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Age and cohort effects: The American senior tourism market



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ABSTRACT

This study employed time-series data along with the theory of generations, life cycle theory, and continuity theory to analyze the psychological characteristics and travel behavior of American senior leisure tourists. Three generations were compared—the Silent Generation, the Lucky Few, and the Baby Boomers—using empirical data collected in 1986, 1996, and 2006. Whereas the findings support the applicability of life cycle theory and continuity theory to the senior travel market, they also indicate that the theory of generations might be limited in explicating this market, since to some extent age effects were more effective than cohort effects in explaining group differences. This study further suggests that although marketing programs geared toward the senior market need to be updated, they do not need to be radically changed over time. Marketers should also expect the average age of the senior travel market to rise, since traditionally defined “young seniors” of 55 to about 60 years should no longer be considered seniors, and they might not be interested in senior programs.

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The market for senior leisure travel is becoming ever more important as the American population ages. As Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964), who account for about 30% of the total population, advance toward older adulthood, the landscape of the nation’s tourism industry is set to

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change. As [Hudson \(2010\)](#) reported, the senior segment in the US is a powerful consumption group controlling more than half of consumer spending. Even more encouraging is that leisure travel appears to be taking a central role in the retirement life of seniors ([Nimrod, 2008](#)).

But although nobody appears to doubt the increasing significance of senior tourists in current and future tourism, an in-depth understanding of this market is lacking, especially from a temporal view. Although existing studies in senior tourism have greatly enhanced our understanding of the senior market, most have used a cross-sectional approach with data collected at a single time point. Without tying the examined phenomenon to the temporal dimension of consumer behavior, it is unlikely that researchers can gain a full picture of the problem at hand. As many researchers (e.g., [Becker, 1992](#); [Lepisto, 1985](#)) have argued, longitudinal research is necessary to determine the effects of generations and aging as well as to provide information for more accurate forecasts of future consumer patterns and intentions.

Nonetheless, a survey of the existing literature reveals that some studies have addressed the temporal dimensions of travel; moreover, these have been performed using mainly one of three frameworks—theory of generations, continuity theory, or human life cycle theory—all of which emphasize generation or cohort and demographic effects on travel behavior. But given the size and increasing importance of the senior market, these studies can be considered but a drop in the bucket, thus leaving a large void in the senior tourism literature in need of immediate filling.

The literature survey also revealed that most existing studies in senior tourism, especially those conducting cross-sectional comparisons, did not control for the interactive effects of generation and life-cycle stage. This is understandable when non-time-series data are used to conduct analysis, but it might also lead to misleading findings. Senior tourists are special, because at this stage of life their physical condition and social roles are changing. As an Asian saying goes, all seniors become “children” again once they pass a certain age point. That means they have different priorities in life and different views about themselves and the world, and some may even need to be nurtured by others owing to deteriorating health.

This raises certain questions: Do the psychological characteristics and travel behavior of seniors change as they advance to a higher level of adulthood? Do today's seniors want exactly what seniors did 10 years ago? Might differences among all seniors disappear at some age point? All these speculations can be found in the literature, but they have yet to be answered.

We thus designed this study to identify any patterns or changes in the behavior of senior travelers over a 20-year period by applying the theory of generations, continuity theory, and human life cycle theory simultaneously in an effort to answer these questions as well as reveal new findings. The variables we used included both psychological and behavioral elements—specifically, motives, attitudes, destination selection criteria, travel activities, and perceived travel barriers. These five variables have deep roots in consumer behavior and have been widely used in tourism studies to gain in-depth understanding of tourists' decision-making processes.

Literature review

Many academic and trade articles have studied the market of those ages 55 years or older to better understand their travel behavior ([Shoemaker, 2000](#)). Marketers originally identified this population group using such labels as “the mature market” ([Lazer, 1985](#)), the “older market” ([Allan, 1981](#)), and “the senior market” ([Shoemaker, 1989](#)). More recent studies have used other phrases such as “the silver market” ([Branchik, 2010](#)). Here we use the label “senior travel market” and review the literature concerning this market through the three lenses of theory of generations, continuity theory, and life cycle theory.

Theory of generations

Theory of generations (or sociology of generations) was originated by Karl [Mannheim \(1952\)](#). According to Mannheim, the socio-historical environment in which notable events predominates the youth of a group of individuals at the same chronological age significantly influences the formation

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