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Sun Hee Lee
Griffith University

Carmen Tideswell
Southern Cross University

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Understanding attitudes towards leisure travel and the constraints faced by senior Koreans

By

Sun Hee Lee, Griffith University
Carmen Tideswell, Southern Cross University

ABSTRACT

The senior segment of the Korean population is rapidly becoming an attractive target market for leisure destinations due to its increasing rate of growth and the level of income available. While this is a potentially attractive segment for the tourism industry, the impact of traditional Confucian philosophy represents a constraint which may deter senior Koreans from travelling for leisure purposes. Through a self-completion survey of 200 Korean residents over the age of 60 years, conducted in 2002, this paper explores the attitudes of this market towards leisure travel. The constraints which may restrict the travel propensity of senior Koreans and the types of travel experiences they demand are revealed.

KEYWORDS: Korean senior travellers, travel motivations, restraints on leisure travel

INTRODUCTION

The ageing Korean population is an attractive market to the tourism industry. Approximately one-quarter of Koreans aged over 60 have domestic travel experience and 17 per cent have international travel experience.¹ However, the development and sale of many types of services and products to seniors have not been successful partly due to a lack of suitable consumer research. This is despite the fact that the consumption propensity of seniors has increased.² In Korea the discretionary income of seniors over the age of 60 years has increased from 6 per cent in 1980 to 20 per cent in 1991.³ As a result, the lifestyle of seniors has changed and an increasing emphasis is being placed on the quality of life, especially opportunities for travel and leisure activities.⁴

Due to the declining birth rate and an increase in the average life expectancy, Korean society is now continuously ageing.⁵ From 1955 to 1960 the country experienced a 'baby boom', with population growth at approximately 3 per cent per annum, which peaked in 1959.⁶ The increasing income available to seniors and the expansion of government pension systems has raised the economic comfort of Korean seniors. These changes may allow increased pleasure travel by this market.⁷ Senior Koreans

who can support themselves without assistance from their children want to save money and travel overseas.⁸ This study explores the specific travel behavior of senior Koreans, and assists in identifying specific tourism product development and marketing opportunities to cater for this emerging market.

RELATED LITERATURE

The influence of Confucianism

To understand the travel behaviour of Korean seniors, it is essential to consider their culture, lifestyles and family relationships. Korea - along with many other Asian countries, including China, Taiwan, Japan and Singapore - has been strongly influenced by the values and norms of Confucian philosophy. Since Confucianism has influenced Korea from as early as 682 AD,⁹ its philosophy has provided solid cultural values over various fields, placing great emphasis on education, work discipline and an orientation toward achievement.¹⁰ Of particular importance is the notion that the family is the central institution in one's life.¹¹ In commentary on the distinctive characteristics of the dominant religions in the USA and East Asia¹² it has been noted that Christianity, the dominant religion in the USA, emphasizes individualism, work ethics and personal salvation, while Buddhism and Confucianism emphasize humility, duty to parents and elders and harmony with nature and one's fellow humans.

Since Confucianism was adopted in Korea its philosophy has become a major influence on the way Koreans think and act, including their travel attitudes and behaviours.¹³ Confucianism, with its emphasis on work and study, does not leave much time for leisure.¹⁴ While today's younger Korean population places a greater emphasis on self-fulfilment and travel,¹⁵ the majority of older Koreans think of work as being more important than any other activity.¹⁶ As a result, the older generation is less likely to travel extensively.

Barriers to leisure travel

A number of factors that constrain seniors in their travel have been identified, including lack of equipment, information, time and money, fear of disapproval by others, physical limitations and lack of social networks that encourage travel.¹⁷ The other key constraints to travel by seniors are insufficient money, poor health, lack of a companion to travel with, not wanting to drive home in the dark,¹⁸ low energy, disability and perceptions that they are too old to travel.¹⁹ According to a study of seniors' travel behaviour in Taiwan, the two main travel barriers are the individual traveller's capabilities and an inadequate number of suitable travel suppliers.²⁰ In terms of the Japanese market, one of the reasons for not travelling by seniors is lack of time.²¹ This is surprising, as it is widely assumed that retirement provides more time for travel. Other travel constraints experienced by ageing Koreans include the family discouraging or 'forbidding' travel, as well as a tendency on their part to feel guilty about considering travel in their senior years.²²

Impact of travel on life satisfaction

Leisure has a positive influence on the lives of elderly people and, in particular, their satisfaction with life. The interests and desires of the elderly are satisfied through leisure.²³ The right type of leisure can help seniors' physical and mental fitness and lead to greater life satisfaction.²⁴ Travel can be an enriching experience in the lives of seniors.²⁵ The benefits of travel for seniors include a change in everyday routine as well as the opportunity to gain new experiences.²⁶ Pleasure travel has been found to be an important issue affecting the quality of life of seniors.²⁷ Although in most developed countries the relationship between quality of life and tourism for seniors has been investigated, the issue has not been examined in many other countries.²⁸

Travel motivations

In various countries research on the senior travel market has focused on the motivations, constraints and behaviours of those who travel for pleasure and other non-business purposes.²⁹ The findings of travel motivation research have been varied. It has been found that seniors primarily travel for rest and relaxation purposes.³⁰ It has also been identified that seniors' motivations for travel are as varied as their backgrounds, and include travelling for the purpose of nostalgia, cultural experiences, sightseeing and meeting and talking to people.³¹

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences, motivations, perceptions and preferences of senior Koreans regarding leisure travel. The study also aims to identify future travel intentions and any constraints that may be preventing the senior Korean market from maximizing their travel experiences. The authors recognize that this market is not homogenous, as demonstrated in market segmentation studies of seniors in general³² and the Korean traveller specifically.³³ Therefore, the aim is to identify the various segments of the Korean senior market and explore each segment's travel requirements.

METHOD

Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted in June 2001. The aim of the pilot study was to ensure that the survey was well designed and easily understood by potential respondents. The questionnaire to be used in the main study was developed based on existing literature examining the travel needs of the Korean senior market. The questionnaire was developed in English and then translated into Korean by the primary researcher, fluent in both English and Korean. An independent translator was consulted to ensure a smooth and accurate translation. The pilot study was conducted in Kyung-Ju City in the southeast of South Korea. A pilot survey was administered to a selection of senior Koreans for self-completion. A convenience sample of seven senior Koreans were

approached in a retail store in which a colleague of the primary researcher worked. One of the key problems identified from the pilot study was the respondents' reluctance and difficulty in answering a question related to income levels. This question was deleted from the final instrument, as recommended by survey methodologists.³⁴

Main study

The main study was conducted in August 2002. Two hundred senior Koreans aged over 60 years were approached by two volunteer data collectors in three welfare centres in Dobongu, Mapogu and Sungbokgu in Seoul. A welfare centre is a community group which provides free services to residents (e.g. free computer training programmes). The survey was conducted only in Seoul because of the difficulties associated with accessing respondents and distributing surveys in rural regions of Korea. As a result, the conclusions drawn from this study relate to urban-based seniors only.

Instrument

Questions related to behaviour of senior Koreans were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). This type of scale has been adapted and used in many other studies.³⁵ Since many Asian countries commonly associate the number one with the best, '1' represented the most positive response. This is in contrast to Western societies where the most positive response is associated with the higher number.³⁶

The majority of respondents completed the questionnaire in Korean and returned it to the data collector. A few seniors had difficulty reading the questionnaire and thus they used the assistance of the data collector. It took approximately 20 minutes to complete the survey.

Data analysis

Data were analysed in a series of steps. First, the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics were determined in relation to gender, age, employment, marital status, lifestyle and education level (see Table 1). Second, the respondents' travel experiences, motivations, perceptions, preferences and future travel intentions were evaluated (see Tables 2, 3 and 4). Third, a factor analysis, utilizing the 19 travel perception items from Table 4, was conducted applying varimax rotation to reduce the number of variables into smaller groupings. Only factors with eigenvalues of one or more and factor scores over 0.40 were included in the rotated matrix. Finally, distinct segments of senior Koreans were obtained through cluster analysis based on the respondents' travel perception factor scores. A hierarchical cluster analysis was performed using squared Euclidean distance measures with the average-linkage clustering method.

(Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents)

RESULTS

Table 1 provides a demographic profile of the respondents. The proportion of males to females was relatively equal. The majority of seniors were under the age of 70, no longer working and were married.

As Table 2 illustrates, over 80 per cent of respondents had travelled in the past five years, both within Korea and overseas. The majority of this travel had been solely within Korea (39 per cent) or in South Asia (16 per cent). This suggests that most seniors surveyed were experienced travellers and that domestic and short-haul Asian destinations had been the main places of their visitation.

(Table 2: Travel experience and future travel intentions of senior Koreans)

Forty-six per cent of respondents indicated they had travelled two, three or four times per year over the last five years. Almost 70 per cent of respondents indicated they travelled mainly for business purposes. This suggests that their travel in the past five years had been for work rather than pleasure.

Most respondents indicated a desire to continue to travel in the future (93 per cent). Only 7 per cent indicated they did not want to continue to travel. In reality, however, considering their current situation (e.g. health, finances, etc.), a smaller proportion (69 per cent) believed it would actually be possible for them to continue to travel. Some seniors (31 per cent), although they would like to continue travelling, thought they might not be able to do so due to the various constraints faced in their retirement years.

Travel motivations

The travel motivations of respondents are summarized in Table 3. The most popular motivations for travel were to experience natural attractions (96 per cent), to visit new places and experience new things (86 per cent), to rest and relax (71 per cent) and to occupy free time (74 per cent). Most respondents also noted that they travelled to stay healthy in their senior years (70 per cent).

There was some disagreement about travel being undertaken to escape everyday routines (34 per cent) or to socialize (42 per cent). There was also strong disagreement that seniors travelled so that they could tell friends about their trip (71 per cent). This suggests that senior Koreans are not really travelling to meet new people or to socialize. They do not see a need to travel so that they can tell other people about their trip. They appear to travel largely to experience natural attractions and new things.

(Table 3: Travel motivations of senior Koreans)

Perceptions of travel

The results relating to the travel perceptions of senior Koreans are presented by order of agreement in Table 4.

The travel perceptions of senior Koreans were further synthesized using factor analysis (see Table 5). Six key factors emerged, accounting for an overall variance of 61 per cent. The KMO Bartlett's test of sphericity was not significant ($\chi^2 = 808.3$, $df = 171$, $p = 0.000$). A brief overview of each of the key findings now follows.

Constraints to travel

This factor accounted for the largest proportion of the variance (20 per cent). It contains seven items related to issues that are interpreted as constraints to travel. While senior respondents generally agreed that they were healthy enough to travel (85 per cent), that travel was generally affordable to most of them and that they were able to get information about travel, the perceived constraints related largely to their own and others' perceptions about being 'too old' to travel. The majority of respondents (88 per cent) admitted that they would 'feel guilty about travelling'. While in a physical, financial and practical sense there appeared to be few real constraints to deter them from travelling, their own beliefs, along with those of others, appeared to be acting as psychological barriers to travel.

(Table 4: Perceptions of travel held by senior Koreans)

Quality of life

The second factor, accounting for 12 per cent of variance, reflects how travel is viewed in terms of adding to seniors' quality of life. Over 90 per cent of respondents agreed that travel improved their quality of life, and a similar percentage also believed that it created new interests in their lives. Seventy-two per cent perceived that they had 'plenty of time to travel'.

Energy to travel

The third factor, accounting for 10 per cent of variance, included items related to being able and willing to make their own travel arrangements, whether or not seniors should stay at home (rather than travel) and whether or not travelling made them tired. These issues appeared to be causing some resistance towards travel. Eighty-eight per cent of respondents agreed that 'seniors should stay at home or in silver towns' (i.e. retirement homes), while approximately 80 per cent agreed that travelling made them tired. The implications of this latter result will be discussed subsequently.

(Table 5: Factor analysis of travel perceptions)

The importance of travel

The fourth factor, accounting for 8 per cent of variance, contained just two items relating to planning effort and importance of travel. Response to this factor generally suggested that senior Koreans did not feel overwhelmed by the amount of planning that travel requires (only 47 per cent agreed). As only 42 per cent agreed that they 'had more important things to do than travel', it generally appeared that most respondents saw travel as somewhat important in comparison to the other activities they could be doing.

Escaping boredom

The fifth factor, a one-item factor accounting for 6 per cent of variance, shows that respondents generally saw travel as a way to 'stop life from becoming boring'. This suggests that as well as being an important source of physical activity for senior Koreans, travel is also a way of keeping them mentally active and preventing them from entering stages of sadness or depression as a result of being bored.

Peer approval

While almost 70 per cent of respondents previously indicated that other people told them they were too old to travel, the response to both items in this last factor suggests that while seniors felt that this was the case, they generally agreed that both friends and family would approve of their travel. Clearly, there is some disparity about how others influence senior attitudes towards travel. Confucian philosophy is likely to be an influential factor here, as seniors themselves feel guilty about travelling, even though they are aware that close friends and family would not attempt to stop them from doing so.

(Table 6: Travel preferences and current availability of travel products and packages for senior Koreans)

Travel preferences and availability of travel products for seniors

The final issue explored in the survey was related to the travel preferences of senior Koreans of how well the travel industry was catering for seniors' travel needs (see Table 6). More than 90 per cent of respondents hoped that people changed their stereotypes about senior travel. They also agreed that the costs of package travel should be cheaper than they are at present (72 per cent). In addition, there was a belief that travel companies should provide fully independent tours (FITs) for seniors (61 per cent). Similarly, they believed they would travel more often if there were more travel packages specifically developed for seniors (54 per cent). Further, there was a sense of ambivalence about whether or not travel packages currently provided by companies offered only long trips (40 per cent). Respondents were also unsure about whether or not existing tourism attractions provided suitable facilities to cater for seniors (32 per cent). Few respondents indicated that they were unaware of trips designed for seniors (17 per cent) and most had seen advertising for senior travel packages (57 per cent).

Senior Korean travel groups

It is interesting to observe how different groups of respondents perceived the travel industry to be catering to their requirements. Tables 7 and 8 provide a breakdown of the total sample into four sub-segments of senior Koreans. A range of cluster solutions was considered, but the four-cluster option was considered the most parsimonious. The four clusters are reported in Table 7 along with a profile of the response patterns of subjects within each segment based on travel perception factor scores, key demographic characteristics and travel behaviours. The second column indicates significant differences at the 0.05 level using chi-square tests.

(Table 7: Profile of senior Korean segments based on cluster analysis)

Cluster 1, 'quality-of-life-seeking travellers' (29 per cent of respondents), were relatively neutral about the level of constraints faced when travelling, but they felt strongly that travel influences seniors' quality of life. They had high energy levels, enabling them to travel, and felt that travel was important in life. On the downside, they had a sense that their family and friends would disapprove of them travelling. Interestingly, respondents in this group were generally female, married and within the 60-65 age bracket, hence they were still able to participate in travel. Most had travelled for a holiday within the last five years, and nearly all were able to continue travelling in the future. Travel within Korea and overseas had been undertaken by the majority of respondents in this cluster.

(Table 8: Travel preferences and availability of travel products for senior Koreans based on cluster analysis)

Cluster 2, 'constrained travellers', is the largest segment (43 per cent of respondents). They perceived that they were faced with a number of constraints to travel and they had low energy levels to travel. They did not regard travel to be of particular importance in life, as they saw no real potential for improvement in their quality of life. They did admit, however, that travel would alleviate their boredom. This group, while still predominantly female, tended to be in the older age brackets (i.e. 65 or more). Interestingly, the majority said they would still like to travel in the future and believed they would be able to do so.

Cluster 3, 'ambivalent travellers' (22 per cent of the sample), felt they were not particularly constrained from travelling and had good energy levels to travel. Travel was seen by them as a low priority in life, however, and they did not perceive any particular benefits from it. Unlike the previous two segments, this group was predominantly male. While most (82 per cent) had travelled in the last five years and believed they were still able to travel, only half of them (51 per cent) had plans to travel in future years.

Cluster 4, the smallest cluster, 'novelty-seeking travellers' (6 per cent of the sample), perceived very low constraints to travel, had high energy levels and saw travel as highly important in life. Rather than viewing travel as a way to improve their quality of life, they saw it as something that relieved the boredom that goes with retirement. They viewed travel as providing some novel aspects to life that would not otherwise exist. The majority of this (albeit small) group were male, and half were 60-65 years. They all believed they were able to travel in future years and planned to do so.

To profile the four segments further, Table 8 summarizes the relative travel preferences of each cluster. There was a significant difference in opinion across the four clusters, with the exception of the issues relating to cost of package travel (where all four clusters agreed equally that senior travel packages should in fact be cheaper than they are). All segments felt very strongly that other people needed to change their attitudes about seniors participating in leisure travel.

While 'constrained travellers' and 'ambivalent travellers' were neutral about the idea that FITs needed to be available to seniors, the 'novelty-seeking travellers' and the

'quality-of-life-seeking travellers' tended to agree that these should be made available to seniors. Both segments also strongly agreed that they would purchase such packages if they were available. Ambivalent travellers also agreed that they would probably travel more if such packages were available.

There was some degree of neutrality among all groups about whether or not travel companies offered only longer trips for seniors, particularly so for constrained travellers and ambivalent travellers. There was also a lot of neutrality about the issue of whether or not existing tourism attractions provided suitable facilities for seniors. Only novelty-seeking travellers tended to agree that they did, while constrained travellers were neutral on this issue and quality-of-life-seeking travellers and ambivalent travellers tended to disagree that such facilities were provided by the industry.

Only novelty-seeking travellers and quality-of-life-seeking travellers agreed that they were aware of trips designed especially for seniors. Both constrained and ambivalent travellers were unsure on this issue. Novelty-seeking travellers were also the group which expressed the strongest agreement that they had seen advertising for senior travel packages. Quality-of-life-seeking travellers and ambivalent travellers were again neutral on this issue.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that there is a clear interest in, and physical ability to, travel among the majority of senior Koreans surveyed. An important finding of the study is that senior Koreans tend to think that they should stay at home or in a silver town. This stereotype may, therefore, limit their travel behaviour. They generally believe that if they want to travel their family and friends would approve, but they themselves would feel guilty about travelling. Seniors also believe that travel improves their quality of life and creates new interests. Furthermore, they have the confidence to travel without assistance and feel they can arrange travel by themselves. The majority can afford to spend money on travel, but they also believe they should do something more important than travel.

Unlike previous studies which indicated that senior Koreans did not travel largely due to poor health impeding them from doing so,³⁷ the majority of respondents in this study (85 per cent) felt that their health was good enough to allow travel. Senior Koreans see travel as a way to stay healthy, rather than an activity which is constrained by ill health. The difference in results between studies may be attributable to the fact that the current survey was distributed in welfare centres, which attract seniors who are active and healthy enough to be able to engage in various activities. According to respondents, they generally have the time and money available to travel. What appears to be restraining their travel is a culturally ingrained belief that they are either too old to travel or that they would feel some form of guilt about spending time away from their families and friends. While studies in other cultural contexts have shown that many seniors perceive they are too old even though they are physically able to travel,³⁸ the issue of feeling guilty about travelling has not been strongly identified. As the Korean culture, affected significantly by Confucianism, has

traditionally focused strongly on work and non-leisure activities, this result is not surprising given the age groups surveyed and the impact of their cultural upbringing.

This study also suggests that senior Koreans are influenced by family and other people when considering travel. Other studies have also mentioned that the opinion of family is important, and a constraint to senior travel.³⁹ Even if senior Koreans want to travel, family perceptions of senior travel could represent barriers.⁴⁰ Under Confucianism the rules of the family suggest that decision making should be a joint family process. The authors believe that Korean families and other people should be encouraged to change their stereotypes, not only about senior travel but also about ageing in general. Moreover, senior Koreans expect travel companies to develop special packages to meet their travel interests and requirements. Respondents also perceive that the current travel products and services available are not well tailored to the senior market.

IMPLICATIONS

As with any culture, it is difficult to change deeply ingrained beliefs in the senior years of a person's life. Travel and tour operators wishing to encourage senior Koreans to travel more should try and promote the benefits of travel towards their families and other influential people in their lives. Given that many respondents saw travel as a way to stay healthy, travel operators may be well advised to promote travel products and experiences as a way of staying healthy in senior years, as well as a vehicle to experience new things in life.

The travel industry may wish to consider developing tourism campaigns that target the families of retirees and portray the positive benefits associated with encouraging their parents to travel in retirement. Educating both seniors and their families about the positive quality-of-life effects on participating in leisure travel may also assist in removing psychological barriers to travel, which stem from a feeling of guilt about travelling. Such an educational campaign may well be conducted in consultation with senior welfare centres.

Given that the main motivations for travelling were to experience natural attractions, new things and places and to rest and relax, tour companies may wish to consider developing appropriate tours and packages combining attractions and services that meet these key motivations (e.g. to see scenic wonders, natural attractions and educational destinations). They may also consider packaging these activities together in short-trip durations, given that the majority of respondents acknowledged that travel can be tiring. Long-haul destinations or lengthy periods away from home are unlikely to be attractive. The reason why many travel companies have not developed such products is that senior travellers have not been perceived to have high purchasing power. The results of this study show that the majority of seniors surveyed had sufficient finances to enable them to travel, although there was a clear opinion that travel services should be priced more economically.

In terms of the specific preferences of the four groups of senior Koreans identified in this study, the tourism and travel industry may better meet the needs of all groups by

promoting the changing of others' stereotypes about travel as well as providing lower-cost travel products. For quality-of-life-seeking travellers, promotion of free independent tours and special packages for seniors would help to meet the needs of this segment. Informing seniors in this segment that special facilities exist for seniors at appropriate tourist attractions is also important. For constrained travellers, an awareness of specialized senior travel packages needs to be promoted by the industry, along with the existence of short-duration and overnight trips and special facilities for seniors. Ambivalent travellers have the potential to be converted to more actively involved tourists by simply targeting travel advertising at them more effectively. The industry has pretty much already won the support of novelty-seeking travellers. Further promotion and development of free independent tours for trips of short durations would, however, further boost the appeal of travelling to this active segment.

CONCLUSION

While many of the characteristics of international senior travellers have been found to relate to the senior Korean market, there are some unique characteristics of this market identified in this study. There are also several specific types of travel products and services that are particularly desired by senior Koreans. While the results reported here relate only to seniors living in the urban capital of Seoul, rather than in regional areas, the study raises some interesting challenges for tour operators wishing to tap into this market. However, since the results of the study are based on a small sample size, further research on a larger scale should explore the issues raised here. For instance, it would be useful to identify the specific constraints that the constrained travellers believe are preventing them from travelling more extensively.

Overall, there is the potential and interest of senior Koreans to undertake more leisure travel. The key challenge for travel companies, and the Korean community in general, is to promote leisure travel as a desirable retirement activity, supported by the families and communities of elderly Koreans, as a way of enhancing their quality of life, staying healthy and learning about new things.

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