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Older travellers as a critical sector of the tourism industry, now and in the future: overcoming myths and stereotypes

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Abstract: Population ageing is an irreversible global trend (United Nations, 2023). The global population of people aged 65 years and older is forecast to rise from 10% in 2022 to 16% by 2050. As a result, many older tourists who have large amounts of discretionary time and money at their disposal want to travel the world because they are wealthier, healthier, and more active than previous generations. This review paper provides a thorough analysis of the existing literature to predict the major trends associated with older travellers in the future and how tourism providers can more effectively respond to their changing needs. In the past, marketing campaigns have displayed a lack of understanding of the travel needs of older tourists. A ‘new age’ of older tourism and travel is emerging, where new technologies are becoming key drivers of change to support greater travel opportunities. This is likely to provide greater economic benefits for local communities because of the increased spending power of the ‘silver economy’. Marketing of tourism needs to be portrayed as a pleasurable and enjoyable experience, and as a mentally and physically healthy pursuit that can add increased vitality to the lives of older people.

Keywords: Older travellers; population ageing; tourism; marketing; stereotypes; accessible tourism

1 Introduction

Albert Einstein once said, “I never think about the future - it comes soon enough”. As Einstein stated, the immediate

future is upon us now, and one of the most formidable demographic challenges facing the world of the future is no longer rapid population growth but ‘population ageing’. The concept of overpopulation was introduced by Stanford Professor Paul Ehrlich and his wife, Anne, who wrote ‘The Population Bomb’ in 1968, which sold millions of copies and turned Ehrlich into a global celebrity. The authors predicted a worldwide famine due to overpopulation, as well as other major societal upheavals, and advocated immediate action to limit population growth. However, what has become more apparent in the 21st century is that, “ageing has become the real population bomb” (Bloom & Zucker, n. d.), and that there has been a major shift from the concept of ‘overpopulation’ to ‘population ageing’ as a major global issue because the proportion of older people has been steadily rising over the past century (Harper & Leeson, 2008).

Population ageing has been described as one of the most profound demographic changes in human history. As a result, different cohorts of older people are growing faster than any other age group (United Nations, 2019). In the European Union (EU), there were 101.1 million older people (aged 65 years or more) living in the 28 EU countries in 2018, which is almost one-fifth (19.7%) of the total population. During the next three decades, this figure is forecast to rise to 149.2 million inhabitants in 2050 (28.5 % of the total population) (AGE – Platform Europe, 2019). Globally, the United Nations (2023) has predicted that the number of people aged 65 years and older worldwide is projected to more than double, from 761 million in 2021 to 1.6 billion in 2050. Furthermore, the number of people aged 80 years or more is growing at an even faster rate and is expected to triple in the next 30 years.

The World Health Organisation (2022) has described ageing as a gradual decrease in physical and mental capacity, with a growing risk of disease and ultimately of death. However, these changes are regarded as neither linear nor consistent and are only loosely associated with a person’s

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chronological age. For many, ageing is often associated with life transitions such as retirement, relocation to more appropriate housing and/or the death of friends and partners. On a more positive note, Crăciun (2023) concluded that positive ageing is the successful development across different life stages and life domains (e.g., cognitive, social, emotional) that can lead to positive outcomes in later life (e.g., regarding well-being and health).

In response to this major demographic challenge of population ageing, the World Health Organisation and the United Nations have combined to promote strategies that support the positive health and well-being of older people. These strategies aim to promote the growth and maintenance of functional abilities in older people, while acknowledging that these depend on the inherent potential of each person, their immediate environment, and the interaction between the two. By combining policy reforms and technology advances, the United Nations has advocated that all nations need to be better prepared to address the challenges and opportunities associated with these demographic changes. In this world of rapid social, technological, and economic changes, “the long-term process of population ageing has begun or is expected to begin soon in all countries and areas of the world” (United Nations, 2023, p. 11).

One way that older people can lead a healthy lifestyle is through tourism, which is now regarded as a multi-component leisure activity that may be more advantageous than purely leisure activities that only have physical outcomes. Vega-Vázquez et al. (2021) concluded that tourism can connect with other crucial aspects of healthy ageing, such as well-being, life satisfaction, and social networks. In addition, the positive effect of tourism on the quality of life for individuals aged over 65 years was confirmed through the concept of Health-Related Quality of Life (HRQoL), which was measured with the results of self-administered questionnaires, and compared with results from a reference population.

Based on these preliminary findings, the main aim of this paper is to provide an in-depth review of the published research within the tourism and gerontological fields of study to answer the following research questions:

1. Are negative attitudes and outdated marketing approaches toward older travellers’ part of the tourism industry in the future?
2. What are the future societal trends associated with older adult travel?
3. How can tourism providers effectively respond to the changing needs of older travellers?
4. Should the focus of future tourism research be on accessibility for all, rather than tourism services based on the chronological age of tourists?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Outdated attitudes toward older adults

Robert Butler, an American gerontologist and the first Director of the National Institute on Ageing in the United States, coined the term ‘ageism’ in 1969 to describe discrimination against older people. Butler challenged the negative attitudes and attempted to raise societal awareness about issues surrounding population aging, “The tragedy of old age is not the fact that each of us must grow old and die but that the process of doing so has been made unnecessarily and at times excruciatingly painful, humiliating, debilitating, and isolating through insensitivity, ignorance, and poverty” (Butler, 1975, pp. 2–3). Since then, Meisner (2021) has noted that definitions of ageism have widened to encompass cognitive (such as age stereotypes and beliefs), affective (such as age prejudice and attitudes), and behavioural (such as age discrimination) components.

Ageism has been found to have harmful effects on the psychological well-being of older adults, which can lead to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety (Kang & Kim, 2022). These negative stereotypes include suffering from poor health and loneliness, physical and cognitive incompetence, unproductivity and unattractiveness (Reissmann et al., 2021). Ageism can also be a major barrier to enacting effective governmental policies and developing action strategies for healthy ageing. This was recognised in a systematic review of the impact of ageism on health, commissioned by the World Health Organisation (2021), which included 422 studies from 45 different countries. This review found that in 405 (96%) studies, ageism was associated with the worst outcomes in all the health domains that were examined.

2.2 Older travellers

Based on these changing global ageing trends, there has been a growing recognition that older travellers want to travel more and are increasingly accounting for a greater share of holiday spending (Patterson, 2018). In the future, it has been forecast that older adults will be regarded as one of the most significant growth markets in the tourism industry. One of the reasons for this is because in the future older adults will be regarded as one of the most significant growth markets in the tourism industry (Patterson et al., 2021), because they are considered to be the richest generation in the world. Baby

boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, are currently the wealthiest generation, with the average Boomer worth \$1.2 million, according to Fortune (Carbonaro, 2023).

Because of this, one of the global challenges that tourism providers face is to recognise and provide services and programs that meet the needs of older travellers aged 65 years and over. It has been forecast that by 2025, travellers aged 65 and older will more than double their international travel to 180 million trips, accounting for one in eight international trips globally (Visa, n.d.). In Europe, it has been acknowledged that almost half (49%) of all people aged 65 years or older have participated in at least one tourism experience (Eurostat Statistics Explained, 2020). In addition, older travellers are travelling more frequently and now account for nearly 1:4 of tourism nights for private purposes. This is because many older travellers can afford longer trips and are focused on comfort and health rather than saving money, preferably in their country of residence, where they often stay in non-rented accommodation, such as holiday homes that they own (Eurostat Statistics Explained, 2021).

Nevertheless, in the past, the needs of older travellers have been largely unmet and often undermarketed. Researchers (Le Serre, 2008) noted that the senior tourist segment represents a profitable source of revenue for companies in the tourism sector, not only due to its growing size, but also because of the increased discretionary time available for travel. However, the tourism sector has been slow to respond and lacks senior-friendly products and services (Alén et al., 2015; Wan, 2015). Many tourism marketers continue to treat senior consumers as a single, homogeneous market (Esiyok et al., 2018). However, demographic studies have shown significant differences in the travel needs of different cohort groups (Mary et al., 2020). One group in particular are older travellers with specialised health needs, who require individual care as well as the provision of accessible facilities (Lee & King, 2009; Mary et al., 2020).

It is pleasing to note that a growing number of developed countries are now recognising the importance of providing services and programs for older travellers, who are becoming a priority market due to their rapid increase in numbers (Alén et al., 2015; Francescato et al., 2017). Many are healthier, wealthier, more technologically savvy, climate and eco-conscious, and more mobile than previous generations (Patterson, 2018).

3 Methodology

An extensive literature review was conducted to find, select, and synthesize all the available evidence on this topic. This paper employed a systematic literature

review to link tourism with demographics and to focus on future trends associated with the travel behaviour of older tourists, which can support their need for a healthy lifestyle and foster positive feelings of well-being. A systematic literature review (SR) synthesises scientific evidence to answer a particular research question in a way that is transparent and reproducible, while seeking to include all published evidence on the topic as well as appraising the quality of this evidence (Lame, 2019).

To review the research findings, the authors identified several key sources through an iterative search of multiple literature databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar, to connect existing theories and research findings. A five-stage approach was adopted that included:

1. Defining the research objectives for data collection.
2. Differentiating searched keywords and selecting databases.
3. Searching the literature in the databases according to the selection criteria.
4. Extracting pertinent materials from qualified sources, and to
5. Synthesise the findings.

Databases were accessed and searched using a pre-determined set of keywords, which were modified to reflect their findings and to ensure their relevance to the research. A total of 68 research studies published between 1968 and 2023, using the following keywords—population ageing, older tourists/travellers, future trends, myths and stereotypes, and accessible tourism — were identified, retrieved, and analysed to identify research gaps and development on the topic.

4 Results

This review paper offers a comprehensive analysis of current literature to predict significant trends for future older travellers and explore how tourism providers can better address their evolving needs. The analysis is organised into four sections. An overview of the previous attitudes that were held toward the ageing process, resulting in what has been termed ‘ageism’, which has resulted in outdated approaches to the marketing of tourism: *New approaches to the marketing of older tourism*. The second section, *Future tourism trends of older travellers*, examines some of the future trends in regard to tourism for older travellers. The third section, *Response to the*

changing tourism needs of older travellers, makes suggestions about how tourism providers can cater for the changing needs of older travellers. *Marketing accessible tourism experiences to older travellers*, the fourth section, advocates for the need to change the terminology to include ‘accessible travel’ for people with disabilities as well as older adults.

Historically, marketing campaigns have often overlooked the unique travel requirements of older adults. However, a “new era” in tourism for older adults is emerging, with advancements in technology serving as primary catalysts for change, facilitating enhanced travel opportunities. This shift holds potential for substantial economic benefits for local communities, driven by the growing spending power of the “silver economy.” Tourism marketing should emphasise the pleasure and enjoyment of travel, presenting it as a mentally and physically enriching activity that enhances vitality for older individuals.

5 Discussion

5.1 New approaches to the marketing of older tourism

With increasing age, studies have shown that functional limitations become more prevalent, and many older adults can develop one or more physical limitations that impact their ability to travel (Sundling et al., 2016). These include health-related problems such as impaired vision and hearing loss, as well as knee and hip problems (Hunter-Jones & Blackburn, 2007). As a result, it was a common stereotype that these health-related problems generally restrict seniors from travelling. Furthermore, studies in the past have mainly focused on health-related matters such as illnesses after returning from holidays, contracting malaria, sexually transmitted diseases, accidents and injuries incurred while travelling. Additionally, several transportation barriers were identified for older adults, particularly those with functional limitations. Examples include accidents during boarding or alighting, distances to a bus stop, and feelings of insecurity when travelling alone (Wretstrand et al., 2009).

Because tourism providers often stereotyped older consumers as having functional limitations, this often led to the older generation being overlooked, underserved, and often ignored as they were regarded as a lower market priority. Early attempts at marketing tourism to older adults were perceived as unrealistic and not truly representative of the diverse generations of older

adults. Oró Piqueras and Falcus (2017, p.122) suggested that “advertisements on holidays and vacation packages directed at the senior population show images of athletic and dynamic citizens in their sixties and seventies. Silver white hair, wide smiles and tanned skin characterise the retired tourists in most advertising campaigns.”

It is still rare to see older individuals pictured in advertising, and this trend has been consistent over the years (Prieler & Kohlbacher, 2011). Prieler and Kohlbacher (2011) concluded that older people and especially older women are underrepresented in most television advertisements in Japan. In the United States, Hsu (2019) reported on a study by the American Association for Retired Persons (AARP) that found that this demographic is “shunned and caricatured in marketing images, perpetuating unrealistic stereotypes and contributing to age discrimination” (The Business Times, 2019).

Eisenberg (2018) in Forbes commented on a report on ageing by McCann, a leading global marketing services company. McCann conducted one of its largest investigations of 28 quantitative marketplaces with approximately 24,000 global responders. The authors of this study titled it “Truth about Age” and concluded that rather than concentrating on numbers, marketers should shift from age segmentation with an emphasis on chronological age, toward what they termed ‘attitudinal segmentation’. That is, advertisers need to think differently about ageing and advocate the need to adopt a new theme, which is: ‘Age is becoming a less reliable indicator of just about anything’.

Stončikaitė (2022) concluded that previous attempts to market tourism to older consumers have tended to increase the types of prejudice and social exclusion that many older people experience. As a result, she believed that it is very difficult and unrealistic to provide suitable products and services, as well as marketing and communication strategies that go beyond age and statistics. One study that achieved this was Pesonen et al. (2015) who studied senior travellers who were users of tourism information technology and found that age was not a barrier to using technology, as there was no special marketing or website design that senior travellers needed; And that a good website will cater for both the needs of younger as well as older consumers. An empirical study by Tuomi et al. (2023) surveyed 357 Finnish older adults who were aged 60 years and older to determine their acceptance and use of digital cultural tourism services. Their findings indicated that the COVID-19 mobility restrictions have accelerated the use of technology amongst the older adult population, and that digital cultural tourism services were seen to complement in situ cultural tourism experiences to some degree.

5.2 Future tourism trends of older travellers

Tourism is regarded as one of the largest, most resilient and dynamic sectors in the world today (Streimikiene et al., 2021). Its weight in the GDP, as well as its contribution to employment, makes it a fundamental pillar of the world economy. Its resilience is seen with more than 900 million tourists travelling abroad in 2022, which is double the number in 2021, although it is still 63% below pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels. The Middle East has enjoyed the strongest relative increase in tourist arrivals, reaching 83% of the pre-pandemic numbers. In 2023, it has been forecast that international tourist arrivals could reach between 80% and 95% of the pre-pandemic levels (UN Tourism, 2023).

With the government's emphasis on promoting healthy lifestyle strategies, many older adults are now actively engaging in travel behaviour to enhance their post-retirement lives (Sien Leong et al., 2023). The older population has been increasing in size in recent years, and for many, this has led to an unprecedented level of affluence, independence, good health, and leisure time (Alén et al., 2015; Musa & Sim, 2010; Patuelli & Nijkamp, 2016). In the future, older adult tourism is expected to account for a sizable share of all holiday expenditure and will be the fastest-growing and most significant potential driving element for the tourism and hospitality industry (Patterson, 2018; Stončikaitė, 2022). The greater disposable income and increased time, along with seasonal adaptability and more frequent and longer-distance journeys, make this generation more important to the travel industry than other age groups (Alén et al., 2015; Balderas-Cejudo et al., 2019; Sharma & Swamy, 2019).

As a result of the promotion of tourism for older populations, the global hospitality and tourism industry is undergoing significant changes, not only due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions but also due to major technological advancements. The Office of Economic Development & Competitiveness (2020) stated that governments need to consider the long-term implications of the Covid-19 pandemic by capitalising on digitalisation, supporting low-carbon transition, and promoting the structural transformation needed to build a stronger, more sustainable and resilient tourism economy.

One of the technological advancements is the evolution of the metaverse. The metaverse is defined as a collective, persistent, and interactive parallel reality formed by the fusion of all virtual worlds into a single, seamless universe (Gursoy et al., 2022). That is, the metaverse provides immersive experiences in both virtual and physical environments. Allowing users to seamlessly traverse

between them. This includes attending meetings, concerts, and visiting museums, as examples, which can be delivered in the metaverse without sacrificing any of the expected benefits, thereby decreasing their carbon footprint while saving time and money. Buhalis et al. (2023) stated that the metaverse is likely to revolutionise travel and tourism management and marketing in the future. It empowers destination awareness, positioning and branding, as well as coordination and management through providing opportunities to support trip planning, interaction and engagement, which effectively transforms consumer behaviour.

Forecasting the future of the tourism sector is becoming increasingly challenging due to the rapid pace of technological innovation and shifting consumer expectations. One example of this increase in technological advancement is the study by Fennell (2021), who stated that new technology is likely to create a new market for what he termed a 'surrogate ecotourism experience'. This allows tourists who have accessibility needs (such as people with disabilities and older people) to remain in their homes and to employ local guides to facilitate personalised, interactive, real-life tours through virtual reality experiences. However, there is strong evidence to suggest that many of the low-income social groups, such as older people on government pensions and/or people with disabilities, will be excluded from tourism activities in the future (Alves et al., 2020). Chikuta et al. (2017) strongly advocated that more research is needed that focuses on tourists with disabilities.

5.3 Response to the changing tourism needs of older travellers

There is little doubt that the needs and wants of older tourists are changing and becoming significantly different from those of previous generations in terms of the number, duration, and mode of travel they take, as well as their trip preferences (Alén et al., 2015). Marketers and travel companies are increasingly targeting the older generations as a growing market because they are "healthier, financially well-off, better educated, and have a greater desire for novelty, escape, and authentic experiences than previous cohorts of retirees" (Patterson & Pegg, 2009, p. 254). Because of their higher disposable time, seasonal adaptability, and more frequent journeys, this generation is critical for the future growth of the travel sector". However, negative or ageist attitudes towards older people still exist. With the increasing demand for older travel in the future, this presents an ongoing challenge for tourism providers,

as many key stakeholders lack a basic understanding of their needs and expectations (Bakucz et al., 2021).

In addition, many older travellers are now redefining their expectations. They are looking for tailor-made journeys with a paradigm shift from one that previously valued products and services, toward the goal of providing ‘memorable experiences’. Tung et al. (2011) concluded that the senior market is becoming increasingly interested in revisiting many of their memorable experiences that may have occurred at critical stages throughout their lives. This is because many are losing interest in pre-packaged standardised tourism programs and are preferring tailor-made, unique and authentic experiences (Patterson, 2018; Patterson et al., 2021).

Thus, older people are placing greater demands on the travel industry to provide a wider variety of destination options than previously, catering to their special needs. As a result, holiday tours are becoming more specialised, with special-interest tours becoming increasingly popular. Baby boomers are seeking a broader range of adventurous, educational, and cultural experiences. However, the role of age needs to be taken into consideration when choosing adventure experiences. Osland et al. (2017) found that as the perceived years of physical ability to travel decrease, the tolerance for safety risk increases. Overall, tourism providers are now seeing a shift in motivations away from holidays for relaxation, entertainment, and shopping, to travelling for ‘real-life’ experiences.

This presents distinct opportunities for tourism organisations to offer a range of memorable experiences that are active, participatory, and respectful of local communities in their natural surroundings. To meet the sector’s requirements, providers will need to adapt, which requires them to grasp the nuances of new and emerging customer motives and preferences.

5.4 Marketing accessible tourism experiences to older travellers

Qiao et al. (2022) helped to unify the literature on senior tourism by combining the research studies on people with disabilities and re-naming them ‘accessible tourism’. They selected a total of 213 articles on accessible tourism from the core collection database of Web of Science (WoS) and analysed them using Cite Space. They concluded that over a 13-year period between 2008 and 2020, there has been an increasing number of studies published on accessible tourism, but overall, the base was still relatively small.

Accessible tourism is now a term accepted and used by the UNWTO to describe the right of every person to have equal access to tourism opportunities, regardless

of their origin, age, gender, or type of disability. In their Report ‘Promoting accessible tourism for all’ (<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/issues/promoting-accessible-tourism-for-all.html>), the United Nations (n.d.) stresses the importance of recognising the rights of the world’s ageing population. For many older and less mobile individuals with access needs, this can become a significant obstacle when travelling or touring. The report highlights the importance of accessibility to enable older tourists to participate fully in society well into their later years.

Strategies that enable accessible tourism to occur in the future must be implemented by destination management organisations (DMOs). Sein Leong et al. (2023) surveyed 227 Malaysian respondents and found that safety and cleanliness were the most important attributes for a senior-friendly destination. Other attributes deemed important by senior tourists included the availability of accessible facilities and barrier-free public transportation. They concluded that destination managers (DMOs) need to provide more welcoming, accessible, and inclusive destinations for older people. A senior-friendly tourism environment enables all tourists, whether healthy and active or weak and frail, to participate in the widest range of community and leisure experiences tailored to their abilities.

6 Conclusion

The travel industry is facing new challenges due to the increasing demand for travel among older adults over the age of 65. Therefore, DMOS must gain a greater understanding of the basic requirements of accessible tourism. One of the biggest problems the tourism and hospitality sectors face in the future is the lack of data or knowledge that will help them predict what older people require to cater for their specific needs. However, on a more positive note, some of the more developed countries have presented new opportunities to travel for older adults. Because the research indicates that ‘pensioners’ prefer to travel all year round and to travel in the off season when prices are lower, hospitality businesses are becoming more stable and less prone to seasonal changes. Nikitina and Vorontsova (2015) forecast that in the future, the hospitality industry will be forced to increase the number of hotel staff to assist with the provision of geriatric health care, as well as ‘telehealth’ and ‘telecare’ which will support the aspirations of older people to travel and to encourage an active lifestyle.

Tourism is crucial for the social, cultural, and economic growth of many countries (Chen et al., 2022). Due to its growing purchasing power, the “silver economy” is becoming increasingly significant and is playing a crucial role in the post-COVID-19 recovery. Seniors in the 45- to 64-year age range are the wealthiest age cohort in the world (Fengler, 2021). Fengler (2021) has forecasted that the silver economy will continue to grow in strength until 2030, as the number of seniors is increasing at a rate of 3.2% annually. Furthermore, geographically, the silver economy will shift from the OECD economies to emerging ones, such as those in Asia. This is due to the generous retirement plans, lifelong savings, and investments that contribute significantly to their economic well-being as consumers.

According to the final report of Mobilising the Potential of Active Ageing in Europe (<https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/320333/reporting/>), “a specific challenge is to (continue to) introduce measures that increase healthy life expectancy alongside the rising life expectancy; greater emphasis needs to be placed on the social engagement of older people (especially for those with limited health) and early life interventions that improves lifestyle factors”. There is also increasing evidence linking personal and social benefits for older travellers to social tourism participation, including positive physical and mental health outcomes (Ferrer et al., 2015; McCabe, 2020).

In the past, many marketing campaigns have displayed a lack of understanding of the needs of older people, and specifically older travellers, which has occurred mainly through ignorance, prejudice, and/or unrealistic images. There is a real need to include more senior models in holiday brochures and the depiction of older people in positive rather than negative ways. Tourism marketers also need to use the expertise of seniors themselves in promoting tourist products and services. Older people are usually good judges of what they require and value services that meet their specific needs. Finally, travel needs to be portrayed as a pleasurable and enjoyable experience that should also be widely promoted as a mentally and physically healthy pursuit, adding increased vitality to older people’s lives. “Tourism is a means of stimulating the pleasure of discovery and conviviality, fulfilling desires, needs and expectations” (Moura et al., 2022, p. 2).

Bionotes

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