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**SPORTS CLUB LOYALTY: GENERAL AND AGE-RELATED ANALYSIS. AN EXAMPLE FROM RECREATIONAL RIDERS IN RIDING SCHOOL**

Céline Vial<sup>A</sup>, Camille Eslan<sup>B</sup>, Sandrine Costa<sup>C</sup>



ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article history:</b>  <b>Received:</b> Jun, 28<sup>th</sup> 2024  <b>Accepted:</b> Aug, 30<sup>th</sup> 2024</p>	<p><b>Objective:</b> The objective of this study is to investigate the impact of age on sporting club loyalty, focusing on horse riding in France.</p>
<p><b>Keywords:</b>            Attitudinal Loyalty;            Equestrian Activities;            Leisure;            Student-Teacher's Linkage;            Multigroup SEM.</p>	<p><b>Theoretical Framework:</b> Using a consumer behavior marketing approach, this study provides an understanding of the relationships and influence between the constructs of loyalty, satisfaction, switching barriers, affective commitment to the group of friends and community commitment.</p>
	<p><b>Method:</b> A multigroup SEM was used to provide a global understanding. The Data collection was carried out through an online survey amongst 615 respondents in France.</p>
	<p><b>Results and Discussion:</b> Whatever the age is, the results confirm the classical influence of satisfaction on loyalty and highlight the significant influence of riding teachers on customer loyalty to riding schools. The relationships between the other constructs differ by age with different factors influencing satisfaction and loyalty. Younger riders' loyalty relies more on teacher linkage, while older riders consider a more global environment, including switching barriers and commitments.</p>
	<p><b>Research Implications:</b> The practical and theoretical implications of this research are discussed, providing insights into how the results can be applied or influence practices in the field of sport management. These implications could encompass equestrian activities and sports businesses.</p>
	<p><b>Originality/Value:</b> This study contributes to the literature by showing the differences or correlations between segments of recreational riders according to their loyalty to their riding club. Thus, adapting marketing and management strategies according to the age of recreational riders is essential to improve loyalty according to its main drivers.</p>
	<p>Doi: <a href="https://doi.org/10.26668/businessreview/2024.v9i10.4563">https://doi.org/10.26668/businessreview/2024.v9i10.4563</a></p>

**LEALDADE A UM CLUBE DESPORTIVO: ANÁLISE GERAL E POR IDADE. UM EXEMPLO DOS CAVALEIROS RECREATIVOS DA ESCOLA DE EQUITAÇÃO**

**RESUMO**

**Objetivo:** O objetivo deste estudo é investigar o impacto da idade na lealdade a um clube desportivo, focando o hipismo em França.

**Enquadramento Teórico:** Utilizando uma abordagem de marketing do comportamento do consumidor, este estudo permite compreender as relações e a influência entre os constructos lealdade, satisfação, barreiras à mudança, compromisso afetivo com o grupo de amigos e compromisso com a comunidade.

**Método:** Foi utilizada uma SEM multigrupo para proporcionar uma compreensão global. A recolha de dados foi efectuada através de um inquérito em linha a 615 inquiridos em França.

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**Resultados e Discussão:** Seja qual for a idade, os resultados confirmam a influência clássica da satisfação na fidelização e sublinham a influência significativa dos professores de equitação na fidelização dos clientes às escolas de equitação. As relações entre os outros construtos diferem consoante a idade, com diferentes factores a influenciar a satisfação e a fidelização. A lealdade dos cavaleiros mais jovens assenta mais na ligação com os professores, enquanto os cavaleiros mais velhos consideram um ambiente mais global, incluindo barreiras e compromissos de mudança.

**Implicações da Investigação:** As implicações práticas e teóricas desta investigação são discutidas, fornecendo uma visão de como os resultados podem ser aplicados ou influenciar as práticas no campo da gestão do desporto. Estas implicações podem abranger actividades equestres e empresas desportivas.

**Originalidade/Valor:** Este estudo contribui para a literatura ao mostrar as diferenças ou correlações entre segmentos de cavaleiros de recreio de acordo com a sua lealdade ao seu clube de equitação. Assim, a adaptação das estratégias de marketing e de gestão em função da idade dos cavaleiros de recreio é essencial para melhorar a fidelização em função dos seus principais factores.

**Palavras-chave:** Lealdade Atitudinal, Actividades Equestres, Lazer, Ligação Aluno-Professor, SEM Multigrupo.

## FIDELIZACIÓN DE CLUBES DEPORTIVOS: ANÁLISIS GENERAL Y POR EDADES. UN EJEMPLO DE JINETES RECREATIVOS EN LA ESCUELA DE EQUITACIÓN

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** El objetivo de este estudio es investigar el impacto de la edad en la fidelidad a un club deportivo, centrándose en la equitación en Francia.

**Marco teórico:** Utilizando un enfoque de marketing basado en el comportamiento del consumidor, este estudio permite comprender las relaciones y la influencia entre los constructos de fidelidad, satisfacción, barreras al cambio, compromiso afectivo con el grupo de amigos y compromiso con la comunidad.

**Método:** Se utilizó un SEM multigrupo para proporcionar una comprensión global. La recogida de datos se llevó a cabo mediante una encuesta en línea entre 615 encuestados en Francia.

**Resultados y Discusión:** Independientemente de la edad, los resultados confirman la influencia clásica de la satisfacción en la fidelidad y destacan la influencia significativa de los profesores de equitación en la fidelidad de los clientes a los picaderos. Las relaciones entre los demás constructos difieren en función de la edad, con distintos factores que influyen en la satisfacción y la fidelidad. La fidelidad de los jinetes más jóvenes se basa más en el vínculo con el profesor, mientras que los de más edad tienen en cuenta un entorno más global, que incluye barreras de cambio y compromisos.

**Implicaciones de la Investigación:** Se discuten las implicaciones prácticas y teóricas de esta investigación, proporcionando ideas sobre cómo pueden aplicarse los resultados o influir en las prácticas en el campo de la gestión deportiva. Estas implicaciones podrían abarcar las actividades equestres y las empresas deportivas.

**Originalidad/Valor:** Este estudio contribuye a la literatura al mostrar las diferencias o correlaciones entre segmentos de jinetes recreativos según su fidelidad a su club hípico. Así pues, la adaptación de las estrategias de marketing y gestión en función de la edad de los jinetes recreativos es esencial para mejorar la fidelidad según sus principales impulsores.

**Palabras clave:** Lealtad Actitudinal, Actividades Equestres, Ocio, Vinculación Alumno-Profesor, SEM Multigrupo.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Loyalty to a sporting setting is actively studied for obvious economic reasons. The place of sports and leisure activities has been constantly growing and is now an instrument for the development and dynamism of local economy. In France, household expenses for sport and leisure activities represent 0.9% of the gross domestic product (INJEP, 2020). The recent pandemic has amplified the practice of leisure, but has also led sports practitioners to self-

organize and leave their clubs seeking for outdoor practices (Lombardo & Müller, 2023). Moreover, sports club members are not particularly loyal and switch clubs frequently, as memberships or licenses are often purchased to gain access to competitions (Duret, 2019). These recent facts show the great challenge for research to better understand loyalty processes.

Many marketing studies examine the loyalty process, by observing the conative loyalty of customers (e.g., service purchasing behavior) (Trail, 2015). The study of long-term relationship with loyalty program is well investigated in services and tourism marketing with models showing the influence of different factors. For example, customer satisfaction is often seen as a predictor of behavioral intentions and loyalty (Bodet, 2012; García-Fernández et al., 2018), as well as service quality (Giovanis et al., 2015; Parasuraman, 2010). However, the influence of the various stakeholders' relationships, as well as the role of commitment on loyalty is not clearly defined (Bodet, 2012). Moreover, the models proposed in the literature are often partial, not including all the determinants.

Despite the profusion of research on the loyalty subject, differences between specific segments of customers (Lichtlé & Plichon, 2008), like according the age, remains relatively understudied in a context of leisure services. Besides, with the lengthening of sporting life cycles, age becomes an interesting variable to investigate. In addition, engaging in the activity seems to be influenced by age (Yim et al., 2021). Age is even studied as a moderator of sport commitment model in tennis (Casper & Stellino, 2008). In the field of equestrian activities, some authors focused their interests on motivation differences according to the age of riders (Wu et al., 2015).

The development of equestrian centers in France is unique compared to other countries. The practice of horse riding in French riding schools (RS) is based on one hour use of an animal, by group lessons of 8 to 12 riders, with a qualified teacher. Horse riding, often considered elitist and difficult to access, has progressively grown in popularity. Today, with almost 700 000 federation members (FFE, 2022), the French Equestrian Federation (FFE) is the third French sport federation and the first women's federation. This massification began with pony riding in the 1980s, as ponies offer the opportunity to practice for younger riders. Consequently, the most important historical segment of the FFE is the female population aged 12 years old and younger, and the average age of FFE members is 21 years old (FFE, 2022).

Loyalty to equestrian centers is specific because of the characteristics and organization of the practice. First, equestrian centers very rarely offer the rental of their equipment or horse for independent use, like fitness clubs for example, which offer an autonomous use of the equipment,

a coached practice, or training workouts. Second, the presence of another being, the horse, can engender a different kind of loyalty and commitment to the horse and thus to the club. Nevertheless, in reality, there is a high volatility of riders: each year, 30% of first-time members drop out of the federation and 10% of riders switch clubs (FFE, 2022). Moreover, we observe an increase in self-organization in equestrian activities, people who organize themselves to take care of their equines, outside of any professional structure (Eslan et al., 2023). Among them, 95% have previously used riding schools (RS), and they are older (average of 34 years) (Eslan et al., 2023) than RS riders. 34.5% of RS riders are between 9 and 14 years old (FFE, 2022). In this context, we wonder if there is a moderation effect of age on loyalty to the services offered by a sports club, specifically in the case of French equestrian centers.

This study focuses on loyalty to the club, here RS, rather than loyalty to the sport, here horse riding. Loyalty is here addressed through attitudinal loyalty. The originality of this study is twofold. First, this study aims to confirm the classical mechanisms of loyalty in the case of RS riders, considering the specificities of this practice. To this aim, this paper proposes a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) model which brings together antecedents of loyalty that are usually studied separately: commitment to a group of friends and engagement to the equestrian center community, satisfaction (Bodet, 2012; McAlexander et al., 2003; Yim et al., 2021), barriers to switching equestrian centers, alternative offer attractiveness, perceived costs (Jones et al., 2000; Lu et al., 2011), and the influence of teacher's linkage. Second, this paper observes the effect of age as a moderator of the loyalty model and its influence on satisfaction.

This paper delves into the intricate theoretical framework surrounding the concept of loyalty within both sport clubs and equestrian riding schools in France and proposes to unravel its complexities through the implementation of a comprehensive structural equation model, based on data gathered through an online survey. Subsequently, the paper analyses the findings of the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis conducted to propose an explanatory model of loyalty to these centers according to different age groups. These results are discussed and shed light on the nuanced dynamics of loyalty in the context of French sport clubs and equestrian riding schools.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since the beginning of the 20th century, customer loyalty processes have been the subject of abundant and heterogeneous scientific research with the development of several

explanatory theories. In marketing research, the proposed definition of the concept of loyalty was first based on the observation of purchasing behavior; the loyal customer being the one who remains a customer over time (Trail, 2015). The current trend integrates the consumer's attitude in terms of recommendation and intention, insofar as re-purchasing may respond more to constraints than to a real desire of customers (Gabriel et al., 2014; Lichtlé & Plichon, 2008). In this paper, service loyalty is defined as a deep consumer commitment to repurchase a service despite situational influences (Gabriel et al., 2014). It's a consumer mindset that enables them to resist change when competitors' offers are not objective and lack value for the services provided. Thus, we focus on the attitudinal dimension of loyalty.

## 2.1 LOYALTY AND ITS ANTECEDENTS

Loyalty in sport is often seen as a multifactor construct based on deep emotional connection and a sense of belonging to the club and its community such as team supporters (Stewart et al., 2003). However, in marketing, the determinants of service loyalty differ depending on the service context, such as a higher influence of commercial friendship (social benefits in service relationship) in hotels services than in bank or airlines services (i.e. Han et al., 2008).

Attitudinal loyalty refers to a psychological dimension. Loyalty predictors observed, in the literature, are satisfaction and the emotional commitment to an organization (Yu & Dean, 2001), resistance to switching and negative information (Jones et al., 2000; Mattison Thompson & Tuzovic, 2020), service perceived quality (Gabriel et al., 2014), or relationship quality (RQ) in services (Giovanis et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2011). RQ is defined as the long-standing premise in marketing literature that losing customers is costly (Athanasopoulou et al., 2013). RQ is mainly described as a higher order construct composed by trust, satisfaction, and commitment. In this study, each construct of RQ will be analyzed independently to specifically determine what influences loyalty drivers.

The main antecedent for loyalty in the literature is satisfaction. Satisfaction is based on the total evaluation of the purchase and consumption experience of a service and is often considered as a behavioral predictor of future purchase intentions (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). Satisfaction can mediate the effects of other determinants on affective commitment (Han et al., 2008) or attitudinal loyalty (Bodet, 2012) amongst various consumer groups. Thus, we hypothesize that rider's loyalty is influenced by satisfaction (H1).



Ko and Pastore (2004, p. 161), in recreational sport context, described services as “activities, systems, or business transactions in which the tangible and intangible attributes are carefully combined for the maximization of customer satisfaction and efficiency of an operational system”. They identify a close relationship and a high level of commitment between service providers and customers. Thus, there are many commonalities in the retention process between forms of sport services and other forms of services (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011). These authors also confirmed that customer satisfaction is an antecedent to attitudinal loyalty but linked with service quality in sport spectatorship context. Many studies report the influence of service quality on satisfaction and loyalty (Athanasopoulou et al., 2013; Javadein et al., 2008; Yoshida, 2017). These findings suggest that loyalty is influenced by the perception of the quality of the services offered by sports service providers. In the case of RS, measuring a global service quality is complex as many different elements must be considered, such as horses used, teachers, environment... For example, there can be an important and non-comparable cavalry effect for each structure (diversity of horses' skills, ability to choose a horse of adapted level) and activity effect (number of riders per lesson, duration of lessons or camp, rider's experience, type of discipline, practice or not of competition). Considering the quality of service would be possible in an analysis of the loyalty to one specific club or a type of clubs that have similar offers. Therefore we focus in this study on the three elements of service quality: the relationship with the teacher, the group of friends and the community.

Community commitment defined by Algesheimer et al. (2005) is based on the interest of individuals to participate in collaborative activities and to become part of community's actions and values. Casper and Stellino (2008) and Yim et al. (2021) reported that social interactions within a community in sport context increase behavioral intentions and engagement with the club. Club-customer relationships are more likely to be moderated by community commitment than other determinants (Mattison Thompson & Tuzovic, 2020). In the case of horse riding, a need for "belonging to a community" that shares the same passion is underlined (Cochrane & Dashper, 2015; Keaveney, 2008; Le Clinche et al., 2017). The riding school is even considered a "place to live" by children (FFE, 2011) who seek to create social bonds with other riders (Vial et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2015). Similarly, several studies highlight adult riders' search for conviviality, human relations, encounters and social ties (Cochrane & Dashper, 2015; Grefe & Pickel-Chevalier, 2015; Julien, 2007). Community membership for less experienced groups, i.e. main RS members, has a direct and indirect effect on loyalty through satisfaction

and a direct effect for experienced groups (McAlexander et al., 2003). Thus, we will test if community commitment positively influences loyalty to RS (H2a) and satisfaction (H2b).

An important motivation for practicing sport, leisure and tourism is the sociability that is generated (Mignon, 2015; Molinero et al., 2006; Pearce & Lee, 2005). Ko and Pastore (2004) posit social experiences as an important outcome of sport participation, social experiences support customers' motivation to participate in sport through social factors such as friends, family members or other people. In addition, Yim et al. (2021) refer to a positive influence of social interactions on sport fan community. This study investigates the affective dimension representing the pleasure in being a customer of the company, the presence of reciprocity in the relationship, trust, and whether the company takes care of its customers (Gustafsson et al., 2005). Ko and Pastore (2004) show in the recreational sport industry that to prevent the cause of problems, managers must expect a high level of interaction between sport consumers and clients as a group affect each other. Studies on riders showed that they seek to create social links with other riders (Cochrane & Dashper, 2015; Grefe & Pickel-Chevalier, 2015), presupposing friend group commitment positive influence on riders' community commitment in their equestrian center (H3).

In the equestrian context, various studies showed that a relationship with the teacher is sought by riders (Klisch, 2009; Wu et al., 2015). In RS, the practice is always done with a teacher, which is not the case in all sport clubs like fitness clubs where autonomy is important. This relational proximity, defined in the literature as the strength of the direct relationship between the staff in contact and the consumer, is showed as a factor influencing loyalty (Héroult-Fournier et al., 2012). A strong relationship between an athlete and a coach can build trust, stimulate motivation, and encourage increased personal development (Lewis et al., 2022). However, excessive dependence on the coach can compromise the athlete's autonomy, lead to biased decisions, and make club loyalty vulnerable to changes of coach. We also note a staff turnover that induces a loss of customers in equestrian activities (REFERENCES, 2019). These results join the work on relationship quality explained above. Relationship between the teacher and the riders and trust to the teacher have then to be considered as potential antecedent of loyalty. Thus, we define **teacher's linkage** as a relationship with affective commitment and trust influence with the teacher. It would directly influence loyalty (H4a), increase satisfaction (H4b), or create a too high perceived cost to change equestrian center (H4c). Moreover, Côté (2002) showed that teacher's role is also to instill in children the social values linked to sports



that can be useful in society. Thus, we assume that teacher's linkage would influence community commitment in the equestrian center (H4d).

Switching barriers is conceptualized as the various factors making it more difficult or costly for customers to change suppliers and lead to retention (Jones et al., 2000; Lu et al., 2011; Mattison Thompson & Tuzovic, 2020). Jones et al. refer to three factors to define switching barriers: interpersonal relationships, attractiveness of alternative offers, and perceived switching costs. Interpersonal relationships are the strength of the personal bond that develops between clients and their service providers (employees). In this paper, interpersonal relationship is related to the teacher's linkage. Liu et al. (2011) show that if the relationship quality is a pull-in force, switching barriers are a push-back force as customers prefer to stay with their current service provider when switching costs increase and/or attractiveness of alternative offers decreases. According to Lu et al. (2011), perceived switching costs refer to customer perceptions regarding the time, money, and effort associated with changing service providers. They not only have an economic nature but can have psychological and emotional characters as well. Lu et al. (2011) demonstrate that service providers ought to increase switching costs in order to increase loyalty. In RS context, perceived switching costs are attachment to a horse, time, and effort constraints. We hypothesize that perceived switching costs can influence positively loyalty to the equestrian center (H5). Finally, attractiveness of alternative offers refers to customers' perceptions of what viable competitive alternatives are available on the market (Jones et al., 2000; Liu et al., 2011). We assume that the decrease in alternative offer attractiveness will increase riders' loyalty (H6) to the current equestrian center.

## 2.2 AGE DETERMINANT

The literature indicates that loyalty mechanisms differ according to age, but few studies consider the influence of age-related determinants on loyalty or commitment. In the case of tennis players, Casper and Stellino (2008) identified differences in commitment linked with socio-demographic constraints (gender, financial means,...) and alternative commitment according to age. These authors also show that even if many studies are conducted on young top athletes, there is a lack of studies on the influence of age on adult's loyalty. Nuviala et al. (2013) and Ko and Pastore (2004) show the critical aspect of the youngest and the financial impact on the renewal of a club's memberships.

In the case of sport clubs, research starts to underline differences according to age (Côté, 2002; Wu et al., 2015; Yim et al., 2021). Yim et al. (2021) show the influence of key factors such as community or emotional consumption on Millennials. Casper and Stellino's work (2008) on demographic predictors in tennis confirmed the need for age-related differentiation in recreational sport practices. Their findings show that commitment increases according to the age of the participant. Commitment also seems to be related to the activity context. For example, running as a committed activity decreases with age. Tennis also competes with other activities in the younger market segment compared to older market segments (Casper & Stellino, 2008). This finding is consistent with the membership situation of the FFE. In tourism leisure, age differences explain preferences according to life course expectations (Gibson & Yiannakis, 2002) and the choice to participate to trail riding (Sigurðardóttir & Helgadóttir, 2015). Indeed, Sigurðardóttir and Helgadóttir (2015) also pointed out a difference between visitors under 20 years old and over 32 years old in the choice of equestrian tourism (either rent a horse only or buy the complete trekking experience). Wu et al. (2015) declared that age is a key demographic determinant and noted the importance to differentiate between those individuals who are young (less than 30 years old) and those who would be classified as mature (age 30 and older) to observe differences in terms of leisure riding motivations. Younger segments (30 and under) seek forward progress, relaxation, excitement, pleasure or social connection, while older segments (over 30) mainly seek an evasion of everyday life (Wu et al., 2015). In the FFE, loyalty among students, young working people and senior riders seems to increase while loyalty among its main segment, 7 to 14 years old (39.6%), is declining (FFE, 2022). Consequently, we pose that loyalty determinants differ between ages (H7). Age is supposed to act as a moderator of each relationship in the model. However, the age-related variation in the influence of switching barriers is not shown in the service sectors (Jones et al., 2000) but a relationship of dependency in loyalty to a business may emerge (Des Garets et al., 2003), to which younger individuals may be more sensitive. According to the literature, the influence of community commitment on loyalty through the mediating effect of satisfaction changes with age especially for younger population. Two major breaks seem to occur in the pattern of physical activity over the lifecycle. The first one occurs shortly after the age of thirty, when individuals statistically drop out of physical activity, but rather of competition. Then a second one appears in their fifties, with individuals abandoning the sporting activities of their youth in favor of new ones more suited to their abilities (Duret, 2019).

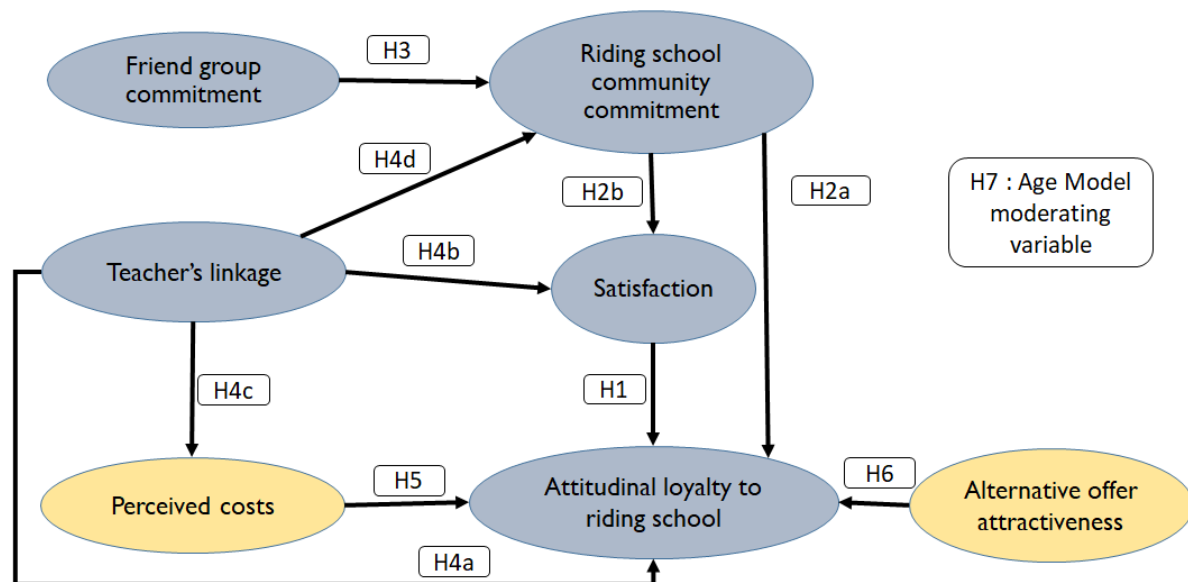
### 2.3 LOYALTY AND ITS ANTECEDENTS

According to Greenwell et al. (2002), there is a need in marketing literature in recreational sport to discuss outcomes of consumer consumption. The interest of this study is to provide, in a service context, this type of knowledge and serves to deepen the relationship between loyalty and community commitment, the influence of switching barriers, and especially how age influence these concepts while moderating the hypothetical model (Figure 1).

This study aims to analyze loyalty to sports club and, more specifically, consumers' attitudinal loyalty in the context of RS.

**Figure 1**

*Hypothetical Model of Loyalty in French Riding Schools*



The study case focuses on horse riding and loyalty to riding schools. Even if the recent figures show a new increase during the two post-covid years (2021 & 2022), the development of equestrian activities in France had recently slowed down, as the evolution of the number of memberships in the FFE has reversed since 2012 after seventy years of uninterrupted progression. This raised the question of the drivers of loyalty to horse riding clubs. Among drop out riders, 34% switched for another area of interest (Kantar – TNS, 2017). Several authors report on rider demand evolution (Grefe & Pickel-Chevalier, 2015; Vial et al., 2020), the diversity of expectations (Pickel-Chevalier, 2016), the importance of human-horse relationship (Eslan et al.,

2023; Keaveney, 2008) and the growing desire for personalized services (Sigurðardóttir & Helgadóttir, 2015). The disciplinary standard of the lessons is often oriented towards the practice of Olympic disciplines (dressage and show jumping), in a closed practice space (sand arena) and on competition (Jez, 2014; Vial et al., 2020). Only some more specialized and tourist-oriented clubs offer hacks or trail rides. This raises questions about the adaptation of supply to demand and its consequences on customer loyalty. These findings show the interest to adapt recruitment policies and practices according to the age of riders. A previous study analyzed loyalty and satisfaction of young rider (7-12 yrs.), showing that both child and parent influence the choice processes and loyalty to sports club. Satisfaction, community involvement, the attractiveness of the alternative offer and the bond with the teacher, the group of friends, and the horse appear to be concepts influencing the loyalty process. Moreover, the latter two elements may also represent switching barriers. (Vial et al., 2020). This present research focus on older riders, aged from 15 and over, as the ethical and legal aspects of the French environment makes it difficult to carry out surveys of an audience under the age of 15. In addition, Casper and Stellino (2008) note a need for sport study on adult commitment, we intend to help closing this gap.

### 3 METHOD

We focus on horse riders, who are clients of equestrian centers in France. We rely on a mixed methodology with qualitative and quantitative surveys. First, a qualitative survey aimed to identify the antecedents of loyalty in the case of horse riders and their specificities. Second, an online quantitative survey was conducted to test the hypothesized theoretical model.

**Table 1**

*Qualitative Exploratory Survey Sample Presentation*

	Descriptive presentation
Sample number	30
Gender	Male 17%
	Female 83%
Age (mean)	20.7 yrs. [12;63]
Profession *	Parents: Executives (8/21), intermediate class (5/21) or employees (8/21)
	Adults: Executives (5/9), employees (4/9)
Number of years of horse-riding practice (mean)	8.8 yrs. [3 months; 26 years]
Number of years in horse riding schools (mean)	4.8 yrs. [1 month; 26 years]
Equestrian level	From beginner to confirmed level (Galop 6)
Interview length (mean)	27 min [15; 54]

\* Executives = executive manager and intellectual profession; intermediate class = intermediate profession, business manager and farmers; employees and workers

The qualitative survey was conducted face-to-face among 30 riders, aged from 11 to 63 years, based on semi-structured interviews in various equestrian structures in the Hérault department (34) of France, in urban, suburban, and rural areas, including touristic ones (Table 1). Parental ethical consent forms were requested prior to interviews with respondents under the age of 18. Based on the literature review and on a content analysis of this qualitative survey of riders' loyalty to equestrian structures, we highlighted some elements that contribute to the satisfaction of the riders (such as progression, conviviality, services quality, and cavalry) and those likely to create dissatisfaction (such as not considering fear). It emphasizes that among the various possible supports of emotional commitment, the group, the horse, and the teacher are the most often mentioned. The results support the link between confirmation of expectations, satisfaction, and loyalty, while making hypothesis that loyalty mechanisms vary according to switching barriers. Thus, we selected the concepts analyzed in the quantitative stage to conceptualize a model according to these findings. Finally, the interviews underlined differences according to age.

For the quantitative step, the survey includes questions describing riders' sociodemographic characteristics (age, living area, household income, educational level, job), riding practice (what type of course, duration), behavioral loyalty to their actual riding school (RS) (number of years of practice in this RS) and psychometric scales aiming to measure the constructs of the model. Respondents under 18 were asked to notify their parents and confirmed by checking a box to complete the questionnaire. Attitudinal loyalty is measured through intention of recommendation, repeated purchase, and return to equestrian center, inspired by the scale proposed by Raïes and Gavard-Perret (2011). Satisfaction is adapted from the scales of Oliver (1980) and Gustafsson et al. (2005) and is measured through three items as well as the community commitment concept (Algesheimer et al., 2005). The scale of affective commitment to the group of friend is adapted from the scale used by Gustafsson et al. (2005) (3 items). The link to the teacher is measured using a scale composed of 3 items of affective commitment to the teacher (adapted from the scale of Gustafsson et al. (2005)) and one item describing trust towards the teacher. Finally, switching barriers are defined as 2 constructs: attractiveness of alternative offer and perceived costs of change, evaluated through 5 items inspired by scales developed by Gustafsson et al. (2005) and Jones et al. (2000). The questions for the different items were asked randomly in the survey (Table 2). Loyalty, affective commitment, trust, switching barriers items and community commitment were based on 5 points Likert scales except for the item of satisfaction where a 10 points scale was used.

The quantitative survey was conducted online in 2018 for 4 months, using social network (Facebook and own mailing contacts), on the metropolitan territory. A convenience sample of 586 riders currently practicing in equestrian centers answered anonymously this survey (descriptive table in Appendix 2). Only retained individuals had sufficient answers to the various variables and were in clubs for over a year.

**Table 2**

*Constructs Items Selected for the Model of Loyalty towards Riding Schools.*

		General sample	Loading std
<i>Likert scale from 1 to 10 (very unsatisfied – highly satisfied)</i>		Mean (SD)	
Satisfaction	Please indicate your overall level of satisfaction with your equestrian center?	8.41 (1.42)	0.85
	Does your riding school correspond to the ideal riding school you imagine?	7.37 (1.74)	0.84
	To what extent does your riding school meet your expectations?	7.91 (1.55)	0.91
<i>Following constructs measured with Likert scale from 1 to 5 (totally disagree /totally agree)</i>			
Teacher's linkage	My teacher at the riding school really takes care of me.	4.19 (0.78)	0.81
	I am very happy to take lessons with my riding schoolteacher.	4.54 (0.67)	0.75
	There's a form of reciprocity in my relationship with my riding schoolteacher.	3.96 (0.82)	0.76
Friend group commitment	I am very happy to be with my group of friends at the riding school.	4.26 (0.84)	0.77
	My group of friends at the riding school really takes care of me.	3.70 (0.95)	0.84
	There is a form of reciprocity in my relationship with my group of friends at the riding school.	3.94 (0.93)	0.88
Community commitment	I am motivated to participate in the equestrian center community because:		
	Afterwards I feel better.	3.99 (0.90)	0.83
	It allows me to help the other members of the equestrian center.	4.11 (0.88)	0.73
	It allows me to achieve personal goals.	3.99 (0.93)	0.65
<i>Switching barriers measured with Likert scale from 1 to 5 (very unlikely /very likely)</i>			
Perceived costs	Changing riding school takes a lot of time and effort.	3.49 (1.11)	0.85
	For me, the cost in time and effort to change riding school is high.	3.35 (1.07)	0.60
	Generally, it's complicated to change riding school.	3.51 (1.11)	0.88
Alternative offer attractiveness	I'd probably be happy with the services of another equestrian center.	3.14 (0.91)	0.72
	Compared to this riding school, there are other riding schools that could also satisfy me, if not more.	3.10 (0.98)	0.69
<i>Following construct measured with Likert scale from 1 to 5 (very unlikely /very likely)</i>			
Attitudinal loyalty	The likelihood that I will take my membership/fees/courses at this riding school in the future is...	4.50 (0.92)	0.82
	The likelihood of me returning to this riding school in the future is...	4.62 (0.79)	0.90
	The likelihood of me recommending this riding school to my friends is...	4.35 (0.83)	0.73



These respondents, from 15 to 77 years of age, have practiced for an average of 12.8 years. Riders showed a certain loyalty towards horse riding, i.e. a median of 11 years (i.e. 0 to 56 years) of total practice, for 4 years [0:47] in their current RS. Riders switched RS an average of 2.6 times [1:20]. There is a slight over-representation of women (92%) compared to FFE memberships (83%) and an over-representation of higher socio-economic status (executive and intellectual profession: 39% in our sample) compared to French national average (18%) but this is consistent with previous findings in equestrian activities (Chevalier, 1996; Le Mancq, 2007).

Data processing is based on confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling. R 4.2.3 software with Lavaan package was used to confirm the quality of the model, its convergent and discriminant validity, and to estimate the structural model. A multigroup analysis is used to detect simultaneously differences between groups of different ages, as this method can test the plausibility of a model in different groups (Gana & Broc, 2018). Thus, 3 groups were created for the SEM multigroup analysis, according to age. The first group represents teenagers and students (15 to 20 yr., 206 ind), they are mostly dependent on their parents in terms of finances and often mobility. The second group, young actives (21 to 30 yr., 187 ind), have often left the parental home, become financially independent through employment, sometimes this period is also the starting point to begin a family, and sometimes lack time for leisure activities. Finally, the third group (31 years and older, 193 ind) represents a more sedentary period of life but also, as explained for the satisfaction variables, a more complex approach to leisure activities with a lower desire for competition and a sporting practice based on physical ability. The models are based on the answers of 586 people; we have removed riders with less than one year of experience in the RS because studying their loyalty is not yet consistent.

## 4 RESULTS

The various hypotheses developed above, based on marketing theories about the behavior of riders or sportspeople, led us to the development of the previous model (Figure 1). The measurement model checks the following properties: standardized loadings between 0.60 and 0.91, the convergent validity is checked ( $AVE > 0.5$  for all constructs) as well as the discriminant validity (Table 2 and 3). The structural model quality is validated by the following adjustment indices: absolute indicators (SRMR = 0.051 & RMSEA at 0.07), and an incremental index (CFI at 0.92). This predictive model adequately explains loyalty ( $R^2 = 0.604$ ).

**Table 3***Validity of the Measurement Model Constructs following the CFA*

	Satisfaction	Community Commitment	Loyalty	Teacher's Linkage	Friend Group Commitment	Offer Attractivity	Perceived Costs
Alpha	<b>0.898</b>	<b>0.776</b>	<b>0.842</b>	<b>0.871</b>	<b>0.871</b>	0.661	<b>0.818</b>
Omegas	<b>0.898</b>	<b>0.781</b>	<b>0.859</b>	<b>0.824</b>	<b>0.875</b>	0.666	<b>0.830</b>
AVEvar	<b>0.748</b>	<b>0.545</b>	<b>0.672</b>	<b>0.613</b>	<b>0.702</b>	<b>0.501</b>	<b>0.627</b>

In bold values reaching the thresholds of alpha and omega &gt; 0.7 and AVEvar &gt; 0.5

#### 4.1 THE STRUCTURAL MODEL OF LOYALTY QUALITY

Our framework confirms previous work showing that satisfaction has a positive effect (Table 4) on attitudinal loyalty to the RS (H1).

Community commitment, through volunteer work and participation in the activities offered by the RS, appeared in the exploratory survey as necessary for riders in their learning. Community commitment also appears to be a factor of loyalty (H2a) and satisfaction with the RS (H2b). The indirect effect of community commitment on loyalty through satisfaction is significant (indirect p-value = 0.021, effect n°1 on Table 5). This supports the strong mediation effect of satisfaction in the relationship between community commitment and attitudinal loyalty for RS riders.

**Table 4***Regression's Coefficients from General Model of Loyalty in Riding Schools*

		Estimate	std	p-value
Loyalty <-	H1: Satisfaction	<b>0.618</b>		<b>&lt;0.0001</b>
	H2a: Community Commitment	<b>0.110</b>		<b>0.039</b>
	H4a: Teacher's Linkage	0.097		0.129
	H5: Perceived Costs	<b>-0.107</b>		<b>0.005</b>
	H6: Alternative Offer	<b>-0.133</b>		<b>0.019</b>
	Satisfaction <-	H2b: Community Commitment	<b>0.214</b>	
H4b: Teacher's Linkage		<b>0.520</b>		<b>&lt;0.0001</b>
Community Commitment <-	H3: Friend Group Commitment	<b>0.363</b>		<b>&lt;0.0001</b>
	H4d: Teacher's Linkage	<b>0.302</b>		<b>&lt;0.0001</b>
Perceived Costs <-	H4c: Teacher's Linkage	<b>0.279</b>		<b>&lt;0.0001</b>

In bold significant p-value

Affective commitment to the friend group positively influencing community commitment proves that belonging to a group of friends involves more towards the RS, confirming hypothesis 3. When tested, both effects were significant: indirect effect of friend group commitment on loyalty through community commitment (indirect p-value = 0.051, effect n°5 on Table 5) and direct effect (direct p-value= 0.000, Table 4). However, considering a lower

p-value threshold (e.g. 0.05), the influence of friend group commitment on loyalty is no more significant, showing the weak influence of friend groups on loyalty to RS but its major influence on community commitment.

**Table 5**

*Table of Indirect Effects*

	<b>Indirect Effect</b>	<b>Coefficient</b>	<b>P-Value</b>
1	Mediation effect of satisfaction between community commitment and loyalty	<b>0.132</b>	<b>0.021</b>
2	Mediation effect of community commitment between teacher's linkage and loyalty	<b>0.033</b>	<b>0.048</b>
3	Mediation effect of satisfaction between teacher's linkage and loyalty	<b>0.321</b>	<b>&lt;0.0001</b>
4	Mediation effect of perceived costs between teacher's linkage and loyalty	<b>-0.030</b>	<b>0.011</b>
5	Mediation effect of community commitment between friend group commitment and loyalty	0.040	0.051

In bold significative p-value

Regarding the relationship with the teacher, there is no significant influence of teacher's linkage on attitudinal loyalty (H4a) but a strong positive influence on satisfaction (H4b), perceived costs (H4c) and community commitment (H4d) (Table 4). Different mediation effects of the constructs were tested on the model (indirect effect n° 2, 3 and 4 on Table 5). Thus, the stronger the connection riders have with their teacher, the more satisfied they will be and the more likely they are to engage in the RS community (effect n°2). In addition, these riders will find it more difficult to leave the structure (effect n°3) and be less sensitive to perceived costs (effect n°4).

Finally, the results confirm that the less attractive the alternative offer is, the more loyal riders are to their RS (H6), illustrating the switching barriers effect. The attractiveness scale of the offer contained only two items and, therefore, had somewhat limited statistical properties. Concerning the perceived costs (H5), the results appear to indicate that the more perceived costs increase, the less clients would remain loyal to their RS, which confirmed hypothesis 5 that we had considered. A partial mediation effect of the perceived costs between teacher's linkage and loyalty appears and will be explained according to age difference.

## 4.2 AGE-RELATED MODEL OF LOYALTY

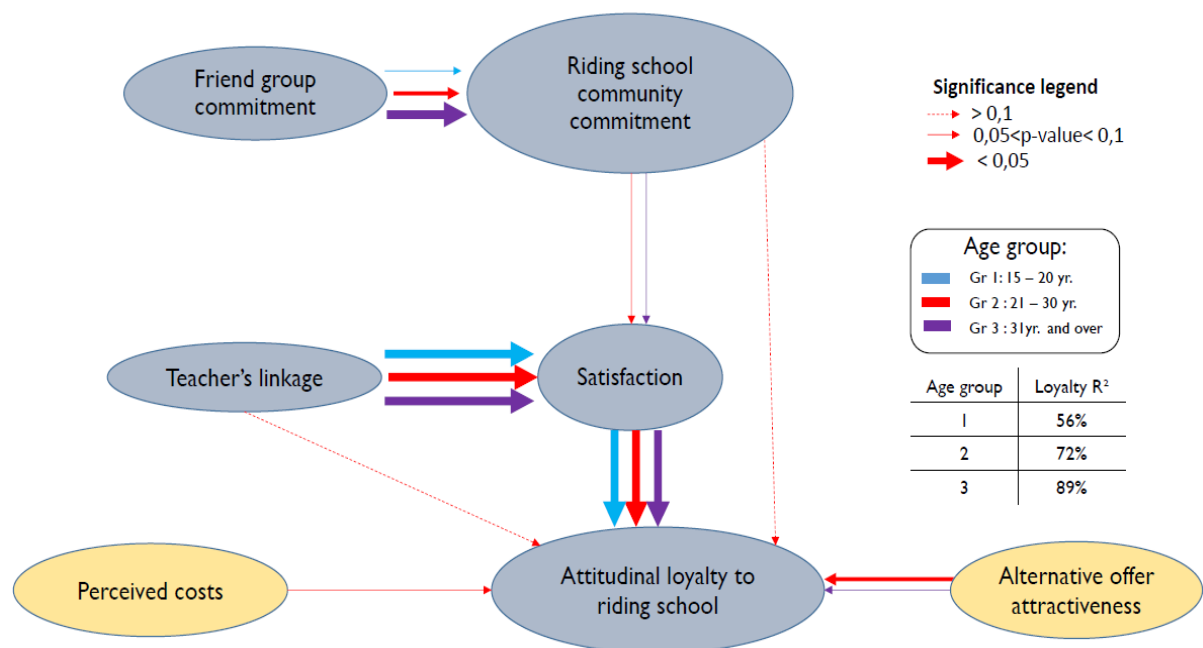
Results of the previous exploratory survey show that the behavioral profile of riders appears to be largely related to age. For example, volunteering is strongly related to rider's age, with community commitment being common among teenagers but smaller for older riders. The

exploratory survey also shows that younger riders’ satisfaction can differ according to their parents’ opinion. The teacher’s linkage changes with age, particularly regarding trust, which is a more important factor for adults. We chose to test our explanatory loyalty model with 3 age-groups of riders, in a multi-group analysis.

The multigroup SEM model is validated by the following adjustment indices: the absolute indicators (RMSEA at 0.081, SRMR at 0,069), an incremental index (CFI at 0.905, and TLI at 0,885). The unconstrained multi-group model gives very satisfactory results and can therefore be compared with the measurement-invariance model. We tested the configural model with the weak model  $\Delta\chi^2 = 58.37$  for  $\Delta dof=26$ . The p-value  $< 0,001$  is very significant showing a significant deterioration of the chi square. Thus, the weak invariance is not verified, constraining equal loadings in the three age groups deteriorate the model quality). Consequently, these model properties confirm the existence of age-related differences in our model, which support hypothesis H7.

**Figure 2**

*Age-Related Multigroup Model of Loyalty in Riding School*



The model (Figure 2) better explains attitudinal loyalty to a RS when age increases. Group 3 (31 years old and over) has the highest R<sup>2</sup> (89%), followed by group 2 (21-30 years old) and then group 1 (15-20 years old). We assume that when age increases, people have more experience in life, they should therefore be less influenced by other variables external to the

model and less subject to competition from other RS or other sports. Moreover, they could have a higher ability to step back to answer questions.

**Table 6**

*Regression's Coefficients from Age-Related Model of Loyalty in Riding Schools.*

		Group 1		Group 2		Group 3	
		15 to 20 yrs		21 to 30 yrs		31 yrs and over	
		206 ind		187 ind		193 ind	
		Estimate std	P-value	Estimate std	P-value	Estimate std	P-value
Loyalty <-	H1: Satisfaction	<b>0.683</b>	<b>&lt;0.0001</b>	<b>0.550</b>	<b>&lt;0.0001</b>	<b>0.750</b>	<b>&lt;0.0001</b>
	H2a: Community Commitment	0.056	0.612	0.136	0.103	0.102	0.253
	H4a: Teacher's Linkage	0.066	0.615	0.143	0.103	0.146	0.189
	H5a: Perceived Costs	-0.100	0.180	<b>-0.114</b>	<b>0.019</b>	-0.069	0.342
	H6a: Alternative Offer	-0.041	0.594	<b>-0.266</b>	<b>0.001</b>	<b>-0.182</b>	<b>0.013</b>
Satisfaction <-	H2b: Community Commitment	0.024	0.870	<b>0.328</b>	<b>0.019</b>	<b>0.225</b>	<b>0.025</b>
	H4b: Teacher's Linkage	<b>0.621</b>	<b>&lt;0.0001</b>	<b>0.494</b>	<b>&lt;0.0001</b>	<b>0.520</b>	<b>&lt;0.0001</b>
Community Commitment <-	H3: Friend Group Commitment	<b>0.285</b>	<b>0.027</b>	<b>0.228</b>	<b>0.012</b>	<b>0.463</b>	<b>&lt;0.0001</b>
	H4d: Teacher's Linkage	<b>0.433</b>	<b>0.003</b>	<b>0.350</b>	<b>0.001</b>	0.181	0.097
Perceived Costs <-	H4c: Teacher's Linkage	<b>0.334</b>	<b>0.001</b>	<b>0.218</b>	<b>0.015</b>	<b>0.289</b>	<b>0.002</b>

Significant regression in bold

The age-related model confirms the general model results about the positive effect of satisfaction on attitudinal loyalty (H1), as the literature showed. The age-related model also shows that community commitment could tend to influence loyalty (H2a) for group 2. More important, an increased community commitment has a positive influence on satisfaction towards the RS (H2b), except for youngest riders (Group 1). This commitment, through volunteering and participation in the activities proposed by the club, appeared in the exploratory survey as necessary for the riders in their learning process. The age-related difference in the model suggests that this effect is less important for youngest riders, maybe because they don't realize it or because they don't have the opportunity to engage in the community as they can be restricted by their parents. In addition, affective commitment to the group of friends of the RS has a positive influence on community commitment, confirming hypothesis 3, and the significance of this effect increases with age, probably because friends made through leisure activities become more important when you get older, and engaging in the equestrian center's community provides the desired conviviality, as already shown in the literature. However, there is no indirect influence of friend group commitment on loyalty for any groups (Table 7).

**Table 7***Table of indirect effects on loyalty according to age group*

Indirect effect	Group 1 (15-20 yr.)		Group 2 (21-30 yr.)		Group 3 (31yr. and over)	
	Coeff std	P- Value	Coeff std	P-Value	Coeff std	P-Value
1 Mediation effect of satisfaction between community commitment and loyalty	0.016	0.869	<b>0.180</b>	<b>0.031</b>	<b>0.169</b>	<b>0.033</b>
2 Mediation effect of community commitment between friend group commitment and loyalty	0.016	0.634	0.031	0.188	0.047	0.307
3 Mediation effect of community commitment between teacher's linkage and loyalty	0.024	0.616	0.048	0.140	0.019	0.273
4 Mediation effect of satisfaction between teacher's linkage and loyalty	<b>0.424</b>	<b>0.002</b>	<b>0.272</b>	<b>0.001</b>	<b>0.390</b>	<b>&lt;0.0001</b>
5 Mediation effect of perceived costs between teacher's linkage and loyalty	-0.033	0.198	-0.025	0.120	-0.020	0.353

Significant regression in bold

The link with the teacher has a strong positive influence on satisfaction (H4b) for all groups (Table 6). Thus, a strong teacher-rider relationship implies a higher satisfaction. Moreover, a strong teacher-rider relationship could tend to influence the loyalty to RS but only for group 2 (H4a). However, the teacher's linkage does not influence community commitment (H4d) and perceived costs (H4c) (Table 6). For all the groups of age, teacher's linkage influence on loyalty is fully mediated through satisfaction (H4b) (Figure 2 and Table 7). This tends to prove that loyalty to the club strongly depends on the relationship with the teacher, but this influence express differently, involving different other constructs, according to the age of the customer.

Concerning switching barriers, the results confirm that higher perceived costs of change imply lower customers' loyalty, but only for group 2 (H5). Different elements could combine to explain this result. First, parents could be the ones who endure the perceived costs of change as some members of this group are still dependent on their parents (e.g. students). Second, it is possible that the respondents who best and most accurately estimate the perceived costs associated with a change of equestrian center are the individuals who have already thought about it. Consequently, riders who have already considered changing the equestrian center but have not yet done so are either likely to do so soon or remain at the equestrian center lacking something, inducing a low attitudinal fidelity but potentially high behavioral loyalty. A strong negative influence of perceived costs and, more generally, switching barriers on satisfaction and loyalty mean that riders must stay (or perceive that they should) in their equestrian centers,



regardless of the satisfaction created in the relationship. According to the reactance theory or retention, such limited freedom of choice and higher perceived switching costs create less satisfaction, redemption intentions and attitudinal loyalty than a more unconstrained situation (Ringold, 1988). This result is consistent with Jones et al. (2000), who explained that dissatisfied customers may remain due to high switching barriers but engage in enterprise-based sabotage, such as negative word-of-mouth.

Finally, the results confirm that a low alternative offer attractiveness allows higher loyalty (H6), unless for group 1, maybe because of their young age they don't know the alternative offer and depends on the parental influence on decision making. However, respondents seem to have encountered problems of understanding and positioning themselves relating to the alternative offer, suggesting a lack of knowledge from customers about the existing alternative offer. This consequently highlight a need to better promote equestrian centers' offer by adapting it to targeted customer's profile. The negative influence of the alternative offer attractiveness on loyalty for older groups (2 and 3) shows that loyalty might also depends on the degree of knowledge of these clients. Thus, if they are dissatisfied with the club, they are better able to identify the costs of change and are more willing to stay if the teacher is suitable. In addition, professional stability, the acquisition of a house for example, or having children who do not wish to change schools implies a reduction in the mobility of older population.

These results suggest the primary influence of the RS teacher on loyalty as observed in the literature through the concept of relationship quality with service providers but also that depending on the customers' age, the influence of antecedents on loyalty changes.

## 5 DISCUSSION

The originality of this paper is to consider loyalty to each one's riding center and not to an only one particular structure. The variability of the services of the structures is not considered but the results are based on generic customers' expectations towards the equestrian center concerning the practice. The identification of key points to build customer loyalty in equestrian centers appears to be fundamental in a context of great versatility of the riders and a growing competitive leisure offer. The results obtained show that the teacher's linkage plays a central role in the process of riders' loyalty to their riding school (RS) through satisfaction. The teacher often conveys the image of the RS. In addition to the measurements of the constructs, respondents were asked why they left their previous RS. Apart from the main reason related to

moving (39.3%), 33.3% of the riders left their previous structure for reasons related to teaching (lack of progression, pedagogy, competence, adaptation to the needs or friendliness of the staff, traumatic experiences), also underlining the importance of teachers in building loyalty.

The key role of the teacher in the loyalty process expresses through client satisfaction, community commitment and perceived switching costs. Thus, the teacher's pedagogy, according to the personalization of the services offered within a lesson or the simple choice of the horse ridden, influences the satisfaction and community commitment dedication of the customers, therefore a high satisfaction increases the loyalty to the structure, and a low satisfaction foster a switch. Thus, dissatisfied switchers would be more responsive to the club's service proposals and therefore achieve faster performance changes between the old and new service. This enhances the influence of the alternative offer attractiveness, as competition in the leisure activities market implies a proactive approach by RS. However, very often these structures do not have a communication plan allowing them to be competitive (Galy, 2018) while we note the negative effect of this construct of alternative offer on loyalty, demonstrating that it may be useful to canvass consumers from other structures. Communicating on specific offers can thus allow RS to attract a clientele in search of this offer, therefore maybe less versatile in the long run. In addition, our hypothesis concerning the influence of friend group commitment on satisfaction was not statistically proved, as structural invariance of the model was proven, demonstrating no influence of rider's age. Young riders' community commitment has no effect on satisfaction. In line with Chevalier and Fleuriel (2008) findings on invisible work, this can be explained by the fact that young riders find it normal to help and participate in tasks and in the community, without identifying it as community commitment.

The results show that loyalty to equestrian centers is firmly established in the model for riders over 20 years old (Loyalty  $R^2 > 72\%$ ). However, the main interest of this article is to show that with age, satisfaction as an antecedent to loyalty is not build in the same way. Satisfaction seems to be central to the loyalty of customers under 20 yrs., but its influence is altered with age despite the higher loyalty of older clients. This finding raises questions about the role of satisfaction after a certain age. Customers from a certain age look less globally and could be more attentive to other criteria. As explained by Wu et al. (2015) and Duret (2019), riders under the age of 30 are more interested in the technical side of the practice such as learning or the thrill of the competition while riders 30 and older expect the escapism of their equestrian leisure thus the social side of the teacher and the community.

The mediation effect of satisfaction between either teacher's linkage, or community commitment and loyalty is strong in the global model, but it differs according to populations' age. The literature on community commitment or millennial sport fan consumption underestimates the influence of overall satisfaction (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Yim et al., 2021) or investigates the influence of gender (Bodet, 2012; Casper & Stellino, 2008; Oh et al., 2002) on their behavioral model analyses. The findings show full mediation effect of satisfaction between teacher's linkage and loyalty for all group of age.

The absence, for practitioners under 20 yrs. of mediation effect of satisfaction between community commitment and loyalty and the presence of the switching barriers for riders above 20 years old impact clubs' development strategy towards their client and service providers. This study shows a global loyalty model integrating the different effects of satisfaction and the influence of age as a moderating variable of the model thus acting on each inter-conceptual relationship.

Concerning the switching barriers, different elements could combine to explain the results on perceived costs. On the other hand, it is possible that the respondents who best and most highly evaluate their perceived costs of switching RS are individuals who have already thought about it, (i.e. riders who have already considered switching clubs but have not yet acted). These individuals would, therefore, be at least partly dissatisfied but would stay at the RS anyway (because of the lack of better solution or held back by something), inducing a low attitudinal loyalty but potentially a high behavioral loyalty. This result is consistent with previous research (Des Garets et al., 2003; Jones et al., 2000) showing that dissatisfied customers may still stay because of high switching barriers, but engage in business-driven sabotage such as negative word-of-mouth. Furthermore, these results also confirm Greenwell et al. (2002) explanation to promote re-use intentions and loyalty to sports service providers by fostering a positive attitude of service providers that would result in customer satisfaction and improved service quality. As the literature explains, perceived costs are higher for more experienced clients, i.e., older riders, reflecting a greater visibility and understanding of switching barriers.

## 5.1 LIMITS

This work has several limitations. First, the survey was conducted online, which obviously limited the respondents with access to Internet, and can also explain the composition

of the sample with few respondents over 55 years old. A larger sample would have been desirable to refine the results of the multi-group analyses to study a group of retired people loyalty for example. Then, an item concerning the attractiveness of the alternative offer could not be used (question in reverse code misunderstood by many individuals) implying an altered measurement scale. In addition, although 84% of the federal equestrian population is female, our sample lacks some male representation (92% female). Moreover, these results only concern riders aged 15 and over, who represent only 59% of memberships. Studying the under-15s is difficult due to the difficulty of accessing this public (legislative difficulties, adapted distribution channels) but also due to the overall understanding of these young people in relation to their activity, particularly in terms of switching barriers. The decision to stay or leave the center is perhaps not only linked to individual factors but also to the dependence on the decisions of their parents in terms of transportation, financial cost, frequency of practice or availability to become actively involved in the club's community. Our findings show that all these factors influence loyalty to the equestrian center for older groups.

Finally, this study analyzes club loyalty, not sport loyalty, which could be interested too, because (i) these determinants are certainly not the same as those of loyalty to an equestrian center (ii), in terms of policy for the federation, such results would be complementary to those of this paper to initiate federal policies aimed at strengthening equestrian loyalty.

## 5.2 FUTURE RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS

To our knowledge, such a study has never been done in the context of horse riding. The results on switching barriers are not intuitive on attractiveness and perceived cost but may find hypothetical explanations that should be tested. Future work should integrate other items to measure the attractiveness of the alternative offer. This work should continue with a longitudinal analysis of loyalty to be able to account for the bi-dimensional aspect of loyalty. The empirical findings on the moderating effect of age might come from different situational factors such as financial independence, lifestyle, different interests, or family structures instead of age groups. An extension of the study could focus on different social factors, such as social status, in addition to the sociological studies already conducted. However, it would necessitate a larger sample to have a sufficient number of individuals by group. Experience or skill level could be interesting to investigate as a moderator of the loyalty formation.

First action levers available to equestrian centers begin to emerge, to better retain and satisfy their current customers. For the youngest customers, loyalty is based on satisfaction with the teaching, so the teacher must try to adapt to the needs, to be a pedagogue. Parental influence probably needs to be factored into the decision-making process of these young clients. We then observe the importance of having a group of friends (except for the 21–30-year-olds) that positively influences community commitment. This increases with age, probably showing differences in expectations. RS should offer different activities, adapt to consider friend groups in the practice, propose a dynamic club life adapted to the age group. The 21–30-year riders may not have a lot of time to have a group of friends in the RS, due to an active professional life or family, so the only way to invest in community commitment is through the teacher. This age group may also have a well-established group of friends outside the RS (e.g. at university...). Consequently, teachers need to pay more attention to clients in this age group. The alternative offer is unknown and that is why RS needs to better promote their offer, better target their clients according to the specificities of the proposed offer. If the attractiveness of alternative offer increases due to better communication and segmentation of structures, customers will be more eager to switch RS. These levers however remain to be deepened and adapted according to customers' profile. If from a certain age onwards satisfaction no longer influences loyalty, it is no longer enough to increase satisfaction in a global way, it is necessary to act directly on what matters most to customers by implementing a strategy differentiated by age. Moreover, with the ageing of the population and the fact that more and more people are practicing sport later in life, the consequences and managerial challenges are considerable for clubs and sports federations. In particular in the choice and retention of the teacher within the structure for an older clientele with higher purchasing power.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This paper explains loyalty to riding schools/clubs in France according to riders' age. The results confirm the classical influence of satisfaction on loyalty whatever the age. They also show that loyalty and satisfaction drivers vary according to the age. Satisfaction largely depends on the teacher's linkage, whatever the age, and the effect of teacher's linkage on loyalty is completely mediated through satisfaction. Moreover, there is a mediation effect of satisfaction between community commitment and loyalty for riders over 20 yrs. The findings also show the effect of the alternative offer attractiveness on loyalty for riders over 20 yrs. and

of perceived switching costs for riders between 21 and 30 yrs. These results underline the importance of the pedagogy used (especially for younger riders as their loyalty highly depend on the teacher), of the role of the friend group and club life as a welcoming place and community for older riders, and the problems of adapting club's offer to riders' demand and age. This paper provides an understanding of how to make riding customers more resistant to competitive offers and pressures. This enhances the influence of past and actual expectations towards the practice according to the group of age. Thus, riding schools should stay aware of their clients' needs and offer the adequate services.

The results confirm other recreational sport activities findings. Like riders, these participants seek skills development while practicing. They also need social bonding to increase commitment as shown for loyal advanced tennis players (Casper & Andrew, 2008). It also confirms the specific influence of satisfaction. Finally, in line with Bodet (2012) and Nuviala et al. (2013) findings on loyalty in sport health clubs, managing strategy have to consider the effect of switching barriers with their services offers as well as financial issues especially for practitioners above 20 years old. This confirms that the chosen example of loyalty in French riding clubs can be incremented to other sport leisure activities. In tennis and gymnastics, negative cost perception by younger populations is a predictor of continued practice (Casper & Stellino, 2008). These authors also found that commitment is higher for older tennis players but decreases in running where the stresses on the body are higher, which shows that the practice must be regulated for the more mature groups.

Theoretical contributions of this paper are to include in a general model of loyalty, and mainly rely on the moderating effect of age on teacher's linkage, community commitment, switching barriers and satisfaction. To the best of our knowledge, this hasn't been shown in sport management literature despite the major effect influence of these constructs on satisfaction or loyalty (Bodet, 2012; Casper & Andrew, 2008; Kim et al., 2019; Nuviala et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2015). The conclusions of this study present the usefulness of multigroup structural equation models and the possible managerial uses according to defined factors such as age. However, our model explains less accurately the loyalty of young people, which underscores the need to investigate more this age group or even younger practitioners. Especially for younger groups, other variables below the constructs may not necessarily be captured by this model and influence loyalty, such as the influence of parents.

This work could be extended to more specific research on the under 15 years old audience to confirm their expectations, and on their parents, especially since the FFE has been



positioned for a long time on the sports market on this evolving segment. In this paper, we focus on non-owner equestrian practitioners, and it would be interesting to extend the study to other audiences such as equine owners who practice in riding schools with their own equine.

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## APPENDIX 1

**Table 8***Type of structures for the qualitative exploratory survey*

	<b>Area</b>	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Suburban</b>	<b>Urban</b>
<b>Type of riding schools</b>	Members number	from 50 to 75 members	from 30 to 350 members	450 members
	Number interviewed	2 riding schools Riders	22 riding schools Riders	1 riding school Riders
Type of practice proposed in riding schools		Dressage, Showjumping, Cross-country, Hacking, Vaulting, Equi-feel, Pony-games, Archery	Dressage, Showjumping, Cross-country, Hacking, Vaulting, Horsemanship and Equi-feel, Pony-games, Horse-Ball	Dressage, Showjumping
Distance between house and riding school		In average 15 min [3; 40] (all type of transport car, bike, on foot)		
Lessons orientation		Mainly leisure	Mainly competition	Competition



## APPENDIX 2

Table 9

*Quantitative survey sample presentation*

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	General
Sample number	206	187	193	586
Gender				
Male	5%	4%	14%	8%
Female	95%	96%	86%	92%
Age (mean in yrs. (sd))	15 to 20 (17.7 (1.6))	21 to 30 (24.5(2.8))	31 and over (43.6 (9.1))	28.4 (12.3)
Profession	<b>Student:89%</b> Workmen:3% Other:8%	<b>Student:36%</b> Workmen:29% Farmers: 1% Executive:18% Unemployed: 8% Other:9%	Student:0% Workmen:35% Farmers: 1% <b>Executive:54%</b> Unemployed: 0% Other:8%	<b>Student:42%</b> Workmen:23% Farmers: 1% Executive:24% Unemployed: 4% Other:7%
Monthly income	<1500€: 14% <b>1500/3000€:41%</b> 3000/4500€:29% >4500€: 17%	<1500€: 33% <b>1500/3000€:44%</b> 3000/4500€:19% >4500€: 5%	<1500€: 7% 1500/3000€:33% <b>3000/4500€:34%</b> >4500€: 25%	<1500€: 18% <b>1500/3000€:39%</b> 3000/4500€:27% >4500€: 16%
Study level	<b>Ongoing: 89%</b> ≤A-Level: 10% Bachelor:1% Master&+: 0%	<b>Ongoing: 36%</b> ≤A-Level: 13% Bachelor: 23% Master&+: 29%	Ongoing: 0% ≤A-Level: 17% Bachelor: 36% <b>Master&amp;+:48%</b>	<b>Ongoing: 42%</b> ≤A-Level: 14% Bachelor: 20% Master&+: 25%
Household number	1= 2% 2-3= 31% <b>4= 41%</b> 5-6= 26%	1: 36% <b>2-3: 41%</b> 4: 16% 5-6:8%	1: 18% <b>2-3: 46%</b> 4: 23% 5-6: 12%	1: 19% <b>2-3:39%</b> 4: 27% 5-6: 26%
Number of years of horse-riding practice (median)	10 years	15 years	10 years	11 years
Number of years in horse riding schools (median)	5 years	3 years	3 years	4 years
Equestrian level	Galop 5 & + (medium-plus level): 73%	Galop 5 & +: 70%	Galop 5 & +: 53%	Galop 5 & +: 67%
Number of RS attended (median)	2	3	3	2