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## **Representation of nature by tourists: a method using the social networks. Case study of Center Parcs**

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### **Abstract**

Center Parcs is a tourism concept, which is oriented towards the connection, the closeness with nature. But this “nature” is a nature, which is managed, maintained, artificial. Thus this concept questions the nature perception. More generally, what is the representation of nature by the customers, which stay in this kind of tourism structure? To answer this question, we decided to focus on the comments written by these customers on sharing sites. This study was conducted in the framework of a research program, NaTour, which questions the nature tourism, thanks to the financial support of the French Region Centre-Val de Loire. We used georeferenced digital database, which compiles comments posted on TripAdvisor website (Chareyron, 2014). This main source was completed by observations *in situ* and by the analysis of the website and brochures of the studied spot. The study concerned the Center Parcs Hauts de Bruyères, which is located in Sologne area, in the center of France. The aim was to define a method to use this kind of sources, which are interesting to understand the tourist representation but constitute a significant mass of data. We would like to extract quickly the main information, that’s why we used a textual analysis software. We thus obtained the occurrence of each word. We kept the more meaningful ones, associate the synonyms and classified this group of words by great categories. We note that the comments are often positive. It can be considered as a bias but which is accepted. It also reveals that the families, who

stay at Center Parcs, enjoy and we can thus suppose that they find the “nature”, which they seek. The most frequent adjectives, which are linked to the feelings, are “pleasant”, “quiet” and “great”. But the number of words relating to the provisions (activities) is largely higher than those, which are related to the nature. It leads to wonder, if the tourist really seek “nature”. The first adjective, which is associated to this one, is “quiet”. But the customers also have the feeling that this nature is “preserved” and “luxuriant”. They thus confirm what is written on the website: Center Parcs is described as located in “a unique preserved site in the heart of the regions, which are rich in natural and cultural heritages”. Nevertheless, two parts can be distinguished in the field: a noisy one, which is dedicated to the activities (games, shops) and a quiet one, which is dominated by forest but where are located the cottages, where the families stay. Finally, nature seems to be only a setting. It’s only a landscape to contemplate, thus a landscape, which should be green, nice and quiet.

**Keywords:** *nature tourism, social networks, representation, Center Parcs, TripAdvisor*

## **Introduction**

Center Parcs is a Dutch tourism concept, offering tourism residences in vacation villages. It was devised in 1968 by Piet Derksen and it now includes 26 forest domains in Belgium, Germany, England, the Netherlands, France. Center Parcs concept is oriented towards the connection, the closeness with nature. On its French website, the group includes nature in the “Center Parcs spirit” and it insists on the fact that it offers “stays at the heart of nature”. But this “nature” is a nature, which is managed, maintained, artificial. Indeed, these vacation villages mix nature with cottages and activities. Thus this concept questions the nature perception. More generally, what is the representation of nature by the customers, which stay in this kind of tourism structure? What importance do they give to nature? These questions guided the present study (Issa, 2016), which was conducted in the framework of a research program (NaTour). This one was interested in the nature tourism, thanks to the financial support of the French Region Centre-Val de Loire. To know the nature representation, instead of questioning tourists in the field, we decided to use a more innovative method and we thus focused on the comments written by Center Parcs customers on a sharing website. After clarifying this method, we will present the main results. The analysis of customers comments reveals the importance they give to nature and the representations, which they associate to this nature.

## **Chapter 1 - A method based on the use of the social networks**

Five Center Parcs domains are established in France. We decided to focus on the one located in French Region Centre-Val de Loire, because it’s the area studied by our research program about nature tourism. The Center Parcs Hauts de Bruyères, which was open in

1993, is located in Sologne area, in the center of France. It stretches on 111 ha, consisting mainly in pine forest. As mentioned, to know the nature representation of the customers of this domain, we decided to use an innovative method, using a sharing website. More exactly, we used georeferenced digital database, which compiles comments posted on TripAdvisor website (Chareyron *et al.* 2014) about tourist spots in French Region Centre-Val de Loire – this database was created in the framework of Imagitour research program, funded by the French Region Centre-Val de Loire. TripAdvisor is a recent website, where the Net surfers can post their comments about tourist spots, restaurant or accommodations. Thanks to this database, we studied all the comments posted by tourists on this website about Center Parcs Hauts de Bruyères in 2013 and 2014.

Center Parcs is a tourism concept, which is concentrated on families. The Net surfers confirm this focus. Because we would like to study the nature representation of the main customers, we only consider the comments of families, according to their statement – they can declare to be families, couples, single travelers or professional. We thus studied not less than 2.118 comments. The main advantage of this source is here demonstrated: to question a so sizeable panel in the field would be more time-consuming. But this source is not without limit. Indeed, we thus have only the point of view of the Net surfers<sup>1</sup> and not the one of all Center Parcs customers. Moreover, when we study the comments, we can consider that this source is biased: a large majority of Net surfers are satisfied (more than 70% of them assign a grade of 4/5 or 5/5). It's not necessarily the opinion of all Center Parcs customers. Indeed we can think that the satisfied customers are more inclined to post a comment about their stay than the disappointed ones. But this bias is accepted. It also reveals that some families, who stay at Center Parcs, enjoy and we can thus suppose that they find the “nature”, which they seek. Our purpose is exactly to identify this “nature”. Moreover, this source has another advantage. It allows having the journey story at the end of the stay and not during this one, like it would be for the interviews conducted in the field. For G. Simon (2015), these journey stories at the end of the stay consist in “a restitution of different highlighted times of the tour experience” (transl.). Thus, taking into account the comments posted on TripAdvisor by tourists at the end of their stay allows analyzing what marked tourists during their stay and knowing if nature is concerned.

This main source was completed by observations *in situ* in order to have an objective approach of the “nature” inside the studied domain. We also take into account the point of

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<sup>1</sup> For example, we know that a majority of French people posting comments on TripAdvisors live in Paris [1].

view of Center Parcs group, to know the way it mentions the “nature” in its tourist offer. We then analyzed the website of the studied spot<sup>2</sup> and three commercial brochures:

- the press file dated from 2015, which inventories the activities offered inside Center Parcs domains in 2015: it gives a general view of the tourist offer of the group;
- a brochure, which dated from 2011 and was addressed to the investors, who want to become owner of cottages in Hauts de Bruyères domain: it presents the cottages and it also summarizes the different elements of the domain (nature, activities, etc.).
- a brochure, which provided a general presentation of Center Parcs and distinguished the specificities of each domain in 2015,

We only gave attention to the text relating to the general presentation of Center Parcs and the specificities about Hauts de Bruyères domain.

We were faced with a significant mass of data, especially with the 2.118 comments taken from TripAdvisor website. Moreover, the use of numeric data raises questions around the methodologies and practices in human and social sciences (Casilli, 2014). The analysis of big data, numeric tracks, including comments on social networks, is still at an experimental stage (Desvignes and Jacquot, 2014). Consequently, our purpose was also to define a method to use this kind of sources, which are sizeable but interesting to understand the tourist representations. We conduct a textual analysis, which pertains to the commentography method. This one was used by others like Y. Cinotti (2015), who intended to understand the tourist experience in bed and breakfast from sharing websites comments. We thus decided to draw one’s inspiration from this proven method, by using a software, which is specialized in textual analysis – AntConc. It allowed us to know the frequency of each word in the whole of comments and to also know the words, which are adjacent to each one. We kept the more meaningful words and associated the synonyms. We also defined some categories to focus on the associated words and to know their importance. These categories are about feeling and four of five elements promoted by Center Parcs, pertaining to the “Center Parcs spirit”: nature, cottages, activities and “Aqua Mundo” (the aquatic and tropical area). A particular attention was of course paid to the “nature” category. A complementary analysis was conducted on this word and its adjective to know what word is associated by the customers.

We conducted the same textual analysis on the text of the website and the three brochures of Center Parcs. The purpose was to compare the presentation of the domain by the group and the representation the customers have, focusing on our research object: “nature”.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.centerparcs.fr/fr-fr/france/fp\\_CH\\_vacances-domaine-les-hauts-de-bruyeres?pl=nav](http://www.centerparcs.fr/fr-fr/france/fp_CH_vacances-domaine-les-hauts-de-bruyeres?pl=nav)

At the end of the processing, it appears that nature belongs to the tourist offer of Center Parcs, which is appreciated, but nature is only secondary in this offer, letting us think that it's only a setting.

## **Chapter 2 - Nature like a setting: an element of an appreciated tourist offer but secondary**

The nature is highlighted by Center Parcs, which offers “stays at the heart of nature”, “green stays” to answer an “urge wish of greenery” (French website of Center Parcs, transl.). It's particularly true for the Hauts de Bruyères domain. Indeed, its brochure underlines that “The Hauts de Bruyères domain, which is located at the heart of the forest of Chaumont-sur-Tharonne, is really turned toward nature” (transl.).

Globally, as mentioned, the Net surfers are satisfied. The grades they gave to their stay prove it but this idea is also confirmed by the words they use in their comments. The terms relating to feeling are positive. The most frequent adjective is “pleasant”, which is mentioned around 750 times in the 2.118 studied comments. This positive feeling concerns not only nature but also the cottages, the activities, etc. Some negative adjectives can be mentioned (like sad, disappointed) but, in this case, nature isn't concerned. Thus nature seems to be appreciated but what is its importance in the opinion of customers about their stay?

To know the importance given by the customers to nature in the tourist offer of Center Parcs, we inventoried the number of words mentioned in the comments relating to each elements of this offer, of the “Center Parcs spirit”: nature, cottages, “Aqua Mundo” and activities (fig. 1). To compare the point of view of the Net surfers families and presentation of its offer by Center Parcs, we also take into account the frequency of these words in Center Parcs website and in the three studied brochures.

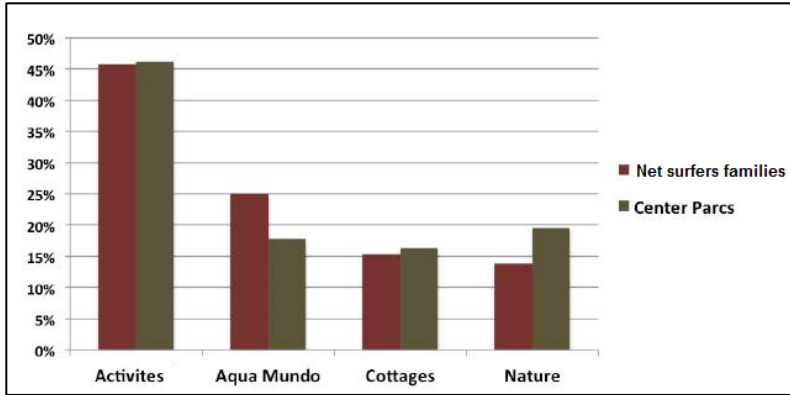


Figure 1: Percentages of words relating to each main element of Center Parcs offer, mentioned by the Net surfers families (on TripAdvisor in 2013 and 2014) and by Center Parcs (in its website and the three studied brochures) – Realization: E. Issa, transl.

In Center Parcs offer, even if the closeness with nature is highlighted, this nature is not the main element mentioned by the group on its website and brochures. The priority is largely given to the activities the customers can practice in its domains. Nature is in the second rank, followed by “Aqua Mundo” then cottages. For the Net surfers families, the higher importance in their comments is given to the activities. As for nature, it’s the last element mentioned, coming after “Aqua Mundo” and the cottages, with only 13.8% of words. We can conclude from this analysis that nature is only secondary for the customers staying in Center Parcs, even more than for the group.

Nature isn’t the only element of an appreciated tourist offer. Moreover, it isn’t the most mentioned. This result lets us think that nature is only a setting, a landscape to contemplate during the stay, for Center Parcs, even more for tourists. But what is the representation associate to this nature? How tourists speak about this nature?

### Chapter 3 – The representations of nature: a nature first quiet

In Hauts de Bruyères domain, two parts can be distinguished: a noisy one, which is dedicated to the activities (games, shops; photo 1) and a quiet one, which is dominated by forest but where are located the cottages, where the families stay (photo 2).



**Photo 1: The noisy part of Center Parcs, dedicated to the activities – the “wild river” of Aqua Mundo - Shot: E. Issa, 2015**



**Photo 2: The quiet part of Center Parcs, dominated by forest, scattered by the cottages, where the families stay - Shot: E. Issa, 2015**

The nature in Center Parcs is managed, even forest, which is largely scattered by the cottages. It's interesting to underline that the most managed part of the area is considered as “wild” by the group (the “wild river” of Aqua Mundo; Photo 1). This is the point of view of Center Parcs, which want to give an image of a “preserved” nature and highlights its commitment in the sustainable development (Center Parcs website). But what is the representation of the customers? How do they speak about the setting and particularly about nature?

If we focus on the words relating to nature, a large majority is general, simply restricted to “nature” (344 times), which is followed by “forest” (136 times). There is no detail given about this nature, except for animals. The only word about vegetation is “tree”. According to the frequency of “forest”, nature is more associated to this quiet part of the domain. And indeed, only 28 comments on the studied 2.118 ones speak about nature of the aquatic



space, which consists in tropical vegetation. This one is clearly considered as a setting, “a superb plant decor” (according to a Net surfer).

We also considered the context, in which nature is mentioned (fig. 2). We can observe that the most important is the immersion in nature and the link with nature, which are highlighted by Center Parcs and taken up by the Net surfers families. Then some differences can be noted between the group and its customers. First one is that the activities in nature are only mentioned by Center Parcs, like if tourists dissociate activities and nature – distinguished also in the “Center Parcs spirit”. Even more, conversely, tourists prefer associate nature with rest, which isn’t mentioned by Center Parcs. The respect of nature, which is a declared value of the group, appears not essential for tourists. Some of these ones mention a criticism, almost to deplore the lack of nature but they represent only a very small percentage of customers.

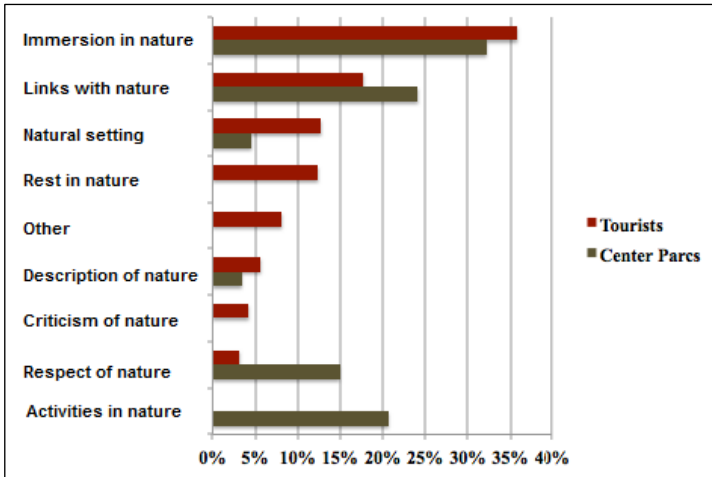


Figure 2: Context in which nature is mentioned, in percentages of the total number of the nature mentions, in the comments posted on TripAdvisor by families in 2013 and 2014 and in the Center Parcs website and studied brochures – Realization: E. Issa, transl.

In a large majority, the opinion about the nature of Center Parcs is positive. When we analyse the associated adjective, we find again the link between nature and rest. Nature is considered as quiet, restful or relaxing for a large majority. This nature is also appreciated for its aestheticism: it’s considered as pleasant, magnificent and even friendly. The nature in Center Parc is a nature, which is managed, maintained, artificial but it’s thus appreciated. It’s not surprising, since the same observation can be done for the urban nature: city-dwellers show a wish of nature but they want a managed nature and not a “wild” one (Robert and Yengué, 2015). Even some tourists associate this nature to a preserved nature,

a luxuriant nature. The idea is in fact highlighted by Center Parcs, which qualifies the nature inside its domains as “preserved nature”, located in “a unique preserved site in the heart of the regions, which are rich in natural and cultural heritages”. This idea is of course questionable and in fact it’s criticized:

“Center Parcs sell a dream of a preserved nature but the reality is an urbanization with a creation of leisure activities. The “nature” aspect can be summarized as an immersion in forest.” (Dubromel, 2014).

Nevertheless, this managed nature seems to be appreciated by Center Parcs customers. It’s seems to be the nature they seek: a nature, which is nice and quiet; a “nature landscape” to contemplate.

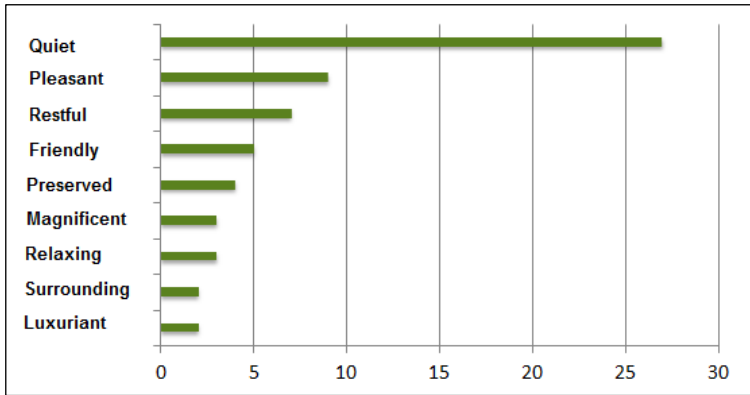


Figure 3: Adjectives associated to nature in the comments posted on TripAdvisor by families in 2013 and 2014 – Realization: E. Issa, transl.

**Conclusion**

Center Parcs is a tourist concept, which is concentrated on families and offers them “stays at the heart of nature”. The concept seems to be appreciated: the opinions of customers are globally positive. What is the importance of nature in this opinion and what is the representation of nature? Behind this question, we want to know what kind of nature is sought by tourists coming in this kind of tourist structure. To answer these questions, we decided to use an innovative method, with several advantages: having a sizeable number of accounts and having stories after stay to know what customers reminder. The bias is that we only have accounts of a part of customers, the one who use sharing websites. But it’s accepted. We thus use comments posted by families on TripAdvisor website. This main source was completed by observations in the field and by the analysis of Center Parcs communication (website and brochures). This study thus reveals that, even if Center Parcs

highlights “stays at the heart of nature”, the importance of nature is not so high. The group, like customers, has a higher interest for the activities. Nature appears only like an element among others in the tourist offer and in the customers stay. It’s even secondary, letting us think that nature is only a setting, a landscape to contemplate. This nature is managed, maintained, artificial but it’s thus appreciated by Net surfers. They consider it as quiet, nice and even preserved. It’s not surprising if we consider the kind of nature city-dwellers wish. We can thus assert that the method, consisting in using comments posted on sharing websites, seems to be relevant. At this stage of the research, we have at least the opinion of Net surfers families staying in Center Parcs. To be sure of the relevance of a generalization to all customers, interviews in the field have now to be conducted.

### Summary

Using comments posted on TripAdvisor, the study focuses on the representation Net surfers staying in Center Parcs have about nature, on the importance they give to this element of tourist offer. The results show that nature is secondary and appears like a setting. Customers appreciate this nature, which they consider as quiet and nice.

### Literature

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