

The Current State of Senior Tourism Research: A Focused Narrative Review

Wu Tang¹, Shashi Kant Gupta²

¹ Postdoctoral Fellow, Lincoln University College, Malaysia

² Computer Science and Engineering, Lincoln University College, Malaysia

¹ pdf.wutang@lincoln.edu.my; ² shashigupta@lincoln.edu.my

Abstract: Research on senior tourism now goes beyond market profiling to consider participation, well-being, and inclusion. This focused narrative review looks at ten peer-reviewed English-language articles published between 2018 and 2026, identified through targeted DOI and publisher-platform searches. The evidence is organised around four themes: travel motivation, constraints and negotiation, well-being, and digital inclusion. The reviewed studies show that older tourists are not a single market segment. Their travel decisions vary with health, income, life-course transitions, social support, previous experience, and confidence with technology. Tourism may support subjective and social well-being, but the direction of this relationship remains uncertain because most studies are cross-sectional and context-specific. Taken together, the four themes point to a participation pathway from motivation to constraint negotiation, experience, and outcomes. Accessible environments, personal assistance, and non-digital alternatives matter throughout this pathway. The review argues that age-friendly tourism should be judged by whether older adults can participate independently and meaningfully, rather than by the availability of senior-labelled products alone.

Keywords: Senior tourism; Travel constraints; Travel motivation; Well-being; Digital inclusion

Introduction

Population ageing is reshaping tourism demand and the responsibilities of destinations. In this paper, senior tourism refers broadly to tourism involving older adults, although studies use different age thresholds. Research links later-life travel with novelty, learning, relaxation, social connection, and destination appeal [1], [4]. However, older tourists differ widely in health, income, family roles, travel experience, and confidence with technology. Age alone therefore gives only a partial account of their behaviour.

The field has gradually moved beyond market profiles. Researchers now ask how older adults deal with barriers, whether travel contributes to well-being, and how digitalised services change access to tourism. These questions are related, but they are often examined in separate literatures. This review asks two questions: Which themes define current senior tourism research, and which limitations should guide the next stage of inquiry? It offers a concise map of the field for researchers, destination managers, and tourism service providers.

Related work

Two earlier reviews provide useful starting points. Otoo and Kim mapped senior travel motivation research and found uneven geographical coverage and research methods [1]. Chang et al. reviewed 56 studies of seniors' well-being in tourism and identified conceptual fragmentation and limited attention to cultural context [5]. Neither review was designed to bring motivation and well-being together with

growing evidence on constraint negotiation [2]-[4] and digital inclusion [7]-[10]. The present review uses these four themes to show what is known and where the evidence remains incomplete. Table 1 summarises this map.

Table 1. Main themes in current senior tourism research

Theme	Recurring finding	Remaining issue
Motivation	Motives combine novelty, learning, relaxation, social ties, and destination appeal [1], [4].	Within-group and life-course differences need stronger explanation.
Constraints	Health, habits, companions, cost, time, transport, and risk interact [2]-[4].	Evidence on how constraints change over time remains limited.
Well-being	Tourism is associated with subjective and social well-being, but benefits are conditional [5], [6].	Longitudinal and causal evidence is still insufficient.
Digital inclusion	Technology can enable travel while creating access, skills, transaction, and equity barriers [7]-[10].	Inclusive service design and non-digital alternatives require evaluation.

Key Contribution

This is a focused review rather than a comprehensive catalogue of the field. It considers four discussions that are often separated in the literature. Motivation concerns the wish to travel, while personal circumstances, social support, tourism services, and digital access affect whether that wish can be realised. Considering these issues together draws attention to the conditions that make later-life travel possible and worthwhile.

Method and Review Findings

For this paper, ten peer-reviewed English-language articles published between 2018 and 2026 were selected purposively. The selection followed four strands already visible in the literature: motivation, constraints, well-being, and digital inclusion. Candidate papers were located through DOI and publisher pages using combinations of senior tourism, older tourists, travel motivation, travel constraints, well-being, digital divide, and smart tourism. Titles and abstracts were checked for direct relevance to older tourists and to at least one strand. This review did not follow a database-based systematic protocol. It should therefore be read as a focused synthesis, not as an estimate of the size or distribution of the full literature.

Motivation and heterogeneity. Older travellers do not share one set of motivations. Otoo and Kim's review of work published from 1980 to 2017 identified several motive domains, but also uneven geographical and methodological coverage [1]. Aggarwal et al. found that destination choice involved motivations, perceived constraints, and perceived risk at the same time [4]. Together, these studies show why age is a weak stand-alone basis for segmentation. A person's resources, previous travel, and immediate circumstances are also likely to matter.

Constraints and negotiation. Constraints are not limited to booking or the journey itself. In interviews with 23 older adults, Huber et al. linked changing travel patterns to health, emotional stress, loss of a travel partner, finances, and regulation [2]. Chen et al. reported different effects of health, habit, relationships, time, and transport in a Chinese survey of travel intention [3]. Together, the studies suggest that social support can help people manage some barriers, but it cannot replace accessible services or sufficient resources.

Well-being and active ageing. Well-being research asks what travel may contribute once participation becomes possible. Chang et al.'s review of 56 studies found inconsistent definitions of senior well-being and called for a more holistic approach [5]. In Japan, Totsune et al. studied 835 adults aged 59-69 and found that travel frequency was associated with subjective well-being. Curiosity and perceived family

budget also mattered [6]. These findings support further study, but an association from a cross-sectional design does not establish that tourism caused the reported well-being.

Digitalisation and inclusion. Digitalisation affects several stages of a trip, not only booking. Chinese evidence links limited digital access and use with lower tourism consumption, partly because of transaction barriers [7]. In a sample of 357 Finnish adults aged 60 and over, accessibility, ease of use, usefulness, attitudes, and digital sociality were related to acceptance of digital cultural tourism [8]. Two later studies move the discussion from access to dependence and fairness. Reliance on children or guides may reproduce the travel digital divide [9], while perceived technological equity is associated with memorable experiences [10]. Digital services can therefore help some travellers while creating extra work for others.

Discussion

The four strands address different points in the travel process. Motivation research concentrates on intention. Constraint research asks whether intention becomes participation. Well-being studies examine possible outcomes, while digital research considers access across several trip stages. Viewing them in sequence is useful, but the available studies do not show a simple causal chain. The literature instead suggests that age works together with health, income, social support, prior travel, and digital competence. A destination can therefore offer senior products and still be difficult to use.

Practical recommendations should reflect this distinction. A digital interface may simplify one task for experienced users, but exclude travellers who lack devices, skills, or assistance. Destinations should keep clear information, staff support, and offline options alongside digital services. The research base also needs stronger designs and broader samples. Longitudinal work could help separate the effects of travel from the fact that healthier or wealthier people may travel more. Comparative studies should include the oldest-old, solo travellers, rural residents, low-income groups, and people with limited digital experience.

Conclusions

1. Recent work treats senior tourism as more than demographic segmentation. It examines why older adults travel, what prevents participation, and what may follow from the experience.
2. The reviewed evidence does not support a single profile of the older tourist. Health, resources, relationships, service conditions, and digital competence all shape travel possibilities.
3. Age-friendly provision should combine physical accessibility and affordable options with clear information, staff assistance, and non-digital routes through essential services.
4. These conclusions are provisional because the review draws on a purposive set of ten English-language articles. A broader database review and longitudinal evidence are needed before stronger generalisations can be made.

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