and procedures for feedback or correction. Children should be invited to participate, but participation should never require public sharing of personal data or images.

These principles align with ICOMOS (2008), which emphasizes access, understanding, authenticity, inclusiveness, and sustainability. In a creative-industry context, governance should also address who owns the story, who authorizes adaptation, who is credited, and who benefits. Community participation should occur before production and continue through review, evaluation, and revenue-sharing decisions rather than being limited to final approval.

Proposed Conceptual Framework

Based on the synthesis, storytelling-based cultural heritage engagement can be organized into five connected stages. First, heritage resources provide the cultural foundation: sites, artifacts, oral traditions, architecture, local values, community memories, and traditional practices. Second, child-centered narrative design transforms verified material into age-appropriate characters, plots, visual symbols, questions, and learning objectives. At this stage, the narrative should identify what is documented, remembered, legendary, or fictionalized.

Third, site-based experience connects the narrative with physical space through guided tours, story trails, observation, sensory activities, drawing, role-play, and inquiry. Fourth, creative production extends the experience into books, comics, animation, games, applications, workshops, performances, and merchandise through collaboration among community, heritage, education, and creative-sector actors. Fifth, outcomes are assessed in terms of cultural understanding, curiosity, emotional connection, respectful behavior, identity, creative learning, accessibility, local benefit, and support for heritage continuity.

Although Figure 1 presents the stages sequentially, implementation should be iterative. Evaluation of children's responses, community feedback, historical review, accessibility testing, and maintenance capacity

should lead to revisions in the narrative, media, and delivery model. The framework is therefore a planning tool for museums, historical-site managers, schools, creative communities, and local governments, not evidence that all stages will automatically produce positive outcomes.

Limitations and Research Agenda

This review has three main limitations. First, it uses a purposive narrative corpus and therefore does not provide exhaustive database coverage or a formal risk-of-bias assessment. Second, the evidence is heterogeneous and includes conceptual publications, institutional guidance, adult-tourist research, youth-focused digital studies, and only a small number of studies directly involving children. Third, most reported outcomes concern engagement, experience, or perceived value rather than long-term historical understanding, cultural behavior, or economic sustainability.

Future studies should test the framework at specific historical sites using clearly defined age groups, accessible storytelling prototypes, pre- and post-visit measures, observation, interviews with children and caregivers, and community-led evaluation. Comparative research should examine oral, visual, performative, digital, and gamified formats; assess long-term learning and repeat engagement; document production and maintenance costs; and evaluate whether creative-industry benefits are distributed fairly among site managers, creative workers, and cultural communities.

CONCLUSION

The reviewed literature indicates that storytelling has strong potential to support school-age children's engagement with cultural heritage at historical tourism sites. Narrative can connect physical evidence with people, values, memory, imagination, and identity, particularly when it is combined with observation, movement, questions, visual cues, performance, and opportunities for children to respond. The evidence does not support a universal claim of effectiveness; outcomes depend on age, narrative quality, guide competence, accessibility, cultural context, and the relationship between story and place.

Storytelling can also generate responsible creative-industry pathways through educational tourism, children's publishing, animation, games, digital applications, workshops, performance, and culturally grounded merchandise. These outputs are most sustainable when they emerge from a transparent value chain involving community validation, historical review, educational design, creative production, delivery, evaluation, maintenance, and reinvestment in heritage and local capacity.

Creative development must be governed by historical accuracy, cultural authenticity, community participation, intellectual-property clarity, fair benefit sharing, accessibility, privacy, and child safeguarding. The proposed five-stage framework integrates these educational, cultural, and economic considerations, but it remains conceptual. Site-specific empirical research is required to establish which storytelling forms produce meaningful learning, respectful engagement, and sustainable benefits for children, heritage places, and cultural communities.

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