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# Studying the senior citizens' motivations for senior tourism in Sri Lanka

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***Abstract***

*Population ageing is reshaping tourism demand worldwide, and Sri Lanka has the highest share of older people in South Asia, yet empirical evidence on why older Sri Lankans travel, and what holds them back, remains limited. This study explores the motivations of senior citizens in Sri Lanka to engage in tourism and the personal, social, cultural, and structural factors that enable or constrain their participation. Drawing on push–pull motivation theory, activity and continuity theories of ageing, and the hierarchical model of leisure constraints, the study adopted an interpretivist, exploratory and qualitative design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten purposively selected senior citizens aged 65 years and above, and the data were analysed thematically. Seven themes were generated. Escape and relaxation, religious and cultural fulfilment, social connection, and nature and scenic beauty emerged as the principal motivations. Family acted as both an enabler and a gatekeeper of travel, and health shaped whether and how participants travelled. Structural barriers—unreliable and inaccessible transport, a shortage of senior-friendly accommodation, limited healthcare at destinations, difficulties with online booking, and inadequate resting and safety facilities- restricted participation, whereas finances, largely secured through pensions, were not a major constraint for most participants. The study suggests that, in a family-centred South Asian setting, travel motives are filtered through family consent and health before they become travel decisions. Practical implications include senior-oriented religious and cultural travel packages, accessible transport and accommodation, healthcare support at destinations, and awareness initiatives aimed at families.*

***Keywords:*** *Accessibility, Family, Motivations, Senior tourism, Sri Lanka*

## Introduction

Globally, the older population is expanding rapidly. The United Nations (2015, p. 2) projects that by 2050 the number of people aged 60 or above will more than double from its 2015 level to nearly 2.1 billion, representing over 21% of the world's population, compared with about 10% in 2000. As a result of this demographic shift, senior tourism is expected to become a dynamic and evolving market segment (Patterson & Balderas, 2020, p. 385). Lee and King (2019) also note that population ageing is a major global trend that creates numerous opportunities to design senior-friendly tourism products and services, and older adults are now recognised as one of the most important and steadily growing tourist groups (Wang et al., 2013, p. 1021). In Asia, the population aged 60 and above stood at 549.2 million in 2017 and is projected to reach 1,273.2 million by 2050 (United Nations, 2017, p. 10). Studies from Asian contexts show that older adults in the region are becoming more educated and autonomous, with greater leisure time and disposable income for travel (Huang & Tsai, 2003), and the economic growth of countries such as China, Korea, Taiwan and Japan has further supported the expansion of the senior travel market (Patuelli & Nijkamp, 2016).

Older travellers have therefore become a distinct and increasingly important market segment, combining purchasing power with ample leisure time. To manage this market, service providers must understand the specific needs and wants of older travellers (Utama, 2014), and the global growth of the senior segment is expected to have a material impact on the future of tourism (Peterson, 2006, as cited in Utama, 2014). Tourism destinations should accordingly regard older people as a promising market for entertainment, recreation and travel-related services. Upcoming cohorts of older adults are also expected to travel much as today's seniors do, with no reduction in their motivation to travel as they move from late middle age into their early senior years.

The distinct characteristics and growing potential of the senior segment have led to increasing research on senior tourism, focusing particularly on the motivations that

influence destination choice. Nevertheless, although population ageing has become a global trend, the tourism industry still falls short in offering adequate senior-friendly products and services, and greater emphasis is needed on ensuring equal access for older adults through tourism offerings based on universal design principles (Alén et al., 2012; Wan, 2015).

Destinations can also succeed in this expanding market by building a strong and favourable image through activities designed specifically for older visitors. Because perceptions play a central role in consumers' decision-making, marketers place considerable importance on how potential and current visitors perceive a destination (Pike et al., 2018, p. 286). To support senior tourists in staying engaged and healthy, destinations need to enhance senior mobility, strengthen community and environmental support, and provide socially supportive surroundings, including dependable public transport and accessible, senior-friendly outdoor areas and built environments (Wretstrand et al., 2009; Lee & King, 2019).

Numerous studies have examined what makes destinations appealing to older travellers. However, many rely on general destination attributes and overlook factors that seniors themselves consider essential, such as accessible public transport, suitable accommodation, barrier-free sites and services, and senior-oriented tour programmes (Batra, 2009; W. Y. Chen et al., 2014). Using an expert panel in Taiwan, Lee and King (2019) applied the analytic hierarchy process to identify the determinants of an attractive senior-friendly destination. Their results indicated that accessibility was the most influential factor, followed by amenities and supporting services, with tourism resources ranked least important; the most crucial elements related to barrier-free transport, accommodation and facilities (Lee & King, 2019, p. 71).

Scholars of senior travel in Asia have called for further work to understand the concerns and special requirements of older travellers (Eddy-U et al., 2020), which highlights the need to examine the destination attributes that seniors prefer. As older adults gain more leisure time and disposable income, their participation in tourism

continues to increase (Patterson & Balderas, 2020), creating considerable opportunities for the industry. Despite this growth, the tourism industry does not consistently address the needs of senior travellers; for instance, many older tourists prefer to travel with peers of a similar age and favour health-related tourism or itineraries that demand less physical effort (Ceylon Digest, 2020).

In Sri Lanka, the share of the population aged over 65 is expected to rise rapidly, from 9.4% in 2015 to 21% by 2045 and 35.6% by 2100 (Asian Development Bank, 2019). The country's population, estimated at 21.2 million in 2018, is projected to peak at around 22.2 million by 2038 before beginning to contract (Asian Development Bank, 2019), while one in every four Sri Lankans is expected to be an elderly person by 2041 (World Bank, 2012). It has been argued that an ageing population with rising incomes could drive exponential growth in senior or 'silver' tourism in Sri Lanka (Ceylon Digest, 2020). Implementing suitable strategies to promote domestic senior tourism could therefore help make the country's tourism sector more resilient while supporting a healthy and active life for its older population.

**Problem statement and research gap**

Although Sri Lanka's ageing is well documented, its implications for tourism have been discussed mainly in policy commentary and grey literature rather than in peer-reviewed empirical research. Existing studies of senior travel motivation are concentrated in Western and East Asian settings (Otoo & Kim, 2020, p. 393), where older adults are often portrayed as autonomous decision-makers. Sri Lankan seniors, by contrast, typically live within extended family structures, and their travel is closely bound up with religious practice. It is therefore unclear whether motivations and constraints identified elsewhere apply in this context, or how family, health and culture shape the translation of travel motives into actual trips. Without such evidence, tourism operators and policymakers design products for older travellers on assumptions rather than on the voices of seniors themselves. This study addresses that gap by examining, from the perspective of senior citizens, what motivates them to travel and what enables or prevents them from doing so.

**The research objectives are as follows;**

The main objective of the study is to explore the motivations of senior citizens in Sri Lanka to engage in tourism, and the factors that enable or constrain their participation.

The specific objectives are:

1. To identify the key motivations that encourage senior citizens in Sri Lanka to travel.

2. To examine how personal, social and cultural factors, including health, financial stability and family influence, shape senior citizens' travel preferences and decisions.

3. To identify the constraints faced by senior travellers in Sri Lanka and derive implications for senior-friendly tourism products and services.

**The research questions of the study are as follows;**

RQ1. What motivates senior citizens in Sri Lanka to engage in tourism?

RQ2. How do personal, social and cultural factors, including health, financial stability and family influence, shape their travel preferences and decisions?

RQ3. What constraints do senior travellers face in Sri Lanka, and how can tourism products and services be adapted to address them?

**Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

**Defining the senior tourist**

The tourism literature defines the "senior tourist" broadly, with lower age thresholds ranging from 50 and 55 to 60 years, and some studies examining travellers above 80 (Chen & Wu, 2009; Hughes & Deutsch, 2010; Pezeshki et al., 2019). Chen and Shoemaker (2014, p. 58) argue that the commonly used "young senior" category of 55 to 60 years should no longer be classified as senior, as cohorts entering later life now travel much as they did in middle age. Following this argument and reflecting the official retirement age in the Sri Lankan public sector, the present study focuses on individuals aged 65 years and above.

## Tourist motivation: push and pull factors

Push–pull theory remains the most widely used framework for explaining why people travel. Push factors are internal, socio-psychological needs that create a desire to travel, while pull factors are destination attributes that shape where that desire is directed (Dann, 1977; Crompton, 1979). Crompton (1979) identified push motives such as escape from a perceived mundane environment, relaxation, prestige, enhancement of kinship relationships and facilitation of social interaction. Iso-Ahola (1982) similarly framed tourism motivation as a balance between escaping routine environments and seeking intrinsic rewards.

Studies of older travellers broadly confirm these motives while showing that they are shaped by later-life circumstances. In their study of seniors in Beijing and Shanghai, Hsu et al. (2007, p. 1262) proposed a model in which internal desires such as improving well-being, escaping routine, socialising and seeking knowledge are conditioned by external factors including personal finances, time and health. A review of senior travel motivation research published between 1980 and 2017 found that rest and relaxation, novelty and knowledge-seeking, socialisation and escape recur most frequently but noted that the field remains dominated by quantitative studies from a limited set of countries (Otoo & Kim, 2020). Segmentation studies further show that senior tourists are not homogeneous and differ in motivation according to age, health and travel experience (Alén et al., 2017; Kim & Kim, 2020).

## Ageing theories and travel

Two theories of ageing help explain why travel matters in later life. Activity theory holds that older people who remain socially and physically active maintain higher life satisfaction (Havighurst, 1961); from this perspective, travel offers a way to substitute for roles lost at retirement and to sustain social participation. Continuity theory proposes that older adults seek to preserve established patterns of behaviour, relationships and values as they adapt to ageing (Atchley, 1989). Travel that continues lifelong practices, such as pilgrimage or visits to familiar places, is consistent with this view. Previous studies also suggest that restful holidays improve the mental and

physical health of older adults by reducing activity levels and increasing relaxation (Anantamongkolkul et al., 2017).

### Constraints on senior travel

Motivation alone does not produce travel. The hierarchical model of leisure constraints distinguishes intrapersonal constraints such as health and perceived ability, interpersonal constraints such as the absence of companions or the attitudes of others and structural constraints such as cost, transport and facilities, which are negotiated in sequence (Crawford et al., 1991, p. 309). For seniors, research highlights health, finances and the availability of travel companions as key predictors of travel propensity (Chen & Wu, 2009), alongside structural barriers such as inaccessible public transport and accommodation (Wretstrand et al., 2009; Alén et al., 2012). Destinations seeking to attract older visitors therefore need dependable public transport, accessible built environments and socially supportive surroundings.

### Conceptual framework

Drawing these strands together, this study views senior travel as the outcome of push motives and pull attributes of destinations, which are filtered through intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural constraints. In a family-centred society such as Sri Lanka, the interpersonal level particularly the views of adult children are expected to play a stronger role than in the predominantly Western settings in which these frameworks were developed. The framework was used as a sensitising lens rather than a set of hypotheses, consistent with the inductive design described below.

## Methodology

A research design is a systematic framework, or blueprint, that guides the researcher throughout the research process. Punch (1998) notes that research design provides the foundation for any research project, covering the research philosophy, approach, strategy, choice of methods, time horizon, and the techniques and procedures used for data collection and analysis. Each of these elements is outlined below.

The study adopted an interpretivist philosophy, as it aimed to understand and interpret the meanings behind human behaviour. Interpretivism assumes that reality can be viewed in multiple ways and stresses the importance of understanding how individuals construct their own realities within their social environments (Oyegoke, 2011). The study is exploratory because existing knowledge of the research problem is limited and because the motivations affecting senior citizens' travel decisions differ substantially across contexts.

An inductive approach was adopted: rather than testing existing theories, the study developed insights from patterns emerging from the data, with the conceptual framework serving as a sensitising lens. This enabled an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives. A qualitative method was employed, as qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the meaning and experience dimensions of people's lives and social worlds (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 717).

The study relied primarily on primary data, supplemented by secondary sources. Primary data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, which allowed the selection of individuals relevant to the research objectives, and ten senior citizens aged 65 years and above were interviewed.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed from the research objectives and questions. Before each interview, participants were informed of the purpose of the study and assured that confidentiality would be maintained. Appointments were scheduled with each participant, and the interviews were conducted individually. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Seven themes were generated: themes 1 to 4 address RQ1, themes 5 and 6 address RQ2, and theme 7 addresses RQ3 (Table 1).

| Theme | Sub-themes | RQ |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Escape and relaxation | Break from daily routine; rest of body and mind; peaceful destinations | RQ1 |
| 2. Religious and cultural fulfilment | Pilgrimage and temple visits; heritage sites; continuity of lifelong practice | RQ1 |
| 3. Social connection | Travel with peers; travel with family; meeting new people | RQ1 |
| 4. Nature and scenic beauty | Natural settings; scenic landscapes as destination pull | RQ1 |
| 5. Family and finances as enablers and gatekeepers | Consent of adult children; family funding and organisation; pension-based financial security | RQ2 |
| 6. Health as a deciding condition | Access to healthcare at destinations; preference for low physical strain | RQ2 |
| 7. Structural barriers to participation | Unreliable and inaccessible transport; lack of senior-friendly accommodation; limited healthcare; digital booking difficulties; inadequate resting and safety areas | RQ3 |

***Table 1:*** *Themes, sub-themes and corresponding research questions*

*Source: Authors' analysis of interview data.*

## Findings

Seven themes were generated from the interview data (Table 1). The first four relate to participants' motivations to travel (RQ1), the next two to the personal, social and cultural factors shaping their travel decisions (RQ2), and the last to the constraints they face (RQ3). Participants' suggestions for developing senior-friendly tourism, which address the second part of RQ3, are reported at the end of this section.

### *Theme 1: Escape and relaxation*

Participants described travel as a break from the routine of everyday life and as a means of resting the body and mind. Relaxation was the motive most closely associated with the small group of participants who preferred to travel alone; these participants sought quiet and peaceful destinations.

### *Theme 2: Religious and cultural fulfilment*

Religious and cultural motives were the most widely shared. The majority of participants preferred to experience religious and cultural heritage, including pilgrimages, temple visits, and visits to heritage sites.

### *Theme 3: Social connection*

Socialisation and meeting new people were important motivations. The majority of participants preferred to travel with peer groups of a similar age or with their families, and group-based travel was generally preferred to travelling alone.

### *Theme 4: Nature and scenic beauty*

Natural settings and scenic beauty also motivated travel and shaped participants' choice of destinations, often in combination with the motives of relaxation and religious and cultural fulfilment.

### *Theme 5: Family and finances as enablers and gatekeepers*

Family emerged as the most influential personal factor in travel decisions. Some participants relied on their children for both consent and funding, and the decisions

of most participants depended on their families; many said they would hesitate to travel if their families discouraged them, mainly because of concerns about health and safety. Finances, by contrast, were not a significant constraint for most participants, who had a sound economic background and relied on their pensions, giving them the means to travel.

***Theme 6: Health as a deciding condition***

Health conditions significantly affected travel decisions. Participants preferred destinations with access to healthcare and trips involving minimal physical strain, such as guided tours and accessible accommodation, and tended to avoid destinations requiring long walks or physically demanding activities.

***Theme 7: Structural barriers to participation***

Participants identified several structural barriers. Transport was described as unreliable and lacking proper accessibility features, and senior-friendly accommodation was scarce. The majority of participants regarded limited access to healthcare at tourist destinations as a major challenge. Booking was difficult because many platforms rely on new technology and do not consider the needs of older users, and participants also reported inadequate resting areas and safety provisions at some locations.

***Participants' suggestions for senior-friendly tourism***

Participants proposed senior-friendly travel packages with discounts, medical assistance and planned tours; better public transport and specialised tour vehicles for older travellers; accommodation with improved accessibility, such as ramps, lifts and easy access to rooms; training for travel agents and tour guides in assisting older travellers; and resting areas and medical support at popular destinations.

## Discussion

This study set out to understand what motivates senior citizens in Sri Lanka to travel and what shapes their ability to do so. This section interprets the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and previous research.

### *Motivations: familiar push factors, culturally specific expression*

The prominence of escape and relaxation (Theme 1) is consistent with the classic push motives identified by Crompton (1979) and Iso-Ahola (1982), and with the recurring importance of rest in senior travel research (Otoo & Kim, 2020). It also supports evidence that restful holidays contribute to older adults' well-being (Anantamongkolkul et al., 2017). The dominance of religious and cultural motives (Theme 2), however, gives these findings a distinctively Sri Lankan character. Pilgrimage and temple visits represent a continuation of established religious practice, which is consistent with continuity theory (Atchley, 1989): travel in later life sustains existing identities rather than introducing new ones. Senior travel motivation research has been dominated by a limited set of markets, notably the United States, Australia and China (Otoo & Kim, 2020, p. 393), suggesting that frameworks developed in those settings may underestimate the role of spirituality in senior travel in South Asia.

The importance of social connection (Theme 3) aligns with activity theory (Havighurst, 1961), as group travel offers seniors a way to maintain social participation after retirement, and with findings that socialising is a key internal desire among older travellers in China (Hsu et al., 2007, p. 1262). The preference for travelling with peers also mirrors observations that many older tourists favour companions of a similar age and less physically demanding itineraries (Ceylon Digest, 2020). The smaller group of participants who travelled alone for relaxation indicates that, as segmentation studies suggest, senior tourists are not a homogeneous market (Alén et al., 2017).

### *Family as a filter between motivation and travel*

The most theoretically significant finding is the role of family (Theme 5). In the hierarchical model of leisure constraints, interpersonal constraints are one level among several that individuals negotiate in sequence (Crawford et al., 1991, p. 309). In this study, however, adult children functioned as gatekeepers whose consent often determined whether a motive became a trip at all, while also acting as enablers who funded travel. This dual role differs from much of the literature, in which older travellers are treated as independent decision-makers whose choices are explained mainly by their own motives and resources (Huang & Tsai, 2003; Chen & Wu, 2009). The findings therefore suggest that, in family-centred settings, push–pull and constraints frameworks should treat family as a mediating filter between motivation and behaviour rather than simply as one constraint among others.

### *Health and structural constraints*

Health (Theme 6) operated as an intrapersonal condition that shaped not only whether participants travelled but also the type of trip they chose, consistent with the role of health in predicting seniors' travel propensity (Chen & Wu, 2009) and with the place of health among the external conditions in Hsu et al.'s (2007, p. 1262) model of senior tourism motivation. Health concerns also fed into family gatekeeping, as families' worries about safety were often grounded in their parents' health. The structural barriers in Theme 7 closely mirror Lee and King's (2019, p. 71) conclusion that barrier-free transport, accommodation and facilities are the most crucial attributes of a senior-friendly destination. The difficulties participants reported with online booking add a digital dimension to structural constraints that is likely to grow as tourism services move online. Unlike studies in which finances limit seniors' travel (Chen & Wu, 2009), finances were not a significant constraint for most participants. This may reflect the pension-holding profile of the sample and should not be generalised to less financially secure seniors.

### *Practical implications*

For the tourism industry, the findings point to senior-oriented religious, cultural and wellness packages, including discounted group rates, all-inclusive tours and guided tours with low physical demands. Public and private transport operators should introduce senior-friendly features such as ramps, suitable seating and easy boarding, and tourist sites should provide ramps, lifts, resting areas and designated senior-friendly pathways. Accommodation providers should offer wheelchair access, grab bars and access to healthcare assistance. Medical support, including first-aid centres and emergency healthcare services, should be available at key destinations, and wellness retreats, Ayurveda treatments and health monitoring could be integrated into senior packages. Booking services should provide assisted or offline options. Because family acts as a gatekeeper, awareness campaigns should present senior tourism to families as a health-enhancing and spiritually enriching activity, and intergenerational travel programmes could turn family members from barriers into companions.

## Conclusion

This study shows that senior citizens in Sri Lanka are motivated to travel by escape and relaxation, religious and cultural fulfilment, social connection and nature, but that whether these motives lead to travel depends on family consent, health and the accessibility of tourism infrastructure. Theoretically, the study extends push–pull and leisure constraints frameworks to a family-centred South Asian context by showing that family operates as a mediating filter between motivation and travel behaviour, and that religious continuity is a central motive in later-life travel. Practically, it indicates that Sri Lanka's rapidly ageing population represents an opportunity for the domestic tourism sector, provided that government, industry and families work together to make travel accessible, safe and supported. Developing a senior-friendly tourism ecosystem could support the well-being of older citizens, strengthen the resilience of domestic tourism and, in time, attract international senior travellers.

### *Limitations and future research*

As a qualitative study with ten participants, the findings are not statistically generalisable, and most participants were financially secure pensioners. Future

research could test the family-mediated view proposed here with larger and more diverse samples; compare senior tourism across countries to identify cultural differences, policy approaches and practices that could be adapted to Sri Lanka; examine how older adults use digital technology in planning travel and the barriers they encounter; investigate the effects of travel on seniors' mental and social well-being and quality of life; explore the influence of different generations within families on senior travel; and assess the economic contribution of senior tourism to inform national tourism policy.

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