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# 8 Motivations, preferences and personality of senior tourists: Cross-cultural comparison between American and Chinese groups

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## The objectives of this chapter are to:

- Identify senior tourists' motivational factors;
- Explore senior tourists' preferences for their travel;
- Examine senior tourists' personality related to their travel;
- Investigate senior tourists' motivations, preferences, personality between US seniors and mainland Chinese seniors;
- Compare the two national cohorts.

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**Keywords:** seniors, personality, motivation, preferences, US, China

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## Introduction

The potential of the senior tourism market for developed and developing economies, including its potential to constitute the tourism growth engine by 2050, has drawn considerable research attention (Hsu, Cai and Wong, 2007; Tiago et al., 2016). Travel niches, including diaspora (Otoo, Kim and Choi, 2020), shopping (Littrell, Paige and Song, 2004), and health/wellbeing tourism (Hwang and Lee, 2019a), are increasingly dominated by an older generation of tourists. Senior tourism is therefore expected to become the growth engine for future tourism (Hsu et al., 2007; Otoo and Kim, 2020).

Senior tourism is attractive to numerous key tourism destinations, including the United States (US) and Mainland China (hereafter China). The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA] (UNDESA, 2015) reveal that the US and Mainland China are projected to have the largest populations of elderly citizens by 2050. In addition, their expected growth rates in tourism demand are unmatched by all key tourist-generating countries.

Literature on senior tourism continues to expand, but several grey areas require academic and industry attention. Considering motivation as an integral first step in exploring the prospects of senior tourism decision, Otoo and Kim (2020) reviewed studies from 1980 to 2017 and revealed a lack of common language to describe such motivation. Similarly, addressing the motivations and preferences of American and Chinese senior tourists is important given their cultural dissimilarity. For example, the term 'elderly' connotes greater respect within the Chinese social context than in various western countries, such as the US (Hsu et al., 2007). This context is set against the backdrop that travel decisions among Chinese seniors are previously described as socially irresponsible (Ryan, 2010), whereas travel is considered a pastime of US baby boomers (Collia, Sharp and Giesbrecht, 2003; Jang and Ham, 2009). Personality traits of senior tourists are also rarely identified (Pesonen, Komppula and Riihinen, 2015).

Furthermore, few studies explore the complexity of senior tourism motivations. Apart from their physical, mental, and demographic differences, the young and elderly are assumed to have distinct tourism motivations (Otoo and Kim, 2020; Patuelli and Nijkamp, 2016; Sie, Patterson and Pegg, 2016). Nevertheless, senior tourism is a global phenomenon. Senior characteristics are expected to differ and their motivations are pluralistic. As such, a realistic approach to explore these differences is to segment the seniors based on empirical evidence.

Thus, uncovering the nature of senior tourism requires understanding its motivations. Exploring and discovering the overseas travel motivations and preferences of senior tourists present certain theoretical and practical values, especially with the rapid growth of overseas travel and the increased proportion of the senior population in major tourist destinations (Otoo and Kim, 2020; Hsu et al., 2007). Ultimately, empirical segmentation can provide indicators to improve products, implement programs, and provide quality services for senior tourists.

This chapter explores the motivation complexity and preferences among American and Mainland Chinese senior tourists. The objectives are as follows. First, the dimensions of overseas travel motivations for American and Mainland Chinese senior tourists are identified. Then, the differences

between their motivation dimensions, preferences, and personality traits are explored. Finally, how their travel-related characteristics and behavioral intentions differ are ascertained. Findings are expected to contribute to the understanding of the demand for senior tourism.

## Literature review

### Value of the senior tourism market

Seniors, defined as persons aged 55 years or above (Hsu et al., 2007; Otoo and Kim, 2020), are valuable for a number of reasons. First, senior tourism products characteristically differ from younger tourist cohorts (Fleischer and Pizam, 2002; Li, Wen, and Ying, 2018; Vigolo, Simeoni, Cassia and Ugolini, 2018). In the US, seniors spend more money on tourism, entertainment, and restaurant meals than their younger counterparts (Fleischer and Pizam, 2002). In the United Kingdom, seniors spend more on travel than on housing and food (Roberts, 2004). Moreover, older consumers can deliberate longer on purchase decisions (Vigolo et al., 2018).

Second, travel provides non-economic importance to patrons of senior tourism, including social identity and bonding (Hwang and Lee, 2019b), improved psychological well-being and quality of life (Hwang and Lee, 2019a; Sirgy, 2019), and self-fulfillment in old age (Sudbury and Simcock, 2009). Ultimately, travel can help provide an avenue for seniors to relive youthful dreams and attain a sense of actualization.

### Preferences and personality attributes in tourism studies

Given that seniors exhibit varying socio-psychological, demographic, or travel attributes (Littrell et al., 2004; Otoo and Kim, 2020), understanding how American and Mainland Chinese seniors differ in their motivations and preferences is a valuable contribution to literature. The evolution of cohort effects over generations (Otoo and Kim, 2020) and between the young and elderly populations (Chen and Choi, 2008; Sirigunna, 2015) are extensively studied.

Pennington-Gray and Lane (2002) stressed that other than cohort effects, the values, attitudes, and preferences do not change as a function of age or lifestyle. Therefore, cohort effects are life long (Feinleib et al., 1993). Understanding senior preferences and needs requires not only the study of particular age cohorts (McPherson, 1990), but also of their similitudes with other senior populations. Segmentation based on psychographic variables, such as motivation, lifestyle, cultural values, and personality, can be useful in identifying tourist differences (Chen and Sasias, 2014; Iversen, Hem and Mehmetoglu, 2016).