



# Ecosystem-based Artefacts as a Source of Loyalty at the French Valley of the Monkeys



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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates an ecosystem as a possible source of loyalty increase. With the case of the Valley of the Monkeys in France, the only European park welcoming monkeys in total freedom, this research statistically explores emotional determinants of loyalty, satisfaction and word-of-mouth behaviour from single to family visitors in order to identify which marketing angles the park should highlight to reach a sustainable development logic. After anchoring our research in the tourism paradigm, we introduce the theoretical framework of loyalty, we define eight research hypotheses, including six sub-hypotheses, and we propose a conceptual model. Then we present our methodology, including a detailed empirical study. Results are displayed consecutively to the research hypotheses' test, which inform our suggestions for marketing directions for the park to increase its touristic performance. Results mainly highlight that in such a paradigm, satisfaction is not emotion-based but cognitive-dissonance linked, that an ecosystem-based philosophy is clearly a sustainable source of loyalty, and that the main targets for such parks are families who seek strong positive emotions such as joy and delight, the latter further supporting loyalty development.

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## 1. An Artefact for a Paradigm

Although it suffers from the global economic and political turmoil like any other sector, tourism grows. It represents 7.58 billion people worldwide in 2016, and its annual growth rate reaches 2.9%. It then remains a broad and recurrent business opportunity for many nations and territories thanks to its capability to create both new sources of revenue and employment opportunities; Gulf countries like the United Arab Emirates or the Sultanate of Oman have long ago understood that tourism is a solution to cope with the expected decrease of their natural resources. Even new destinations such as Cuba hope to position their nations in the sector of tourism. However, various researchers have questioned the legitimacy and the future direction of mass tourism, such as amusement parks (Hergli et al., 2012). Indeed, the question that lies beyond this format's legitimacy is this: to what extent can mass tourism be considered a sustainable development option for a nation? And above all, notwithstanding mass tourism's continued expansion, is sustainable development a credible source of value for amusement park consumers? If this is the case, what can then be the role and place of ecosystem-based services in an environment where emotions and sensations rule to create satisfaction (Araña and

Carmelo, 2008)? According to the Millennium Ecosystems Assessment Classification,<sup>1</sup> both tourism and recreation belong to this nature of services. As such, we are investigating here this psychological marketing environment in the realm of an ecosystem that is determined and pondered as the relation between individuals and cultural services (Kulczyk et al., 2014). Indeed, we are inquiring visitor loyalty towards amusement parks that anchor their strategy into ecosystem-based differentiation items. In such a context, leisure businesses have to question the relevance of environmental social responsibility as a core component of their development strategies. In this regard, tourism actors have no choice but to examine the impact of several issues upon touristic behaviours, among which environmental care might soon become a dominant item.

Beside other key success factors (*i.e.* competitive advantages and elements of differentiation creating value in consumers' minds or, at least, contributing in reducing possible negative cognitive dissonance), tourism professionals need to investigate consumers' perception regarding CSR issues. Cognitive dissonance results from the perception delta that exists between what is expected and what is eventually obtained. The higher the variation, the higher the difference between what consumers expect from a product, a brand or a marketing message and what they finally get. On the one hand, when cognitive dissonance is positive,

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consumers are happily surprised since they get more than what they expected; on the other hand, when cognitive dissonance is negative, consumers are disappointed. Frederick Herzberg (1976) was among the first ones to point out this phenomenon, mainly stating that negative cognitive dissonance always reduces loyalty while positive cognitive dissonance does not systematically increase loyalty, the latter being the result of a more complex combination of variables. As far as tourism is concerned, professionals then need to investigate consumers' perception regarding CSR issues, either to develop competitive advantages or, at least, investigate solutions to reduce possible negative dissonance. For example, they can consider the protection of biodiversity for any organisation working in the specific segment of animal parks, and to determine to what extent personal involvement in responsible tourism impacts behaviours (Gössling et al., 2005; Romão et al., 2014). Answering those questions is essential, not only to develop corporate competitive advantages but also to lead public decision-makers on the virtuous path of touristic activities that further respect the environment. Here, through the case of the French "Valley of the Monkeys", a zoo park where monkeys are relatively free to roam and where environmental care is the brand's competitive spearhead, we intend to investigate the links that exist between emotions and behaviours through the paradigm of understanding ecological sustainable development challenges for consumers who enjoy zoo parks. In other words, we wonder if an ecosystem a source of sustainable loyalty for visitors (Dong et al., 2011).

The French Valley of the Monkeys is a zoological park located in Romagne, near Poitiers, in the west of France (Fig. 1).

Founded in 1998 by the Dutch photographer Wim Mager (1940–2008), it is unique in Europe as the only park where one can walk among thirty species of monkeys. We have chosen this park for our investigation because it has a unique feature: visitors are in direct contact with monkeys. Not only are monkeys extremely genetically close to humans, visitors can also stay close to most of them, making this destination highly emotional for everyone.

Moreover, the park's philosophy is to ensure all monkey species live in green environments, making the ecosystem the dominant advantage of the zoo from entrance to exit. In this regard, we choose this park to investigate an ecosystem as an emotional stimulus to satisfaction and loyalty development among visitors.

So far, research on environment-related touristic behaviours have focused on various areas, such as: (1) studying green hotels (Robinot and Giannelloni, 2010), (2) improving information towards supposedly

ecoresponsible tourists who eventually do not choose sustainable destinations (Budeanu, 2007), (3) understanding what hides behind the concept of sustainable touristic behaviour (Dolnicar et al., 2010; Dhami et al., 2016), (4) assessing the paradoxical role and responsibility of marketing in both attracting people in preserved areas while aiming at communicate on protecting the environment at the same time (Leroux, 2010), (5) assessing the financial value of having a responsible tourist behaviour as compared to the psychological benefit of such a choice (Chieh Lu et al., 2016), or (6) measuring loyalty as per the analysis of the tourist's ecosystem knowledge and satisfaction (Oviedo-Garcia et al., 2017). Those investigations have contributed in identifying touristic profiles, behaviours, priorities, paradoxes and sincerity towards ecosystem-based values as per their sustainable involvement (François-Lecompte and Prim-Allaz, 2009; François-Lecompte and Valette-Florence, 2006; Weaver, 2013). Among several questions, these numerous studies somehow raise more or less directly consumption loyalty issues; yet, only a few really question the existence of links between loyalty and ecosystem-based touristic destinations. To our knowledge, no research has questioned the implication and understanding of the environmental issue in terms of touristic loyalty variation. However, from a theoretical perspective, analysing tourists' loyalty according to those heterogeneous variables makes sense. Indeed, it helps to better understand the various direct and indirect connections that link environmental involvement with tourism-based responsible behaviour. This research then aims at investigating loyalty expressions (Agustin and Singh, 2005) in a framework where both satisfaction and contribution to sustainable development - as well as commitment on a wider perspective - are intermediary explanatory variables. As a consequence, we believe that the marketing campaigns of tourist firms should not use basic emotional justifications. They should also stress corporate care for environmental issues through the subtle combination of environmental involvement and touristic implication in their marketing mix. To demonstrate our thesis, we first introduce the theoretical framework of loyalty, define our research hypotheses and propose a conceptual model. Secondly, we present our methodology, including a detailed empirical study; results are displayed following the research hypotheses' test. Finally, we analyse this work's practical and theoretical consequences and stress its limits before suggesting some future perspectives.

## 2. The Framework of Loyalty

Here, we propose a review of the main loyalty factors that exist in an experiential context before presenting our research model.

### 2.1. From Transaction to Relation

Transactional marketing deals with the analysis of consumer needs and desires with the objective of fulfilling them. It aims to guide the choices of consumers towards a product, a service or a brand without considering any social link, which could exist between the various actors, for example clients and suppliers (Sirkeci, 2013; Zarantonello et al., 2016). Transactional business (Dwyer et al., 1987) is not continuous: every transaction happens as a unique and independent occurrence having no link with past or future deals. Suppliers and clients do not get involved in the business relationship. They do not seek information in order to try and understand the other's perception and preferences. The post-deal level of satisfaction of all actors here creates loyalty (Fornell et al., 1996; Høst and Knie-Andersen, 2004; Vanhamme, 2002; Yu and Dean, 2001). In contrast, relational marketing considers the communication between actors as the most important element of the deal (Oliver, 1999). The link between clients and suppliers is continuous, socially real, and at the origin of a loyalty scheme (Anderson, 1994; McNeil, 1978; 1980).

From this theoretical framework, we consider whether introducing sustainable development in leisure activities as a source of ecosystem-



Fig. 1. The Valley of the Monkeys location in France, city of Romagne.

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