



## ON THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING OLDER TOURISTS: ADDRESSING THE COMPLEXITY OF AGEING TRAVELLERS

*SOBRE LA IMPORTANCIA DE ENTENDER A LOS TURISTAS MAYORES: ABORDAR LA COMPLEJIDAD DEL ENVEJECIMIENTO DE LOS VIAJEROS*

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Trabalho enviado em 03 de setembro de 2022 e aceito em 26 de junho de 2022



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Quaestio Iuris., Rio de Janeiro, Vol. 15, N.03., 2022- Dossiê Demetrio de Falerio y la sociedad de envejecimiento- Coordenação Dr. Alejandro Klein, 2022, p. 1734 - 1751.

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DOI: 10.12957/rqi.2022.66247

## ABSTRACT

Ageing transcends age and goes beyond the older generations. Awareness of the way older individuals behave in tourism beyond clichés, labels and stereotypes and a clearer perspective of the economic benefits of the silver economy for companies in general and the tourism sector in particular is critical.

Tourism providers, governments, and stakeholders in many developed countries of the world have identified older travellers as a priority market because of global demographic changes and the increased participation of older individuals in tourism and leisure activities. Despite the fact that the tourism industry is experiencing its most difficult period in history as a result of COVID-19, an increasingly healthy older individuals market segment with financial means to travel for leisure and a desire to visit new places holds enormous potential for cultural heritage and tourism.

**Methodology:** In order to better understand the need and wants, some gaps in the literature have been identified in relation to the need to comprehend the requirements and expectations of an ageing population in order to have a better grasp of future tourism trends related to older travellers (Huang and Tsai 2003; Lehto et al. 2008), as well as the awareness of the potential economic value of the silver economy, which is less understood (McGuirk et al., 2021). This paper will review the research literature that has supported the need towards a deeper understanding of older travellers beyond clichés. In numerous ways, the increased demand for travel by older individuals presents a challenge for tourism professionals (Bakucz et al., 2021).

**Objectives:** The aim of this article is twofold: to increase awareness and understanding of a yet misunderstood and undervalued market segment, beyond stereotypes and clichés and (2) to contribute to the tourism industry in terms of practical considerations.

**Findings:** The findings regarding awareness and practical implications aid stakeholders in gaining a better understanding of older travellers and the need to meet the changing needs and expectations of an ageing population.



## INTRODUCTION

Population ageing is set to become one of the most profound societal shifts of the twenty-first century, affecting practically every aspect of society (United Nations, 2015). There were 727 million people aged 65 and up on the earth in 2020. (UN, 2020). In a changing and ageing world, older travellers have become an attractive market for many tourist companies. “These changes for individuals are mirrored in societal changes: older persons are a growing demographic group in society” (UN, 2019) and have become one of the most important tourism market segments as a result of changing socio-demographics and increasing travel behaviour (Huber, Milne, & Hyde, 2018; Schröder & Widmann, 2007). The growing ageing population is poised to become a vital lead market for a variety of businesses in general and the tourism sector in particular. Should older travellers be overlooked? Older adults have become one of the most important tourist market segments because of changing socio-demographics and increasing travel behaviour (Huber, Milne, & Hyde, 2018; Schröder & Widmann, 2007).

The global COVID-19 epidemic has serious implications for future tourism, making health and safety considerations for the travel sector urgent and important. Wealthier, healthier, more technologically connected, and savvier than previous generations (Patuelli & Nijkamp, 2016; Patterson, 2018), older travellers are searching for more than just decent accommodations when travelling because they are living longer, in better health, travel off peak season and have more spare time.

Nonetheless, although being acknowledged as crucial to future tourist success, older travellers are under-marketed (Kelly et al., 2020; Patterson & Balderas, 2020). Ageing poses a significant issue and challenge to policymakers, technologists, marketers, and service providers. However, the heterogeneity of older individuals means that they should not be regarded as a single entity (Guo et al., 2017). Knowing deeply how older people behave and connect is key so as to market this diverse market segment without clichés. Negative stereotypes about ageing, which are often connected with decline and fragility, lead to a disregard for the true needs, insights, and expectations of unknown individuals. In an attempt to provide a solid foundation for this conceptual paper, an intensive literature review of theoretical and empirical studies with a fundamental focus on ageism, motivations, expectations, and tourism consumption behaviour of older people was conducted.



Concurring with to McGuirk et al., (2021) while innovation is key to increasing the changes of active ageing, reducing the dependency on healthcare and satisfying the growing needs of older people (Klimczuk, 2016; McGuirk et al., 2021; Zsarnoczky, 2016a), enterprises need to be aware of the changes in demography and its potential economic value to their business. Personalization, as well as reinvention and originality in products and services will be vital to comprehend heterogeneous older individuals.

Deeply understanding wants, needs, behaviour and expectations of this evolving and still unknown market segment may help stakeholders better target this growing population and improve understanding of stereotyped individuals.

## **AN AGEING POPULATION IN AN AGEING WORLD**

Ageing affects people of all ages. The longevity revolution is affecting all societies throughout the world, with some at an early stage and others at a later level. But all will go through this astonishing shift, in which the likelihood of living to 65 years old goes from less than 50% in the 1890s to more than 90% now in the countries with the highest life expectancy (UN, 2020).

Because of increased life expectancy and low fertility rates, the global population is undergoing an unprecedented and long-term shift in age structure. Persons are living longer lives, and the proportion of elderly people in the population is continuously rising. Nevertheless, regarding the impact of Covid-19 on global population ageing, following Harper (2021), “while future estimations of trends arrive with caveats, it seems that many countries will experience a period of falling fertility and lower healthy life expectancy, than would have been the case if the pandemic had not arisen, though for how long is unclear” (Harper, 2021, pg. 139).

Never before has humanity witnessed such a phenomenon, namely, the decline of younger populations in practically all developed countries as the elderly population ages rapidly (Meiners and Seeberger, 2010). The boundaries of old age continue to shift as we live longer and better care for our health and well-being. Rapid demographic ageing is a substantial societal burden (in terms of public budgets, workforce, competitiveness, and quality of life) as well as a major and potential source of new jobs and economic opportunities (European Commission, 2015). The statistics are similar in virtually every developed country in the world and are set to lead to a significant social transformation of the twenty-first century, impacting all sectors of society (UN, 2020).



Older people are defined by the European Commission (EC) as those over the age of 65 years by the World Health Organisation as those over the age of 60 and are all considered as consumers of goods and services (EC, 2020).

The European Commission (2015) used the term ‘Silver Economy’ to describe “the economic opportunities arising from the public and consumer expenditure related to population ageing and the specific needs of the population over 50” (p. 1). In their report on Silver Economy commissioned by the European Commission to support the development of Silver Economy in Europe Varnai et al., (2018) state that in 2015, older adults spent €3.7 trillion on goods and services, which they paid for mostly with their earnings, savings, and transfers. The Silver Economy encompasses a vast range of concepts and areas of interest related to both the challenges and opportunities that the ageing population represents for Europe. From an economic perspective, promoting the development and marketing of products and services for older people (those over 50 years of age) is referred to as the ‘silver economy’ (Varnai et al., 2018). According to McGuirk et al., (2021), “the diversity and complexity of the silver economy and the potential opportunities it offers enterprises presents capacity-building and policy challenges for the economy and society” (pg.2).

The tendency of tourism marketers and product developers was to focus on younger customers while overlooking individuals over 50 (Silvers 1997; Szmigan and Carrigan 2001) and to treat all older individuals as if they were all the same (Horneman et al. 2002; Lehto et al. 2002; Moschis and Ünal 2008), which arose from an inaccurate and misunderstanding stereotyped picture of older people (Lehto et al. 2002; Moschis and Ünal 2008).

## **THE NEED TO IMPROVE UNDERSTANDING OF STEREOTYPED OLDER INDIVIDUALS**

According to the world report on ageing and health (WHO, 2015), pervasive misconceptions, attitudes, and assumptions about older people are some of the most important hurdles to developing sound public-health policy on ageing (Butler, 1980; Tam et al., 2006). Despite evidence that older individuals contribute to society in a variety of ways, they are frequently characterised as fragile, out of touch, burdensome, or dependant (Cook, 2011). Many terminologies and categories have been used by scholars and practitioners to describe the older or mature age tourism sector. According to international and national organisations (such as the



United Nations), as well as the gerontology and psychology literature, 'older adults' are those who are 60 or 65 years old. 'Mature tourist/market/traveller, "silver market,"gray nomads/gray tourists" (Onyx & Leonard, 2005), 'baby boomers,"silent generation,""older adults/tourist,"senior market/travellers,' 'fifty plus,' or 'over-50 travellers' have all been used interchangeably in academic literature (Sie et al., 2016, pg. 104). Previously, the travel industry considered older people as a single, homogeneous group, based on an inaccurate and stereotyped notion of 'the elderly' as feeble, incapacitated, and unwilling to travel due to health concerns (Cleaver et al., 1999; Moschis et al., 1997).

Butler first identified ageism in 1969, describing it as "the subjective experience implied in the popular notion of the generation gap—a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, and disability on the part of the young and middle-aged" (p. 243). Ageism has evolved since then, according to Meisner (2021), to encompass cognitive (i.e., age stereotypes, beliefs), emotional (i.e., age prejudice, attitudes), and behavioural components (i.e., age discrimination, acts) (Ayalon & Tesch-Romer, 2017).

Individual, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural factors combine to cause older persons to be regarded and treated differently dependent on their chronological age (Iversen et al., 2009). During COVID-19, a growth in ageism and social media makes it necessary to promote awareness among organisations and marketers in all sectors, including tourism (Meisner, 2021).

Older travellers have several economic benefits, including the fact that it will continue to grow and economic importance in the coming years (Borges Tiago et al., 2016; Kyriakou & Belias, 2017; Patterson and Balderas-Cejudo, 2020; Kelly and Kelliher, 2021), presenting a profitable untapped additional revenue stream (United Nations, 2015). Increasingly recognized as a vital social and economic resource who contribute to the broader hospitality market's growth (Foster & Walker, 2014), older travellers continue to be misunderstood resulting in uninspired products that do not suit the preferences and expectations of experienced, available and willing to travel individuals (Le Serre, 2008).

Many owner managers regarded older tourists as homogeneous, ageing, and of dubious economic value, negating their economic value as a revenue stream, according to a study conducted by Noel Kelly and Felicity Kelliher in 2020, which looked at senior tourism adaptive strategizing capabilities through the eyes of micro-firm owner managers. The fragmentation and even discrepancies in the literature on marketing to older adults, particularly baby boomers, can be due in part to the market's heterogeneity, according to Hudson (2010). According to Sedgley et



al. (2011), older people are a varied group of complicated individuals, and the vast age range that tourism researchers tend to use when defining someone as "old" amplifies this heterogeneity.

Despite its extensive use, chronological age has been demonstrated to be a poor discriminator of older consumers and travellers, according to Nella & Christou (2016), because age is not a very good criterion to utilise due to the vast lot of variability in ageing (Moschis et al., 1997; Valachis et al., 2009).

Barak and Schiffman (1981) proposed the concepts of 'felt age' and 'subjective age' in their Cognitive Theory of Ageing. People's feelings, thoughts, and perceptions of themselves are all factors in cognitive ageing. In order to portray and explain discrepancies between consumers of the same biological age, the term "subjective age" may appear more appropriate (Nella & Christou, 2016).

Most adults believe they are younger than their chronological age, according to research (e.g., Kastenbaum, Derbin, Sabatini, & Artt, 1972; Berg & Tornstam, 2001; Montepare, 2009).

Ageing adults all around the world commonly express subjective experiences, "ageing adults around the globe typically reporting subjective ages that were younger than their actual ages" (Montepare, 2009 pg. 43).

Barak and Schiffman (pg. 602) stated in 1981 that "despite its great popularity, the use of chronological age is problematic for researchers interested in age-related research, particularly research that examines the attitudinal or behavioural patterns of the elderly". While two people may have the same birth date, other factors such as health, psychological well-being, socio-economic situations, social and family circumstances, gender, and so on impact and shape each person's behaviour, according to Patterson (2006).

Figures as far back as 1999 have shown that in 1999, over 593 million international travellers were aged 60 years and over (Patterson et al., 2017). However, by 2050 this figure has been projected to grow to exceed two billion trips per annum (World Tourism Organisation, 2001).

Understanding the variety of experiences, the diversity and insights of older individuals is crucial. Older consumers want their voices to be heard, as in the case of Revolution55, a community of active people 55+ "united to give them a voice with brands and companies in the products, services and marketing they create for older consumers, created probably" as "people 55+ are too often ignored by marketers or are stereotyped in ads" <https://www.revolution55.com/>



McCann, the world's largest marketing services organisation with an integrated network of advertising agencies in over 120 countries, released one of their largest research in 2018: 28 quantitative markets with approximately 24,000 respondents worldwide<sup>1</sup>.

In this study, their last and ultimate advice to marketers is to shift away from age and toward attitudinal segmentation rather than focus on numbers, moving away from age and beyond number. <https://www.mccann1886.co.za/assets/files/documents/Truth-About-Age1.pdf>

On 12 April 2019, age UK published an article “Is the language that we use to describe older people offensive? In 1995, the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights of Older Persons rejected the term elderly in preference for ‘older persons’. And it raised a question: “Over twenty years later, is it time for the rest of us to do the same?” <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/northtyneside/about-us/news/articles/2019/offensive-description-of-older-people/>

Without a question, beyond discrepancies or preferences regarding terminology preference, there is a clear need to explore and comprehend consumer trends and behaviour, respond to the demands of this diverse and misunderstood market, and develop products and services - as well as marketing and communication strategies - that go beyond age and statistics.

## TRAVEL BEHAVIOUR IN OLD AGE: A NEW WAY TO TRAVEL?

“Because older people are often stereotyped as part of the past, they can be overlooked in the surge towards the future.” (WHO, 2015, pg. 15).

According to Alen et al., (2017), significant changes in life cycles tend to occur between the ages of 50 and 60 years, because people often retire, see their children leave their homes, lose their spouse and become grandparents (Silvers 1997). Nevertheless, as stated by Hutchings et al., (2020), even retirement is becoming increasingly complex (Hulme, 2012), with ‘de-standardised’ life stages (Guillemard, 1989). Concurring with Sargent et al., this is a “fundamental reinvention of retirement” (Sargent et al., 2013: 15), in which individuals struggle with a number of tensions and uncertainties about “whether they want to or can afford to retire, and if they do, how they want to spend the remaining time they have in life” (Sargent et al., 2013: 8). People may have

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<sup>1</sup>Canada, U.S., Mexico, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Brazil, Chile, Sweden, Norway, U.K., France, Spain, Finland, Denmark, Hungary, Germany, Turkey, Lebanon, South Africa, India, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, China, Japan, Philippines, Australia, and Portugal) and 36 qualitative markets (Canada, U.S., Honduras, Nicaragua, Colombia, Chile, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Sweden, Denmark, U.K., Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria, Nigeria, South Africa, Russia, South Korea, China, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong, Philippines, Australia, Portugal, and Mexico.



freedom and autonomy, financial independence and more time for family, leisure, hobbies, and travel (Hutchings et al., 2020).

Disciplines such as healthcare, gerontology, social welfare, and economics, have long shown a scholarly interest in older people research. Nevertheless, the leisure and tourism academia has lagged behind in identifying the importance of the older traveller's niche (Otto and Kim, 2020). Still, in the past decade the older adult segment of the tourism market has drawn increasing attention from researchers (Patterson, 2018). The acknowledgment that older travellers are progressively accounting for a larger part of vacation and holiday spending is one of the direct effects of the shifting global ageing trends (Littrell et al., 2004; Patterson, 2018).

The needs and wants of older individuals are steadily changing and differing significantly from previous generations in terms of the number, duration, and mode of travel that they take as well as their trip preferences (Alen et al., 2017).

Increasingly accounting for a larger share of all global vacation spending (Littrell et al. 2004; Sangpikul 2008; Wang et al. 2007) it is crucial to highlight that there is a pronounced heterogeneity within older people segment (Cleaver et al. 1999; Huang and Tsai 2003; Hunter-Jones and Blackburn 2007; Jang and Ham 2009; Shoemaker 1989).

Many older travellers nowadays like to enjoy holidays and leisure travel in order to learn new things and/or participate in historical, cultural heritage, educational, and cultural events. Older individuals, particularly 'baby boomers' (born between 1946 and 1964), are an emerging market that are increasingly embracing the 'leisure experience' in their tourist activities.

Marketers and travel companies are increasingly targeting baby-boomers as a growing market, according to Patterson and Pegg (2009), 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" (2009, p. 254). Because of their disposable time, seasonal adaptability, and more frequent – and longer distance – journeys, this generation is also critical for the travel sector (Alén, Losada, & Dominguez, 2016; Balderas-Cejudo et al., 2019).

Wealthier, healthier and savvier travellers, following Patterson et al., (2021), many older individuals travel in the off-peak season so as to directly benefit from the cheaper rates and avoid unsuitable weather conditions, children holidays and the inconvenience associated with overbooked flights and hotels.



The Covid-19 outbreak has struck the tourism industry and older individuals particularly badly. As the globe moves toward the "new normal," "silver" tourism will require diversification and a variety of travel experiences to provide alternatives, such as travel experiences from home, smaller groups, less congested areas, or more sustainable tourism (Stončikaitė, 2021).

In AARP's (The American Association for Retired People) annual travel trends poll, COVID-19's impact on upcoming 2020 travel plans, as well as how it continues to disrupt travel arrangements for 2021, was emphasised. While many people consider travel to be "just a fantasy," they hope that with time and vaccines, it will become a reality. <https://www.aarp.org/research/topics/life/info-2021/2021-travel-trends.html>. The survey found that there is growing hope, particularly among boomers (those aged 56–74) who have not given up on their bucket lists and ambitions of travelling the world. The Internet, digital technologies, real-time predictive analytics, and social media platforms have altered the dynamics of communication between older travellers and their options dramatically (Otoo et al., 2021). A more careful, safety-conscious, and health-conscious older traveller, who is more connected than ever, yearns to enjoy travel.

## CONCLUSIONS

One of the most crucial difficulties facing the tourism and hospitality businesses is a lack of information or knowledge to assist in anticipating what future older persons may need and require. According to Tung et al. (2011), the senior travel sector is one of the most difficult for academics to comprehend because of its intrinsic complexities.

Following Horton et al., (2008), popular stereotypes of ageing in North America are overwhelmingly unfavourable. Evidence demonstrates that negative preconceptions about ageing held by older people can influence a variety of health behaviours (Levy and Langer, 1994). Older individuals with more favourable self-perceptions tended to engage in preventive health behaviours, such as obtaining more exercise and eating a balanced diet, according to Levy and Myers (2004). Furthermore, older people with more positive age stereotypes reported improved long-term health and faster recovery from disease (Levy et al., 2002; Levy, Slade, May, & Caracciolo, 2006; Levy, Slade, May, & Caracciolo, 2006).

There is large agreement regarding the heterogeneity of older individuals (Otto et al., 2021) and because their demands and interests are various, marketers and providers must be aware of this market niche (Mathur, Lee, and Moschis, 2006). Individuals from different generations may not have the same wants, expectations, goals, preferences, tastes, motives, or



observable actions as their younger counterparts, as tourist service providers must keep in mind (Fleischer & Pizam, 2002; Hwang & Lee, 2019; Santos et al., 2016).

Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, health and safety considerations for the travel industry are both critical and timely, with implications for future tourism.

Tourist service providers and stakeholders in general must keep a careful eye on developments that may have an impact on tourist demand and requests in this ever-changing and ageing world.

Following Patterson et al., (2017) today, older travellers are “more affluent, healthy and active, better educated, more IT savvy, and are becoming increasingly confident about using the Internet as a major source for planning their trips” (pg. 352).

One thing is certain: the demand situation and people's purchasing habits will change dramatically (Meiners and Seeberger, 2010), particularly in today's context. Older travellers are highlighted as a solution to peak visitor spending and offseason problems, creating economic stability for tourism suppliers and destinations (Hunter-Jones & Blackburn, 2007), a booster of health and wellbeing (Patuelli & Nijkamp, 2016), and a catalyst for an optimal quality of life in studies that project the value and potential contributions of the older people tourism market to global economic development (Hunter-Jones & Blackburn, 2007; Otoo et al., 2021). Tourism stakeholders must have a thorough understanding of the shifts, direction, and repercussions to gain a competitive edge and develop efficient marketing strategies that adapt to the demands and preferences of altering and evolving visitor profiles.

To target this powerful, expanding, and diverse market sector, personalization, as well as reinvention and originality in products and services will be vital. While today's older individuals are active, future generations of older people are more likely to keep up with them (Lohmann and Danielsson, 2001).

Another practical consequence is that older people destinations and tour operators must supply and advertise safe places (Otto, 2021) as top attraction criteria are safety, nature, historical monuments, the quality of services, and simple transit links (Zieliska-Szczepkowska, 2021).

The 2018 McCann study "Truth About Age" discovered that ageing is something that everyone considers. Its findings revealed that those in their 20s are the most afraid of death, those in their 30s are the most concerned about ageing, and those in their 70s are the least concerned about ageing.



According to the report, marketers should steer clear of age. Taking proactive steps to account for the demands, expectations, and wants of a mature market may assist to bridge some of the gaps described, such as the need to comprehend the expectations of an ageing population, the need to broaden knowledge of the trends that drive tourism development, and to investigate the effects of tourism as an active, sustainable and healthy ageing strategy.

In an era of significant business disruption, it is more important than ever that tourism marketers fully comprehend the drivers of engagement for each market segment they seek to serve. The market for older individuals, which has evolved as a substantial but misunderstood section of the tourist and hospitality business in recent decades, is an example. The Internet, digital technologies, real-time predictive analytics, and social media platforms have drastically changed the dynamics of communication between older travellers and their preferences (Otoo et al., 2021).

It is past time to rethink how older people are marketed and catered to, moving away from a possible "silverwashing effect" (making misleading or exaggerated assertions in order to gain market share among older people without truly understanding) and taking the opportunity to truly comprehend.

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Quaestio Iuris., Rio de Janeiro, Vol. 15, N.03., 2022- Dossiê Demetrio de Falerio y la sociedad de envejecimiento- Coordenação Dr. Alejandro Klein, 2022, p. 1734 - 1751.

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DOI: 10.12957/rqi.2022.66247