

ATLAS PhD Seminar – September 2023

What matters now for tourism and leisure postgraduates.

Introduction

Tourism has a history of recovering quickly from challenges, and early signs indicate that recovery from the COVID-19, may be no different. People are now hungrier than ever for opportunities to travel, having been starved of the opportunity for two years. There are diverse motivations for travel ranging from relaxation, medical travel, architecture, to experience culture, business and adventure to name a few. With regard to my PhD research into the motivations of older outdoor adventurers of particular interest is adventure activity tourism and leisure time physical activity (LTPA).

There is an ageing demographic and an ever increasing need for businesses to consider this exponentially growing demographic in their strategies and marketing plans (Coughlin, 2017). This is particularly relevant in tourism with some authors recognising that older travelers are seeking increasingly active, immersive and authentic experiences (Patterson *et al.*, 2017). When one considers this in the context of LTPA and the potential impact on general health and wellbeing, it is clear that there is a socioeconomic relevance to actively promoting outdoor adventure tourism for older adventurers. Much of the literature around active ageing talks about the importance of psychological health, well-being, life satisfaction, and social networks. Outdoor adventure activity has the potential to address these domains (Boyes, 2016). However, the industry needs to embrace and engage the ageing cohort in all its diversity (Hickman and Stokes, 2017).

Why this matters in the context of tourism and leisure postgraduates

Research in the area of outdoor adventure and older people is relatively new in the tourism field (Cejudo and Adela, 2017; Vega-Vázquez *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, there is a body of work to be done in the context of 'where and what' are the preferences of older outdoor adventurers. My research is looking at the 'why' and perceived impact, adopting a qualitative and interpretivist epistemology. The evolving narrative from my work, bearing in mind that I am in the early stages of analysis, indicates that participation in outdoor adventure activity contributes to resilience, quality of life, wellbeing and promotes engagement in ongoing physical activity. Some participants discussed the direct impact their engagement has on their physical, social and mental health, with a number suggesting enhanced relationships. A number also described their desire to participate as being like an addiction, a drug, or as being their identity. Any one, or a number of these findings warrants further exploration. There are also opportunities to investigate the perception of the industry itself in the context of older outdoor adventurers.

Some early, exploratory research conducted to inform my research question, suggested that while older people themselves were interested in adventure activity, it also indicated that not all providers had fully embraced the older population as being a relevant market. The narrative and negative, preconceived notions that all too often exist around ageing and older people need to be addressed. Research demonstrating the psychological, physical, social benefits and

economic relevance of outdoor adventure activity for an ageing demographic needs to be increasingly visible.

There are also opportunities for a more quantitative or perhaps mixed methods approach to measure the impact of the suggested benefits of outdoor adventure tourism. For example, a multidisciplinary approach to exploring the benefits through sport or medical science, partnered with qualitative sociological approaches.

Conclusion

Future research must consider the relevance of the exponentially ageing market and its contribution to the tourism industry. The industry must recognise the heterogeneity of the aging demographic and facilitate this diversity. Qualitative and quantitative research approaches to understand the desires and to measure the impact will increase the relevance of the research.

Increasingly research is demonstrating that outdoor physical activity yields greater health benefits than exercising indoors. Throughout Covid, many people engaged in the outdoors, taking up new or engaging more with activities they were familiar with outdoors. With this in mind, there may be an opportunity for the tourism sector to maximise this new found interest in the outdoors.

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