The Development of Tourism in the Context of an Aging Population Trend

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of China's aging population, the tourism industry has been significantly impacted. To adapt to this demographic shift, the tourism industry must adjust its development trajectory. This paper focuses on the tourism consumption patterns of the elderly population, analyzing their current demand for tourism and the factors that may constrain industry's development. For instance, the elderly population generally has lower incomes, is more susceptible to fraud, and tends to have conservative consumption attitudes. In this context, the paper proposes off-season peak-avoidance tourism and increased use of travel groups to reduce tourism costs for the elderly; establishes an official platform for tourism services and suggests official regulation and penalties for fraudulent activities to alleviate the elderly's concerns about being scammed; and proposes measures to improve the elderly's willingness to consume to increase the average transaction value per customer. This paper provides some suggestions for the development of tourism industry for the elderly.

Keywords: Tourism, aging population trend, economic development.

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of this century, the explosive growth of the domestic economy has brought new opportunities and challenges to all industries. Today's society has seen a shift in reproductive attitudes. With rising reproductive costs and improved social welfare benefits, many individuals from the post-80s and post-90s generations have abandoned the traditional notion of "more children, more blessings." As survival pressures in contemporary society grow increasingly intense, the current main childbearing demographic tends toward having fewer children or none at all, resulting in a continuous annual decline in the number of newborns. In the not-too-distant future, China will enter an era of population decline, with the proportion of the elderly population in the total population steadily increasing [1]. China's population peaked in 2021 and began to decline in 2022 [2].

The shift in childbearing attitudes has altered China's population trends, reshaped the demographic structure and redefined the landscape dominated by younger generations. Data shows that in 2024, the population aged 65 and above will account for 15.6% of the total population. It is projected that by 2050, the proportion of the population aged 65 and above will increase to 26% [3]. China's aging society is an inevitable trend, so the tourism industry should also prepare in advance, making age-friendly adjustments to achieve sustainable development and improvement. Additionally, some scholars currently believe that, in the context of an aging population, the development of the tourism industry should be achieved through industrial integration [4]. The tourism industry can link with other related industries such as healthcare and elderly care to build an industrial integration and development platform. By leveraging the characteristics of these industries, tourism can create signature highlights to attract the attention of the elderly, satisfy their curiosity, and encourage them to try new experiences. This approach allows the elderly to enjoy products and services from other industries while traveling, thereby enriching tourism formats, enhancing their depth, and providing new ideas for presenting tourism, thereby better meeting the tourism needs of the elderly. However, in reality, the elderly are constrained by their post-retirement consumption capacity and concerns about falling victim to fraud. Additionally, the current demand for tourism among the elderly has not yet reached its peak. While building industrial integration, it is also important to address the

challenges currently faced. Fraud targeting the elderly is rampant in today's society, and the elderly often find it difficult to recognize scams accurately. Out of fear of being deceived, the elderly are reluctant to try or accept new things. Furthermore, the elderly population still has issues with their consumption mindset. Having experienced periods of poverty, they have largely developed a habit of "saving wherever possible." They have implemented this habit in every aspect of their lives and find it difficult to change their existing frugal consumption habits. They have little enthusiasm for indulgent consumption and are unwilling to spend lavishly. This paper will summarize the current situation based on the aforementioned characteristics of the elderly population, review the development and characteristics of the elderly population in the past, analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the tourism industry, explore feasible strategies for the tourism industry, and discuss the prospects and challenges of elderly tourism. The aim is to enable the tourism industry to develop more effectively in the context of an ageing population and finally propose feasible solutions.

2. The Demand for Tourism among the Elderly Population in the Current Context

2.1. Types of Demand from the Elderly Population

The elderly population values a leisurely retirement lifestyle and seeks high-quality elderly care programs. They pay particular attention to products featuring terms like "elderly care," and may place greater emphasis on the elderly care attributes of travel products, demonstrating stronger willingness to engage in elderly care-oriented travel consumption. The Yangtze River Basin boasts extremely rich tourism resources and accounts for approximately one-fifth of China's total land area, making it a crucial component of China's tourism market. Data indicates that from 2011 to 2022, the integration and development of the elderly care industry and tourism industry in the Yangtze River region showed an upward trend. The data from the Yangtze River region effectively represents China's overall situation, demonstrating that elderly care-oriented tourism projects still hold a dominant position in the tourism activities of the elderly population [5].

Additionally, the consumption share of other tourism products is also gradually increasing. On one hand, due to the improvement in China's medical standards in recent years, many elderly people are in relatively good physical condition. Therefore, they look forward to exploring natural landscapes while expanding their horizons and staying active to maintain their health. On the other hand, with the widespread adoption of the internet and social media, various cultural traditions have gained exposure in recent years, sparking interest among some elderly individuals. As a result, tourism products related to cultural exploration, such as folk customs experiences and art appreciation, are also highly favored by this demographic. These shifts in demand reflect the evolving trend toward diversification and personalization in the tourism preferences of the elderly population. The tourism industry must adapt to the needs of the elderly by integrating traditional leisure-oriented elderly care with sightseeing and cultural exploration.

2.2. The Scale of Demand among the Elderly Population

Due to the trend of an aging population, the size of the elderly population is continuously expanding, and their proportion of the total population is also increasing. The large population base has laid the foundation for the demand in China's tourism industry, and the expansion of the population's proportion has also altered the composition of demand. Data from the China Association of the Aging Industry indicates that the proportion of elderly tourism in the total tourism market is expected to reach 50% around 2040. Assuming unchanged tourism intentions and per capita spending, the total consumption of the elderly population will exceed 2.4 trillion yuan [6]. These figures demonstrate the significant consumption potential and demand scale of the elderly population. The tourism industry can achieve substantial development through this demographic's consumption,

indicating that the industry's development focus should be on the elderly population to better unlock their consumption potential.

2.3. The New Elderly Population become the Main Force in Tourism Consumption

In recent years, the new elderly population aged 60 to 69 has differed from the traditional elderly population aged 70 and above. Due to improvements in medical care and living standards, the physical health of the new elderly population aged 60 to 69 is generally better, enabling them to frequently engage in travel and consumption activities. Additionally, benefiting from economic and social development since the reform and opening-up, their consumption capacity and educational attainment are significantly higher than those of the elderly aged 70 and above. Furthermore, after retirement, they have full control over their own time, allowing them more opportunities to travel and increasing their consumption frequency [7]. Therefore, this group not only has a strong willingness to consume but should also be regarded as a target group by the tourism industry, which should optimize its services based on their characteristics.

3. The Constraints Imposed by the Characteristics of the Elderly Population on the Development of Tourism

3.1. The Elderly Population Generally has Low Purchasing Power

Due to the decline in labor income among the elderly population, the growth of pensions cannot keep pace with current average wages, leading to suppressed consumption capacity and an inability to maintain the standard of living enjoyed before retirement. As a result, the elderly are less inclined to spend on tourism and instead choose to save their money to prepare for future emergencies. Data shows that for every one percentage point increase in the proportion of the population aged 65 and above, the per capita consumption level of urban residents decreases by 2.9 percentage points [8]. Many elderly individuals may be constrained by their limited purchasing power, preventing them from consuming and enjoying life as they wish. Even if they have expectations and desires for travel, budget constraints may prevent them from doing so, ultimately suppressing demand for the tourism industry. Currently, the growth of pensions is lagging behind, with the growth rate failing to keep pace with the average wage levels of urban employed workers. Even though pensions are being adjusted upward, they cannot meet the additional tourism needs of the elderly. Currently, China's basic pension replacement rate is only 47%, far below international standards and also failing to meet the government's set targets, unable to sustain the living standards that were previously supported by pre-retirement wages [9].

3.2. The Elderly Population is Vulnerable to Fraud

In recent years, the internet and electronic products have been undergoing rapid development, with new types of electronic fraud emerging constantly and evolving continuously. The elderly population has relatively weak information identification and screening capabilities, and their ability to identify internet fraud and false information is severely lacking [10]. The prevalence of fraud may lead to feelings of panic, causing many elderly individuals who are willing to travel to choose not to travel in order to avoid the risk of being defrauded, thereby reducing their desire to explore new things outside their homes. The elderly struggle to keep pace with the rapid changes of the internet age, often encountering content and information they are unfamiliar with or have never encountered before. Additionally, as their physical functions have passed their peak and are now in a state of decline, they find it increasingly difficult to distinguish between genuine and false information, making it harder for them to make rational judgments. This increases the risk of the elderly falling victim to fraud. These factors may negatively impact the tourism industry targeting the elderly population.

3.3. The Elderly Population has Conservative Customer Attitudes

The older generation, who have experienced hardships in the past, adhere to the habit of "thrift and frugality," which they have incorporated into every aspect of their lives. This also means that their basic approach to life has become ingrained, and some elderly people are reluctant to go out. When it comes to travel, a relatively expensive form of consumption, they will think twice before making a decision.

Additionally, even if some elderly individuals do attempt to travel, they still maintain their previous "thrifty" attitude. When traveling, they still try to save money wherever possible and avoid unnecessary spending. This presents new considerations for the development of the tourism industry targeting the elderly population. Furthermore, they tend to save their money and leave it for their children. Although the consumption mindset of the elderly has improved somewhat in recent years, there is still a relatively low willingness to spend money on going out.

4. Feasible Tourism Strategies for an Aging Population

4.1. Reducing Travel Costs and Enhancing the Travel Experience

First, encourage the elderly to travel during the off-season. Most elderly people are retired and have ample time to travel throughout most of the year. During holidays and weekends, tourist attractions need to accommodate more visitors from other groups besides the elderly, leading to a shortage of travel products, rising prices, and a decline in the travel experience due to large crowds. These factors may limit the growth of demand. Therefore, the elderly can avoid peak travel seasons such as holidays and weekends and choose to travel during the off-season. The tourism industry can attract more elderly travelers during the off-season by offering a variety of travel programs. During this period, there are fewer visitors, allowing the elderly to enjoy more favorable prices and higher service quality, thereby achieving the goal of increasing demand.

Secondly, related industries can increase the use of travel groups. The elderly may face obstacles in areas such as accommodation, dining, ticket purchasing, and navigation due to their unfamiliarity with technological products. Travel agencies can organize all-inclusive travel group programs to arrange the entire itinerary for the elderly, providing a more hassle-free and convenient travel experience to address the concerns of elderly travelers and enhance their travel experience, thereby increasing travel demand. Additionally, due to their nature, group tours can significantly reduce transportation, ticket, and accommodation costs through collective action. Therefore, travel agencies can form large-scale group tours to reduce travel costs for the elderly, thereby increasing travel demand.

4.2. Reducing the Elderly Population's Concerns about Fraud

The government should establish an official platform for providing travel services. The elderly population, due to their fear of fraud and unfamiliarity with potential scams, may worry about finding suitable travel consumption channels or hesitate to make purchases. By establishing an official platform, travel resources such as accommodation, dining, transportation, and attractions can be integrated, and simplified procedures can be provided, creating a convenient and reassuring channel for the elderly population to book tickets and make reservations. This allows them to navigate travel consumption more efficiently and confidently.

The government should strengthen supervision and penalties for fraud. As a criminal act, the prevalence of fraud severely impacts social stability and economic development. To fundamentally address the elderly population's concerns about fraud, the government can intensify efforts to address fraudulent activities, including simultaneous supervision of both offline and online platforms, and impose penalties on fraudulent behavior to reduce fraud incidents, alleviate societal panic over fraud, and provide the elderly population with a sense of security during consumption.

4.3. Enhancing the Elderly Population's Willingness to Consume

Promote tourism consumption through both online and offline platforms. The elderly population's willingness to consume is not set in stone; it can be influenced through simultaneous promotion on both online and offline platforms. In offline promotions, leverage high-frequency interaction scenarios such as community activity centers and senior universities, using formats more easily accepted by the elderly population. Invite locally renowned elderly hosts or respected elders from the community to serve as speakers, sharing their personal travel experiences; On-site decorations should align with their aesthetic preferences, playing familiar melodies such as classic red songs and folk music, and displaying vibrantly colored, approachable travel posters to enhance affinity. Additionally, interactive sessions can be organized for seniors with travel experience to share their insights on-site, enabling the elderly population to form a deep impression of the promotional content and create a ripple effect. This approach aims to subtly enhance the elderly population's willingness to consume, thereby increasing the average spending per elderly traveler.

5. Conclusion

This paper, in the context of the current diversification and industrial integration strategies in the tourism industry, summarizes new insights through the analysis of existing data and literature. Considering the unique characteristics of the elderly population in real-world scenarios, this paper proposes optimization strategies and countermeasures for the tourism industry tailored to their consumption capacity, concerns about being deceived, and patterns of thinking. In future practice, this will better stimulate the tourism demand of the elderly population, enabling them to continuously inject development momentum into the tourism industry and facilitate its high-quality growth. In the future, as these strategies are implemented, the tourism demand of the elderly population will be effectively activated—they will not only transition from “observers” to “participants” but may also become sustained contributors to the tourism industry. Their consumption potential will be transformed into a driving force for the development of new tourism formats such as rural tourism and health tourism, prompting the tourism industry to iterate and upgrade in product design, service standards, and other areas, ultimately advancing toward a more inclusive and sustainable phase of high-quality development.

Authors contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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