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Article

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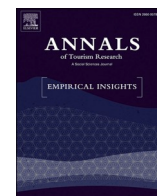
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Developing play for children: An untapped competitive advantage tool for destinations

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1. Introduction

The family segment, which is a heterogeneous group including couples without children (Séraphin, Gowreesunkar, & Cappucci, 2020), couples with adult children and/or underage children (Gram, 2005), is an important market for destinations because of its economic weight (Xu & Kahl, 2018). For families (with young children), going on holiday is very important as it constitutes amongst other things an opportunity to convey some values to the younger members of the family (Huang, Ramshaw, & Norman, 2016). As for children, holidays is an opportunity to relax, have fun, and learn, while spending time with their family (Buzlu, Kuhzady, & Ghaderi, 2024). It is important to note this viewpoint is written from the perspective of families with young children ranging from childhood ie 3–6 to middle childhood ie 7–10 (Poria & Timothy, 2014).

Despite the economic importance of the family market for the tourism industry, and despite the social and learning importance of holidays for the family market, academic literature in tourism has totally overlooked the role and importance of play for young children, to focus almost exclusively on what Séraphin (2024) refer to as ‘adultainment’ (adult entertainment). Additionally, with the growing trend of ‘adult only’ products and services in the tourism industry (Séraphin et al., 2020), some operators, including Destination Marketing Organisations,

are giving a lesser importance to young children play in their products and service development strategies, and in their internal and external marketing strategies. Having said that, some destinations are branding themselves as family friendly and are particularly targeting family with young children. Wales for instance, through its initiative, ‘Play Wales’ is championing children’s play (Play Wales, n.d. [Online]). In Marseille (France), private and public operators are offering scavenger hunts to discover and learn (more) about the city (Citizenkid, n.d. [Online]); etc.

At the moment, the private sector through resort Kids’ Club (Séraphin & Yallop, 2019, Séraphin & Yallop, 2020); theme parks and other built attractions (Wu, Wall, Zu, & Ying, 2019) are the one mainly providing play to children. This viewpoint is suggesting that play could be more widely spread across destinations and be used as part of a branding strategy as children playful destination. This view is supported by the fact that play is a transformative tool that plays a significant role in innovation and improvement of performance (Wadhvani & Sørensen, 2023). Equally important, when a play is the outcome of the combination of education and entertainment (edutainment), it plays a significant role in the engagement and enhancement of customer experience (Hertzman, Anderson, & Rowley, 2008; Rossetti, Wyatt, & Ali-Knight, 2023). This is even the more the case when the target is children (Forbes & Craven, 2023).

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¹ His research interests focus on children in tourism and related topics.

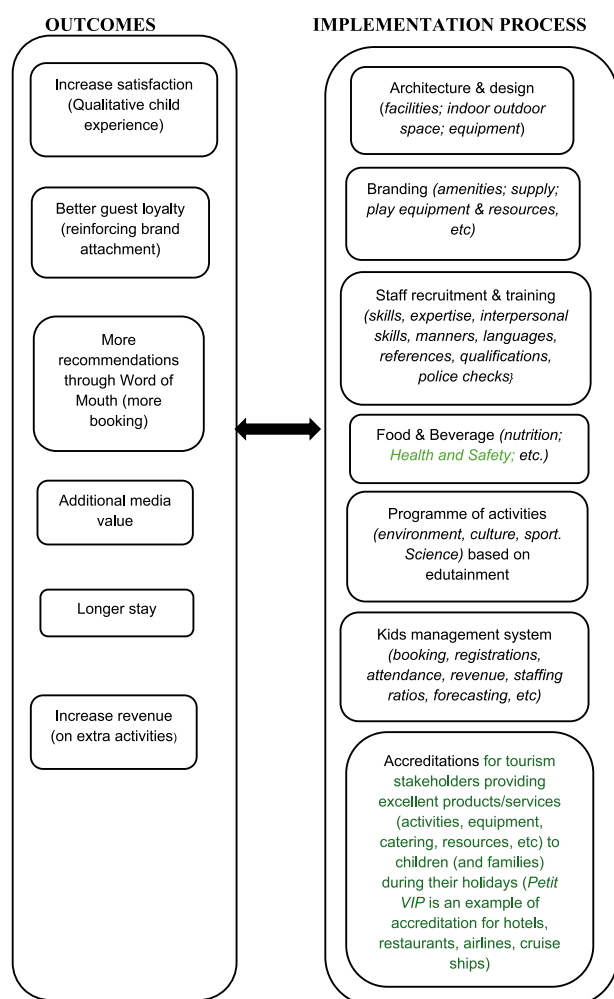


Fig. 1. Operation Model of Edutainment Play for Children.
(Source: The authors (adapted from Petit VIP, n.d. [Online]))

2. Context and opportunities

Despite the importance of play for children, some providers such as the hospitality sector do not perceive it as a competitive advantage tool that can contribute to the improvement of performance. Indeed, taking the example of resort Kids' club, Grande and Séraphin (2024) explain that the fact that play is mainly exploited from an entertainment perspective, it does not contribute to the competitiveness of resorts. However, if the education dimension was added (edutainment), play could be used by resorts to improve their performance (Grande & Séraphin, 2024). There are many opportunities for Destination Marketing Organisations to exploit the potential of play. First, existing resources. Indeed, many destinations have parks and natural areas with equipment for children (Play Wales, 2021a, 2021b [Online]). They could be used as edutainment spaces to educate young visitors about the destination. In that case, parks and natural areas could be assimilated to communication, creative, exploratory, imaginative fun play (Play Wales, 2017 [Online]). Second, there are existing models of children play used as edutainment tools for the improvement of organisations. Indeed, museums are well versed to this approach (Play Wales, 2021a, 2021b [Online]). The experience of the luxury segment of the hospitality industry of using Kids' club as competitive tool not only provides a guideline in terms of implementation process, but also evidence of positive outcomes (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 ('Implementation process') lists of the elements to consider by

any tourism and/or hospitality provider of play for young children. The same figure ('Outcomes') highlights the benefits of developing play for children when a clear process is followed. 'Outcomes' and 'Implementation process' are feeding into each other for the benefits of children, their carers, and the destination (and other stakeholders involved).

3. Conclusion

Being branded as a children playful edutainment destination could be a strong competitive advantage for a destination, while abiding to the rights of children to play. In this endeavour, it is important for all the stakeholders of the industry to agree on the message to be conveyed to the children, and types of play and fun to be used.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Hugues Séraphin: Resources, Methodology, Conceptualization.
Kevin Grande: Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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