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DO WE CHANGE OUR TRAVEL BEHAVIORS AS WE GET OLDER?
AN INVESTIGATION ON THE VARIATIONS OF TRAVEL BEHAVIORS ACROSS
DIFFERENT AGE COHORTS

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Do we change our travel behaviors as we get older?
An investigation on the variations of travel behaviors across different age cohorts

INTRODUCTION

The world's population aged 65 and older is growing by approximately 800,000 people a month (United States Department of Commerce News, 2001). In July 2003, those 65 and older in the United States constituted 35.9 million (12 percent) of the total population (He, Sengupta, Velkoff, and DeBarros, 2005). The older population is anticipated to grow with the most rapid growth predicted to occur after 2010, when the baby-boom population reaches age 65 (Baloglu and Shoemaker, 2001). The largest increase in this population is expected to occur between 2011 and 2030, and the population in 2030 is projected to be twice as large as it was in 2000 (He, Sengupta, Velkoff, and DeBarros, 2005). A rising number of elderly people will result in a corresponding increase for services (Kwan, 1990). These include not only traditional social welfare services, but also leisure services (Hung and Crompton, 2004). Involvement in leisure activities has long been recognized as a useful way of alleviating feelings of being isolated, bored and unhappy (Iso-Ahola, 1980); offsetting emotions of disillusionment and distress (Jang and Wu, 2006); and fulfilling needs such as rest, relaxation, social interaction, physical exercise, learning, nostalgia, excitement, education, and visiting friends and relatives (Fleischer & Pizam, 2002; Horneman et al., 2002). Therefore, studying the leisure behaviors of the elderly on various aspects including travel is likely to help leisure service providers better understand their travel needs.

Studying aging in a tourism context is a recent phenomenon (Hsu, 2001). However, increasing attention is being paid to this market due to the rise of an aging population, improved health, more time flexibility after retirement, increasing disposable income, and the elderly's substantial interest in travel (Faranda and Schmidt, 1999; Marvel, 1999; Lieux, Weaver, and McCleary, 1994). Past research in this field falls into two categories from the perspective of life span: studies which embraced all age groups including the elderly and studies focused only on older age cohorts. The former category often compares senior and non-senior travelers on various aspects such as travel motivations, travel demands, travel amenities preference, travel purposes, socioeconomic factors, travel mode, distance of travel, etc. (e.g., Reece, 2004; Javalgi, Thomas, and Rao, 1992; Ananth, DeMicco, Moreo, and Howey, 1992). The general consensus of these studies is that senior travelers are different from younger travelers on a wide range of aspects. The other category of studies have focused only on older age cohorts. These studies often further divided the aged population into different subgroups, and investigated variations in the travel behaviors across these groups (e.g., Bai, Smith, Cai, and O'Leary, 1999; Huang and Tsai, 2003; Horneman, Carter, Wei, and Ruys, 2002). Studies in both categories of research suggests heterogeneity of travel characterizes not only the between groups (i.e., senior and non-senior), but also within groups (i.e., subgroups in the senior population) (e.g., Shoemaker, 1989; Hsu, 2001; Prideaux, Wei, and Ruys, 2001). Combining these two streams of research, this study seeks to understand seniors' travel patterns as well as identify the changes in travel behaviors as we get older. Comparison on travel propensity, expenditures, and behaviors were conducted not only between seniors and non-senior travelers, but also among the subgroups of these two cohorts.

METHODS

The study analyzed Performance/Monitor data provided by D.K. Shifflet & Associates, Ltd. (DKS&A). The sample was stratified demographically to match the U.S. population in order to be able to project findings to the entire U.S. population. Household panels in which households agreed in advance to periodically participate in mail and phone surveys were used. Forty five thousand households were sampled every month. A new sample was drawn each month to replace the sample used in the previous month. The survey was conducted once a month and 12 times a year in order to generate annual travel behavioral data and control for seasonality biases. The response rate was approximately 45%. This study analyzed Performance/Monitor data representing travel behaviors of the U.S. population in year 2004. Respondents were asked to report their travel behaviors in the past three months at the time of completing the questionnaire. In the Performance/Monitor survey, travel was defined as “any night away from home or a day trip over 50 miles one-way from home.”

FINDINGS

Descriptive statistics, crosstabs, and chi-square analyses were used to reveal the variations of travel behaviors across different age groups on three aspects: travel propensity, travel expenditure, and travel characteristics.

On average, each respondent took approximately four overnight trips and three day trips over the past three months at the time of their interview. A majority of seniors and non-seniors took at least one overnight trip a year. The tendency of not taking an overnight trip decreased as people get older until they reached 60-69 years of age. The tendency to not travel overnight increased after 60-69 years. For those who traveled, most took one to five overnight trips. People take overnight trips more frequently as they get older. The highest percentage of those in the age group taking 6-10 overnight trips occur in the 60-69 cohort, while those taking more than 10 overnight trips in the past three months peaked in the 70-79 cohort. However, travel frequency decreased after reaching this age. More than half of the respondents across all age groups took at least one day trip in the year 2004. For those who traveled, most respondents reported that they took day trips from one to five times in the past three months. The frequencies of taking day trips are relatively stable across different age groups. This suggests a continuity of taking day trips as people get older.

On average, senior travelers spent more on the trip than non-senior travelers in year 2004. While the lowest spending on the trip displays a “U” shape pattern, the highest spending displays an inverted “U” shape pattern across the age groups. While the percentage of travelers who spent US\$500-2,999 on their trips are relatively consistent across all age groups, the highest proportion of those with the lowest spending power occurred at the youngest cohort. Alternatively, the proportion of those who spent the most increased as their age increased, with a percentage peak for the 60-69 age group. Then, the tendency to spend more decreased as travelers got older.

Most respondents arranged their own trips. Only a small proportion purchased package tours. Seniors were twice as likely to take a package trip than non-seniors, although those who purchased travel packages were a relatively small portion of the traveler population. The Kruskal-Wallis Test indicated that the purpose of travel and activities participated on the trips were also different between seniors and non-seniors at the .001 level. Most respondents reported that sightseeing was the main reason for their travel. Interest in sightseeing was found to increase as people age up to 70-79 years old. Although the interest in sightseeing decreased slightly afterwards, this interest was found to remain at a high level even among those 80 or older. The second most popular activity reported was gambling. The interest in gambling was found to

increase steadily as people get older. The older travelers also showed more interest in playing golf, and visiting historic sites, museums, and art exhibits. However, younger people were more likely to go on trips for a beach/waterfront, hiking, biking, watching sporting events, enjoying night life, and visiting theme/amusement, national, state and other parks.

APPLICATION OF RESULTS

Results of the data analyses revealed seniors and non-senior travelers differ on their propensity to travel, expenditures, and trip characteristics. Using the travel data among both groups from the year 2004, the study revealed the diverse pattern of travel among different age cohorts. Comparison between and within seniors and non-seniors were conducted in order to identify their differences on travel frequencies, spending, and behaviors. This information can help travel service providers understand the market to which they are serving, and implement effective marketing strategies accordingly. Using more recent data, this paper further confirmed the previous findings on the heterogeneity between senior and non-senior travelers, and among the senior travelers themselves.

The result indicates that although seniors have lower education and household income in general than their younger counterparts, they remain active in their later life on travel. They maintain a high frequency of travel as they get older, although reasons for travel have changed. The Continuity Theory (Archley, 1971; 1972) which argues that individuals have a tendency to maintain a consistent trend in their behavior as they age, may explain this phenomenon. Future studies will need to incorporate longitudinal data monitoring people throughout their life stages in order to reveal if the continuity exists within the same subjects.

The activities which were indicated by the subjects as their primary reason for traveling demonstrated both similarities and differences between seniors and non-seniors. The majority from both groups traveled mainly for sightseeing. While senior travelers were more likely to engage in less active activities such as playing golf or visiting historic sites, museums, and art exhibits, younger travelers tend to report trips filled with activities. This may relate to a personal interest change along the life journey, and seniors becoming more unwilling to engage in some activities which require physical strength.

Seniors usually are retired and free of child support in their later life. Retiring from their work, they have more leisure time to spend for travel. Although the younger cohorts have higher income than the older cohorts, their spending on trips are constrained by responsibilities supporting their children and family. Therefore, senior travelers tend to spend more on their trip than non-seniors despite their low incomes. This provides some marketing implications for those tourism planners who intend to minimize the negative impacts of tourism in a community by targeting a small number of tourists with high-spending power. The older adults aged from 50 to 79 seem to be a desirable market. Due to the improved medical techniques in today's society, the elderly retain their physical strengths allowing them to continue to travel. In addition, past research suggests that older adults often perceive themselves to be younger than their chronological ages (e.g., Cleaver and Muller, 2002; Wikes, 1992).

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, the elderly today differ from the elderly in the past not only physically, but also psychologically. To target older adults more effectively, travel service providers need to understand the interest of today's elderly, their mindset and behaviors, as well as their similarities and differences compared to other age cohorts. The increasing older population and their substantial interest in travel may indicate an important emerging opportunity to the travel service industry which often treats the senior as a neglected-market.

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