Senior Tourists' Digital Travel Experience: A Humanisation Perspective

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Abstract. As with the development of digital technology, increasing older adults have used digital technologies in different stages of their travel. While advocating the positive aspects of digital usage among older adults, the downside has been largely neglected. Moreover, older adults vary in their backgrounds, lifestyles, digital competence and specific needs. When seeking appropriate solutions to enhance their digital travel experience, it is important to initially profile the diverse subgroups and delineate their specific preferences. This study adopted a humanisation perspective and a qualitative approach to 1) understand senior tourists' digital travel experience, 2) explore senior tourists' needs and requirements regarding digital travel, and 3) develop a senior tourists' digital travel experience typology. Findings provide rich contributions in understanding senior tourists' digital use and the humanised digital travel experience. Recommendations are also offered to destinations, tourism service providers and care providers regarding how to develop an age friendly destination digital environment.

Keywords: Senior Tourist · Digital Travel Experience · Humanisation

1 Introduction

Tourism plays an important role in supporting older adults' good quality of life. As with the development of digital technology, more and more older adults have used digital devices in different stages of their travel. Existing studies are mainly framed within seniors' digital stereotypes, lacking dynamic perspectives to understand this age group's changing needs in digital experience. While advocating the positive aspects of digital usage among older adults, the downside has been largely neglected. Moreover, senior people vary in their backgrounds, lifestyles, digital competence and specific needs. When seeking appropriate solutions to enhance their digital travel experience, it is important to initially profile the diverse subgroups and delineate their specific preferences and behaviours in terms of their travel motivation, digital competence, and digital adoption.

To bridge the aforementioned gaps, this study adopted a humanisation perspective and a qualitative approach, to 1) understand senior tourists' digital travel experience, 2) explore senior tourists' needs and requirements regarding digital travel, and 3) developing a senior tourists' digital travel experience typology. Findings provide rich contributions in further understanding senior tourists' digital use and the humanised digital travel experience. Recommendations are offered to destinations and service providers regarding how to develop an age friendly destination digital environment.

2 Literature Review

In the past decade, a shift from technology-centred digitalization to human-centred digitalization is evidenced in tourism business, academia and policy-making [1]. Humanising the digital tourism experience starts with acknowledging what it means to be human, to feel secure, respected, valued, and involved [2]. Originally aimed to challenge the public health field, Todres, Galvin and Holloway [3] developed a humanisation value framework to delineate core features to see the people they serve as humans rather than objects. Derived from the tradition of existential phenomenology, the framework is informed by Husserl's concept of lifeworld, Heidegger's thinking about being, and Merleau-Ponty's idea about body [4]. The framework consists eight dimensions of humanization and dehumanization, with each dimension considering as an emphasis along a continuum, rather than binary opposites [5]. They are insiderness-objectification, agency-passivity, uniqueness-homogenisation, togetherness-isolation, sense making-loss of meaning, personal journey-loss of personal journey, sense of place-dislocation, and embodiment-reductionist body. Extant research demonstrated that the framework has potential to bring together the subjective lifeworld of the person within the systems approach of health and social care institutions, and to inform and develop public policies and practices. By considering the inward human experience, the framework serves as a sounding board for making sense of older adults' experiences of living and ageing, which echoes to the current research.

Overall, prior studies of senior tourists as users of information technology are mainly based on the technology acceptance model, the motivation-opportunity-abilities model, the stimulus-organism-response theory, the leisure constraint theory, and the transaction cost theory. Exist research focuses on seniors' perceptions of the benefits and costs of the tourism information technology, and few studies examined their tourism experience through digital services.

3 Methodology

This study sought to understand senior tourists' digital tourism experience and establish a senior tourist typology through the humanising perspective. Therefore, the qualitative research method and interview design were chosen to achieve an in-depth investigation of the individual experience. The sampling frame consists of Chinese senior tourists who are 60 years or older, have travelled in the past two years, and have used digital technologies before, during, or after their trips. Data collection was carried out between April 2021 and June 2023. A total of 38 interviews were conducted, lasting between

20 and 80 min. Of the participants, 14 were female and 24 were male; the average age was 64 years. Additionally, 30 of the 38 participants held a high school diploma or higher. During the semi-structured interviews, the participants were first asked about their adoption of digital tools in general while traveling. Then, they were asked to recall their recent tourism experience related to digital technologies, including the details about their encounters with digital tools or digital services, and the positive and negative aspects of their digital experience. Moreover, they were invited to share their opinions on what humanization in digital tourism means to seniors and their attitudes, requirements or concerns about digital technology in tourism. Data analysis was conducted following a hybrid approach to thematic analysis [6] that combined inductive and deductive coding flexibly.

4 Findings

Seven types of senior tourists' digital travel experience have emerged from the interviews according to their travel motivation, digital device and technology usage and adoption, and their humanising travel experience.

4.1 Digital-Savvy Enjoyer

Digital-savvy enjoyers have an open and favourable attitude towards the digital transformation within the tourism sector. They possess a high level of digital literacy that facilitates their effective utilization of digital tools throughout each phase of tourism, thereby enjoying the tech-enhanced tourism experience. Such tourists represent the ideal tourist type in the digital age. With digital tools, digital-savvy enjoyers find their agency and uniqueness more profoundly respected and actualized during traveling. For digital-savvy enjoyers, digital interventions in areas such as payment, booking, identification, and content presentation are sense-making.

4.2 Collaborative Travellers

Collaborative travellers are older individuals who love traveling and prefer group journeys. With online platforms like WeChat, they set up group chats and exchange travel information, stay in touch, and share feelings and images before, during, and after the journey. Such digital platforms serve as a bridge, connecting them together throughout all times of the journey. Each members' roles and responsibilities within the travel group are allocated based on their specialties, particularly their varying proficiency with digital technology. "*We have a clear task division. Those who are good with digital technology are responsible for booking hotels and tickets and finding local delicacies according to online reviews from Meituan*" (S-003).

4.3 Active Learners

Active learners may not be experts in technology, however, often use digital devices with the assistance of others and recognize the significant improvements the technology

brings to their tourism experience. "*These technologies truly bring a lot of conveniences for me. Although I'm still a beginner and often seek my children's help, I'm slowly but steadily learning how to use them*" (H-018). For active learners, the process of learning and adapting to these technologies is more than acquiring digital skills; it is a personal journey of aligning themselves— individuals of an older generation—with the rapidly updating modern age.

4.4 Digital Tourism Dependents

Digital tourism dependents typically have low digital literacy and limited willingness to learn. Often, they travel with companions who are proficient with digital tools. These companions handle common digital interactions like hotel bookings and accessing e-tickets for them. This assistance process fosters a deeper sense of togetherness among them. However, when they are along and have to deal with digital tools by themselves, their digital experience tends to be negative.

4.5 Life-Long Recorders

Life-long recorders cherish each moment of their journey, meticulously documenting what they see, feel, and experience for both sharing and remembrance. For them, travel is more than a vacation; it's an opportunity to engage deeply with the culture, history, and society of the destinations they visit. Digital technologies amplify this practice. Photos taken, digital introductions downloaded, and moments shared on social media are "digital footprints" that span their personal journey.

4.6 Digital-Ambivalent Traveller

Digital-ambivalent traveller, while possessing a commendable level of digital literacy and proficiency with digital tools, have mixed feelings toward the burgeoning digital revolution. On one hand, they acknowledge the enormous benefits digital technology brings, especially in supporting seniors' agency by empowering their travel engagements. On the other hand, they also have several concerns about the rapid transition from traditional face-to-face services to digital encounters. As more and more services are delivered through digital tools, seniors find themselves facing challenges in adapting, since their learning process usually demands considerable time and effort.

4.7 Digital-Wave Resister

Unlike other groups of seniors, digital-wave complainers have limited digital literacy and are alienated from digital technologies, resulting in their complain about the unsatisfactory digital tourism experience. They often find it difficult to understand or operate digital tools and might be unaware of certain functionalities such as online reservations, which makes them feel passive during traveling. "*Last Labor Day, we were told that online reservations were required for entering Zhuozheng Garden when we arrived there. But we hadn't seen any notice about this before and didn't know how to make the reservation*" (H-005).

5   Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored senior tourists' digital travel experience and developed a typology according to their travel motivation, digital usage and adaption from a humanisation perspective. Theoretically, this study extended the knowledge of seniors' digital experience by introducing the humanisation approach. It not only strengthens the human-centred digitalization progression for the ageing group, but also offers a new angle to understand this age group's travel experience, beyond the traditional technology acceptance and constraint approaches [7]. The established typology also corresponds to the literature that argued that digital divide exists especially by different age groups [8]. Compared with previous senior digital experience categorisation, this research takes humanisation and other travel and digital related preferences into consideration, offering a comprehensive perspective to understand the perceptional and behavioural differences in the ageing population. Results also shed lights to the destinations, attractions and relevant tourism service sectors regarding how to build an age friendly digital travel environment and eventually tackle the ageism in a broader society. Limitations of the current study relate to sample selection and the lasting effect of the pandemic on tourist behaviour.

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