



Active living in later life: An overview of aging studies in hospitality and tourism journals



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ABSTRACT

The most rapid growth of the aged population is predicted to occur after 2010, at which baby boomers would reach the age of 65. Here, a thorough review of past aging studies has been conducted and an overview on the progress of aging studies in six top journals in the tourism and hospitality fields over a three-decade period (1984–2013) is presented. A content analysis of 52 aging-related articles in the fields of hospitality and tourism identifies the research and methodological trends in aging studies in said fields. Significant study trends and possible exploration gaps are also discussed to raise awareness for future research.

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1. Introduction

Given the growing aged population around the world, understanding the mindset and behaviors of the elderly in leisure, hospitality, and tourism settings has gained increasing importance as such information can properly guide marketing strategies and help the elderly achieve satisfaction in later life. A considerable body of empirical evidence has been accumulated regarding the importance of travelling in later life. Hence, many studies on tourism focused on this group are likely to emerge over the next decade (Glover and Prideaux, 2009). Existing studies are based on different perceptions of the elderly. Many studies refer to chronological age when identifying the elderly (Moschis et al., 2003; Jang and Ham, 2009), while others use different life stages when relating to them (Nimrod, 2008; Viallon, 2012). Researchers have explored a wide range of topics, such as understanding the travel decision-making processes among the elderly (Fleischer and Pizam, 2002; Mackay and Smith, 2006), comparing the travel behaviors of elderly tourists with those of younger tourists (You and O'leary, 2000; Namkung and Jang, 2009), identifying subgroups within the elderly market segment (Pennington-Gray and Lane, 2002; Kim et al., 2003), and investigating the effect of travel experience on elderly life satisfaction (Nimrod, 2008; Mitas et al., 2012).

Prior studies have been done on elderly travelers from different countries with diverse cultural backgrounds, such as the US, Australia, Germany, France, Korea, Thailand, Japan, China, Israel, and New Zealand. Yet, despite the large number of studies published in the last 30 years, findings related to tourism and aging remain uncertain because of the lack of systematic review of existing studies. To date, only two review articles on aging and tourism exist. Sedgley et al. (2011) provided a critical marking of tourism and aging research, stating that extant research on tourism in later life is largely quantitative and market-oriented. They argue that humanist and participatory approaches should be employed to explore how the elderly perceive the meaning of their lives. Nielsen (2014) examined various approaches to examining elderly tourist behavior through a literature review of empirical studies. Four approaches are identified: analysis of constraints, comparative analysis, analysis of heterogeneity, and temporal analysis. In addition, the elderly are viewed as both an aging group and a heterogeneous group. Thus far, few studies have provided a systematic review employing a qualitative content analysis through inductive coding. Such studies are needed in order to achieve a holistic picture of tourism's role in later life, to critically appraise the existing approaches employed in aging studies in the tourism and hospitality fields, and to provide suggestions for future research directions. To achieve these goals, the current study provides an overview of aging studies published in the top three hospitality journals (*Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, and *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*) and the top three tourism journals (*Annals of Tourism Research*, *Journal of Travel Research*, and *Tourism Management*) over the past

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30 years (1984–2013), so that the trend of aging studies in the two fields can be better understood. Specifically, this study seeks to answer three major research questions: (1) What is the general trend of aging studies in hospitality and tourism? (2) What are the key research concerns of aging studies in hospitality and tourism? (3) What is the methodological trend of aging studies in the hospitality and tourism fields?

2. Literature review

2.1. Active and successful aging

Over the past three decades, models of “active aging” and “successful aging” have emerged in many countries as the foremost policy responses to challenges related to an aging population (Rowe and Kahn, 1997; Freund and Baltes, 2002). Such models focus on optimizing opportunities to maintain the physical, mental, and social well-being of the elderly. Active aging allows the elderly to participate and be accepted in society while providing them with the protection and care they need (Fernández-Ballesteros, 2008). Showing that the elderly can live life to the fullest and continue to contribute to the society challenges the public’s diminished expectations of aging.

Early aging studies have embraced “the busy ethic,” known as activity theory. This approach suggests that the greater the amount of activity one engages in, the greater one’s life satisfaction would be (Lemon et al. (1972). Activity theory opposes disengagement theory, which claims that the elderly naturally withdraw from society. Despite being widely applied in empirical research and practice, active theory has been subsequently criticized as inaccurate and weak. Modifying activity theory, continuity theory states that elderly try to maintain their lifestyle continuously by adapting strategies that are connected to their past experiences (Atchley, 1989). Two newer and more robust theories — selection, optimization, and compensation theory (SOC) and socio-emotional selectivity theory (SES) — offer descriptions of different strategies that lead to successful aging. These theories emphasize goal selection, prioritization, and pursuit throughout life and under limiting conditions (Baltes, 1997; Carstensen, 1992).

2.2. Aging and tourism

Tourism is conceived as an important component in the quest for active living in later life. Research has shown that significant psychological and physical benefits can accrue from traveling (Milman, 1998; Wei and Milman, 2002; Nimrod, 2008). A growing number of elderly people are seeking active, fulfilling, and adventurous travel experiences upon retirement; these people often treat tourism as the prize they deserve for their busy lives filled with many sacrifices. The tourism and hospitality industries have the potential to serve this lucrative market and make significant differences in the quality of their lives. In fact, movements related to aging have emerged. In many countries, the tourism industries have been seeking ways to ensure that their infrastructure and products are accessible to the elderly, and that they can enjoy the destinations with equity and dignity (Abeyratne, 1995; Darcy and Dickson, 2009). To help cities become more “age-friendly,” the World Health Organization (WHO) prepared a document called *Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Global Guide* (2007). In recent years, specific tourist products targeting the elderly have been developed, such as medical and wellness tourism, root-searching tourism, and snowbird vacations (Higginbotham, 2012; Viallon, 2012; Heung and Kucukusta, 2013). Although the elderly constitutes a large and constantly growing market with significant buying potential, tourism offers for this age group are relatively limited due to its

heterogeneity (i.e., differences in social economic status, health conditions, needs and interests, and travel experiences). This diversity may also explain the different conclusions from travel, leisure, and hospitality studies on the elderly population (Le Serre and Chevalier, 2012).

2.3. Content analysis in tourism research

Content analysis is a well-established research methodology for analyzing and understanding collections of text. By counting various aspects of the content, this method aims to identify, appraise, and synthesize high quality research evidence as well as provide directions for future research. Content analysis has been adopted by tourism scholars as an effective way to review prior research. Baloglu and Assante (1999), for example, performed a content analysis of 1073 articles in five primary hospitality management journals for a seven-year period (1990–1996) based on subject areas and research methods. They found that most articles have been conducted using survey methods with specific focus on human resources, lodging, and the food service industry. Fennell (2001) conducted content analysis to better understand the concept of ecotourism by examining the term’s 85 definitions. The results reflect a changing emphasis in how the term has been conceptualized over time. Through content analysis of case studies published on tourism journals, Xiao and Smith (2006) confirmed the contribution of case studies to tourism research. Based on a detailed examination of the contents from papers published in *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Lu and Nepal (2009) identified a series of trends describing sustainable tourism research. Their findings also reveal future directions on theoretical debates, methodological sophistication, and practical implications in sustainable tourism.

Yet, despite these efforts, a critical appraisal of the knowledge accumulated in tourism and hospitality research in the light of aging is still lacking. Given the increasing number of the elderly population worldwide, research on this topic is likely to advance. Thus, tourism researchers must pay close attention to emerging trends and issues related to aging. In this light, the current study contributes to the literature by reviewing the aging studies published in top tourism and hospitality journal over the past three decades.

3. Research methods

To search relevant aging studies in the leisure, hospitality and tourism fields, two researchers first generated a list of aging-related keywords that were individually based on their professional knowledge and aging literature. Then, they met and brainstormed all possible relevant keywords, which may help in retrieving aging-related articles in leisure, hospitality, and tourism. The ten identified keywords were “elderly,” “older,” “aging,” “ageing,” “aged,” “retired,” “senior,” “age,” “silver market,” “third age,” “mature market,” and “muppie market.” The derived keywords were searched in each journal publisher’s website using the option of “search within current journal” to find the relevant articles. The list of keywords was revised based on the search results. To ensure the inclusiveness of all relevant articles, “later life” was added as the 11th keyword after finding it in several search results.

One of the investigators searched the database of each university library that subscribed to each journal with the sufficient year range of the journal. For example, Cornell Hospitality Quarterly is subscribed in three databases, namely, Sage Management and Organization Studies (May 1960–present), ProQuest (ABI-INFORM Complete) (November 1987–2007), and Sage Premier (February 1999–present). The Sage Management and Organization Studies database was selected as the research time frame (i.e., 1984–2013) fell within its subscription. To access a particular journal year that

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