Senior Travellers as Users of Online Travel Services: a Qualitative Enquiry

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Abstract

Importance of senior travellers as travel segment for the tourism industry increases continuously as the number of pensioners increases. These new senior travellers differ from earlier generations in many ways, one being increasing use of Information and Communication Technologies as part of their information search process. This study examines senior travellers as users of online travel services such as websites. A qualitative approach is chosen to provide insights into the topic and nine Finnish pensioners are interviewed. The results are analysed using content analysis. The results show that the senior travellers are a very heterogeneous segment regarding online travel services. However, there is no special marketing or website design that senior travellers really need but a good website also caters for the needs of younger as well as older consumers. More attention has to be paid to use of pictures and colours on websites as well as instructions.

Keywords: senior travellers; information search; website design; elderly; travel websites; pensioners

1   Introduction

Senior travellers have become a main stream tourism segment. There is no common definition of what is meant by older consumer market and from what age would a person be considered as a senior. Definitions vary from 50 year olds (e.g. Lohmann & Danielsson 2001) to even 65 years (Norman et al. 2001). Maturing of the the post-war Baby Boomer generation has caused a refining of the meaning of senior (Reisenwitz & Iyer 2007), as Boomers tend to reject products that use the word 'senior' in marketing or are targeted to the older generation (Lohmann & Danielsson 2001; Reisenwitz & Iyer 2007). Seniorship is also often connected to the age of retirement, as is in this study.

Characteristics of senior travellers are an important research venue because of the market size and its potential for growth (Horneman et al., 2002). However, these new senior travellers differ from previous pensioner generations in many ways. People who are retiring now are more and more used to work with computers and interact with different kinds of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), many even have smart phones and tablets. Even though the senior market is one of the most influential groups of leisure travellers, the segment is often forgotten for example in hotel marketing and advertising (Hartman & Qu, 2008). Lately many different stakeholders in tourism have emphasized the importance of seniors for the travel industry. For example Finnish Ministry of Employment and the Economy (2006) has identified seniors as one of the main target groups for Finnish tourism strategy and Amadeus (2007) regards active seniors (50-75 year olds) as a very important tourist segment in the future.

Several studies have found the elderly to be different from younger consumers (e.g. Reece, 2004; Newbold et al., 2005). Nevertheless, elderly consumer segment is not a homogeneous group (Sudbury & Simcock 2009a; Nielsen, 2014), and therefore it is likely that the group beholds heterogeneous needs. People with same age can have very different lifestyles (Kohijoki & Marjanen 2012), varying needs and they may value different things (Moschis 1994). Although chronological age is most commonly used to segment older consumers in marketing research, it can be regarded as ineffective segmentation technique (Sudbury & Simcock 2009b).

Elderly consumers are often considered as technology anxious and reluctant to adopt new technologies (Niemelä-Nyrhinen 2007). Older consumers for example have not adopted the Internet as well as other consumers and do not use it as often as others nor are they as active in social media (Statistics Finland, 2012a-d). However, because of their still modest level of adoption, older adults are the fastest growing group of computer users and information seekers (Kurniawan et al., 2006). Elderly consumers are considered to have less willingness to try new products (Reisenwitz et al. 2007) since they prefer having same well-known brands, rather than adopting novel products (Lambert-Pandraud & Laurent 2010). Seniors also tend to consider fewer brands and tend to have repeat purchases to the same brand (Lambert-Pandraud et al. 2005).

Senior travellers and consumers are being increasingly studied in the tourism literature. Focus on earlier research has been on travel behaviour and is largely quantitative and concerned with developing market-oriented typologies (Sedgley et al., 2011). Research has also focused mainly on the behaviour of senior travellers during their trip (Sedgley et al., 2011). Segdley et al. (2011) as well as Nielsen (2014) call for the voice of older people to be heard in the field of tourism research.

This study aims to answer the aforementioned important research gaps in the tourism literature by studying online travel services though the eyes of senior travellers. The focus is on examining how senior travellers use online travel services in various phases of information search process. Additionally, the aim is to provide insights into how online travel services correspond to the needs of the older travellers and what are the attributes of an online travel service that they value.

2 Background of the study

This study defines online travel services as different World Wide Web sites that travellers use when they are searching for information either before the trip, during the trip or after the trip. These can be either third party websites such as www.tripadvisor.com, destination websites or travel agent websites. Online travel services can also be applications that the travellers can use with their tablet devices or smart phones.

Several earlier studies (Dinet et al., 2007) indicate that the computer use among the older adults decreases as the age increases. The older the person is, the less computer knowledge and interest they are likely to have. The senior travellers in this study are defined as people living their third age. Peter Laslett (1987) divides the ageing process into third and fourth age that depict different phases of ageing. Third age means active phase of ageing when the person has the possibility for self fulfilment and extensive leisure time, they have good health and enough livelihood from pension. During the fourth age people start becoming dependent on others as their health deteriorates. For tourism businesses especially the senior travellers living their third age are a very prominent market segment. People living their third age are also much more likely to use ICTs during their travel search process than people already living their fourth age (Dinet et al., 2007). Even though Sedgley et al. (2011) state that those aged 80 years and older are underrepresented in the field of tourism literature, this study focuses generally on people who are better marketing 'prospects'.

Moschis (2003b) states that a consumer-oriented marketing philosophy is critical to create an effective marketing strategy for older consumers. Marketers need to know how older people differ from younger people. These differences tend to be result of two types of factors: either differences in aging processes or life circumstances they have experienced. This is why information on older consumers really is needed.

Use of online travel services is increasing among older people and many of them have been using the Internet for some time now. Dinet et al. (2007) found that travel and recreation was second most sought after topic for older Internet users after health and The World Wide Web has become a major information resource for older people. This indeed calls for more information on how this very interesting and important segment uses online travel services in their information search process. To this date there has been very limited amount of information on the role of Internet in senior travel market (Vigolo & Confente, 2014) and extremely little qualitative information. However, it is well known that the older people search for information differently than other people. Already in the 1980s Gitelson and Crompton (1983) reported that older vacationers were more inclined to use travel agents than other vacationers. Javalgi et al. (1992) stated that senior travellers engage less in external search, meaning that they tend to buy more pre-packaged tours than non-seniors. Contrary to earlier findings, Luo et al. (2004) did not find any significant differences in information search behaviour between senior and non-senior tourists. Senior tourists seem to use the same information sources as others but Luo et al. (2004) did not investigate if there were any differences in how these information sources are used. Vigolo and Confente (2014) studied past travel behaviour and online experience as antecedents of online purchase intention for older tourists and identified online word-of-mouth, pre-

vious online travel purchases and education as significant factors. Also, there were significant behavioural differences between prospective seniors and seniors. Vigolo and Confente (2014) defined prospective seniors as people aged from 50 to 64 years old and seniors at least 65 years old.

The literature agrees that the senior travellers are extremely heterogeneous segment with people with different travel motivations, demographics, psychographics, lifestyle and educational and income levels (Sedgley et al., 2011; Nielsen, 2014). Senior travellers have been studied in many segmentation studies and a large number of senior traveller segments have been identified (Faranda & Schmidt, 2000), establishing the senior market as an extremely heterogeneous. For example in the USA four older consumer segments have been identified in several studies: the "Healthy Hermits", the "Ailing Outgoers", the "Frail Recluses" and the "Healthy Indulgers" (Moschis, 2003a). Moschis (2003a) also states that elderly consumers appreciate some specific attributes in products and services, namely convenience, functionality, quality, dependability, personalized service and product development.

This means that it is very difficult to make any generalizations about the senior traveller market. This also calls for qualitative research to make the voice of senior travellers heard (Sedgley et al., 2011; Nielsen, 2014) and increase our knowledge on what online travel services really mean for senior travellers.

There has been a large number of research conducted on the older people as information seekers, or information search behaviour studies that have included information on older people. Dinet et al. (2007) studied online information needs and search strategies of older people using mixed methods research. However, qualitative research was used only to find out measurements for information search on the web. Their main findings were that individual characteristics make older people a very heterogeneous group of information seekers, but one major problem was relocating relevant information among information provided by the search engines. Fodness and Murray (1997) identified household life-cycle as an affective factor in tourist information search process. Johnson (1990) investigated age differences in decision making and found out that older people used less information, spent more time viewing, and re-viewed fewer bits of information than college-age participants in their study. Also information search patterns differed between age groups. Age was also found significant in the study by Klein and Ford (2003), even though their results are partially contrary to the results of Johnson (1990). Czaja et al. (2001) found significant differences between different age groups in the performance of a complex information search and retrieval task. Older people have more difficulties in performing these tasks, but these can be alleviated by increasing the expertise of the user or by changes in interface design. They suggest that computer-aiding techniques may decrease the load on working memory and increase speed of performance.

Based on the earlier literature we know that the seniors are a very interesting demographic group. They differ from other consumers in their information needs and use of information channels, also in the digital age, but there is also huge heterogeneity within the group of senior travellers. Older people have widely adopted the internet as an important information source and they are using it a lot, but we still have very little information how they themselves perceive the online services. Especially in the field

of tourism research, we have barely no information on the senior travellers as users of online travel services. The voice of the seniors is very seldom heard in research articles. This study aims to provide new insights into senior travellers as users of online travel services, thus increasing our knowledge on what these services mean for senior travellers, how they use them and why, and also how senior travellers have to be acknowledged when designing online travel services. As there is relatively little information on the topic, this study aims to provide general insights that can be used to focus future studies in interesting and important topics such as website design, use of social media and use of mobile devices.

3 Data and Methods

This study adapts qualitative research approach to investigate senior travellers as users of online travel services. The empirical data consist of eight semi-structured face-to-face interviews which were conducted among retired people. The interviewees were selected in collaboration with an association of retired people located in central Finland. Data was collected in Finnish, translations in this study are made by the authors. A snowball technique was applied when searching for senior citizens, preferably retired, and who are active travellers, meaning that the interviewee makes at least one trip abroad a year. The group of interviewees includes five women and four men. In qualitative research, the size of the sample does not matter, but rather what matters is the saturation level of data from the sample in question (Gummesson 2000). A representative sample of different kinds of personalities and backgrounds was the objective. Nevertheless, it must be noted here that as common in qualitative research, the aim was not to produce any generalizable or comprehensive information about Finnish seniors as web users but to increase our understanding of the senior travellers as users of online travel services. Qualitative approach is concerned with interpretation and understanding (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). Hence, the findings will rather give ideas for further research than aim to generalize the insights gained from this study.

The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. The data was analyzed by content analysis, which is a tool to prepare the empirical data for the interpretation process by repeatedly reading and organizing the data and classifying or thematizing it (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). Observations were collected in matrix form in order to better understand the differences and similarities between the respondents. Relevant quotations of the interviewees are included in the presentation of the findings in order to understand the perspectives of the respondents and make their interpretation more transparent.

4 Findings

Background information about the demographics of the respondents as well as their travel preferences is presented in Table 1. Similar tables were created from the whole data, but only the first is presented here because of limited space. Most of the respondents come from rather modest circumstances, which is common in this after war age cohort in Finland. Only one respondent (M78) has a university degree, which has given him an opportunity to learn and use foreign languages. Except him and F64a,

all the others do not manage with foreign languages. This is quite common in this age cohort, only generations born after 1960 have had English or some other language compulsory at school starting from the 3rd class.

Table 1. Background information on the interviewees

	M62	F61	F64a	M68	F64b	F68a	F68b	M69	M78
Gender	male	female	female	male	female	female	female	male	male
Age	62	61	64	68	64	68	68	69	78
Occupation	foreman	nurse	technical officer	military prof.	farmer	kitchen maid	house wife	shop keeper	PhD
Education	vocational	vocational	vocational	military	elementary school	elementary school	vocational	vocational	university
Annual household income	35000	35000	50000	20000	20000	18000	30000	10000	60000
Family	in relation-ship	in relation-ship	in relation-ship	married	married	widow	married	widow	married
Retired	2013		2014	2012	2012	2007	2006	2010	2000
Childhood living conditions	modest	modest	modest	modest	poor	poor	middle class	middle class	well-off
Travelling in child-hood/youth	none	a lot	domestic	none	none	none	domestic	domestic	in Europe
Travel experience during working years	limited	regular	regular	limited	limited	regular	regular	regular	regular
Travelling after retirement	seldom	regular	regular	regular	regular	regular	regular	regular	regular,
Packaged/self admin-istrated	packaged	both	self	packaged	packaged	packaged	both	both	both
Preferred destina-tions	familiar and new	familiar	new	familiar	familiar	familiar	familiar and new	new	new
Has partici-pated/could consider senior trips	not yet	not	yes	not yet	maybe	not	yes	yes	not

Mainly because of their family backgrounds the respondents did not travel during their childhood or youth, but as they got married or started their lives on their own, all of them started to travel abroad and in Finland as well. One respondent (F64a) prefers independent self organized trips, others book most often packaged tours. Some would even book the flights and accommodation separately, if the destination is familiar. Only three of the respondents have participated special trips targeted to seniors, and all of them regarded these trips as active and interesting. Most of the others had prejudices against senior trips, which were thought to be meant only for people in poor health. Common opinion seemed to be that "senior trips" or "trips for retired" would be not an attractive marketing brand or slogan:

"Senior trips, I don't think that's a good slogan. Not very successful marketing as people do not think of themselves as seniors but identify themselves through their earlier occupation or hobbies." (M78)

Regarding use of information technology the respondents have at least a computer or a laptop, some of them have also a tablet and/or a smart phone. Only one of the respondents (F68b) does not use internet independently but needs help even in information search. Two of the male respondents (M62 and M68) do search for information, but let their spouses make bookings. Two of the respondents (M62 and F68a) would not even consider acquiring any kind of smart technology but some of them (F64a, F68b, M78) already are active users of tablets and/or smart phones.

Except one respondent (N68a) all the others use the Internet and online services regularly or even daily. The Internet was used for information search, banking, library, e-mail and online shopping. Six respondents also have a Facebook profile, but not all of them use it actively.

"(In Facebook) I mostly follow the lives of children and grandchildren, but I very seldom comment the posts or post anything about myself. Just not my thing, but of course it is nice to go and have a look when they upload pictures of their trips there." (M78)

All the respondents use the Internet at least to some extend when planning the trip. For all except F68a the Internet is the major source of information when planning the trip. All the respondents book their trips in the Internet, six independently and three with help of a family member. Those who buy their trips as packaged tours regarded them as easy and safe. These respondents were not that afraid of problems in buying the flights and accommodations from the Internet separately but much more worried about the possible problems that might occur in the destination and that without help of a travel operator they would be on their own, without a command of foreign language.

Only one respondent uses the Internet actively during the trips abroad (N64a). One respondent (N68b) has sometimes had her laptop with and she has used Skype and chat, but not always. M78 uses his smart phone or tablet mainly for searching for maps. The other respondents have not used the Internet during their trips abroad, not even at Internet cafes or hotel computers. The respondents were worried of the costs and security of the Internet usage. Instead, the respondents preferred the traditional sources of information at the destination, namely tour operators' hotel books, bro-

chures, TV, and pre-printed material brought from home. They also preferably relied on tour guides and hotel personnel.

After the trip the experiences and photos may be shared in the Facebook (F61, F64, M68, F68b) and if the tour operator sends feedback forms, they will be filled and sent (F61, F68b, F64b, M68). Sometimes more detailed information about the destination may be searched also after the trip.

Most of the respondents go to travel web pages only when they have a plan to make a trip and the topic is current. As soon as the intention to travel arouses the interest to search information will grow. The goal of browsing the websites is to purchase and for that reason information search is conducted. Purchase decision is typically not made during one browsing session but different options are considered with time and in the end the most suitable travel product will be chosen.

Some of the respondents do actively search for travel offers and last minute travel deals, even though the time for their next holiday is not decided. Some of them also dream about trips that they do not have the possibility to take at the moment (F64a, F64b, M68).

"I do have some places that I have not visited yet but have already printed the maps. Little bit of pre-planning if just my health stays good." (M78)

As soon as the trip has been booked, the tour operators' pages will be visited several times. The respondents also visit other travel websites to check up on their own reservation multiple times and search for more information on the destination and plan the details of the trip. Google and domestic travel websites (Rantapallo.fi, Napsu.fi, Ellit.fi) are often used. Information search process increases travelling spirit and this also has huge impact on what the older tourists experience at the destination:

"When you read something online and look at pictures you always get a certain image. Then when you go there the destination feels completely different than if you had not got familiar with the place at all." (M62)

Before the international trip the respondents search for information about the destination: history and current state, number of inhabitants and other factual information, culture and customs, weather, sights, activities, events, local transportation, shopping opportunities, opening times, seasonality, price level, restaurants, local specialities, recommended vaccinations and currency information. Also various pictures about the destination are very important. Besides destination information the respondents also put a lot of time and effort to search for information of the booked accommodation. Pictures are again crucial as respondents want to have clear image on both the rooms as well as general areas in the hotel. All this information is read several times over and over again and also maps are examined in great details before the trip.

Regarding travel website attributes the respondents valued simplicity, clarity, ease of use and trustworthiness. Simplicity and large headings increase clarity and distinct colours on the website make it easier to see text and photos. Also black text on white background is preferred. The front page must be designed to enable logical navigation to different themes. Updating the website frequently increases trustworthiness, as

does instructions and help to the user. A good website directs the user forward in every page and clearly states what happens when different links are clicked.

"I have now learned that the credit card numbers have to be typed without spaces, even though there are spaces on the card. And it is not said anywhere." (M78)

The respondents value websites that has a lot of information and is logically structured. If the information is plentiful and easy to find the respondents are prone to return to the website. Also within site search engines are often used by older travellers. Pop-up advertisements and websites that have too many advertisements are disruptions in the information search process, but if the advertisements are clearly placed for example to the right side of the page, they do not interfere the information search process.

Some of the respondents know English, German or Swedish besides Finnish, but everyone preferred sites in Finnish:

"I do not go to sites that are in other language as I do not understand it well enough, so I prefer Finnish websites." (F61)

Half of the interviewees prefer familiar and safe brands when using online services, other half also uses websites that are not familiar to them or generally known to search for information and even book services.

The interviewees regard themselves as sluggish internet- and travel site user. Even though they want the connections and sites to be fast they are a little bit nervous to make decisions too quickly. For example when they are booking tickets or making a reservation the reservation system deadlines that discard everything are regarded as too short. On the other hand the respondents are very patient website users. In their experience everything works out if you give them enough time and even though some of them have had bad experiences, in the end everything has worked.

The respondents did not expect or hope from the travel pages to offer any special experiences, but regarded the Internet as a tool to search information and make bookings. The Internet was regarded especially as a tool, not something you do for fun or entertainment. Still, they were open to for example receive an e-mail from the tour operator before the trip to prepare them for the trip and increase the travel spirit.

5 Discussion, conclusions, limitations and further research

This study aimed to explore senior travellers as users of online travel services. The goal was to find out how online travel services correspond to the needs of the older travellers and what are the attributes of an online travel services that they value. This kind of insights make it possible for tourism businesses to understand the older consumers and make online services that corresponds to the needs of this customer group. This study brings forth the voice of older consumers as called for by Sedgley et al. (2011) and Nielsen (2014).

According to earlier studies elderly consumers are often considered as technology anxious and reluctant to adopt new technologies (Niemelä-Nyrhinen 2007). This is partly confirmed also in this study. Even though the elders are adept users of the

Internet, they have not widely accepted smart phones and tablets into their lives. The interviewees in this study have different knowledge on the use of online travel services and even the ones with the least experience used the Internet to purchase holidays online.

This means that businesses should really focus on websites as they are often used by this economically very important segment. A travel website does not need to be custom made just for older consumers but a good website serves both older and younger consumers. If a company wants to make the information search process easier for older people they should have at least working within site search engine. Also, some website design elements that younger people take for granted need to be clearly explained to older consumers. However, older people seem to be a travel segment does not easily abandon shopping basket when they have found a holiday or parts of it that they really want.

We really have to be careful with generalizations about the older consumer market. Even this study shows that there are very different types of older consumers in terms of using online travel services. Some are adept users of websites, some require help from younger generation.

The findings of this study are in line with Moschis (2003a). Older consumers seem to appreciate convenience, functionality, quality and dependability also regarding online travel services. One of the main differences between this and earlier studies is the attitudes and use of online travel services by older travellers. Whereas earlier studies identified older consumers as users of traditional information channels such as travel agents and as insecure users of information and communication technologies, this study provides a whole different image. Experienced elderly travellers seem to prefer to use the Internet to search for information and to book holidays and are quite open to the use of technology.

As the post war generations are starting to retire and the number of old people is growing, the tourism businesses should pay attention to and get to know this heterogeneous segment. This study, as well as earlier studies show that the older travellers do not find tailor made services necessary. The reason for this can be for example that aging is seen as a negative thing in western society. Senior travellers do not think of themselves as old or aging and do not connect with those terms for example in marketing.

Companies do not necessarily need differentiated sites for older tourists pages. Website developers should adopt "design for all" philosophy. Making sites work for older tourists does not mean that they wouldn't be as good for other travellers.

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