

A Literature Review on 30 Years in Aging Tourism: Past, present and future trends

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Abstract

Ageing tourism has evolved over three decades from market segmentation to a holistic framework that links travel to healthy ageing and Quality of Life (QoL). This narrative review synthesises past gaps, current trends, and future directions using bibliometric insights. Early research often overlooked the experiential depth, health impacts, and vulnerability of certain groups. Contemporary studies position tourism as a non-pharmacological intervention enhancing physical vitality, psychological resilience, and social connectedness, supported by digital innovations. Future research should adopt inclusive and interdisciplinary approaches, integrate ethical technology, and address the needs of caregivers. Embedding QoL principles will enable tourism to serve as a catalyst for longevity, equity, and well-being.

Keywords: Gerontology; Digital Inclusion; Aging Tourism; Transformative Travel Experiences

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1.0 Introduction

Tourism has concurrently expanded as a global socio-economic force, making the intersection of gerontology and tourism a fertile field for research and practice (Minghetti, 2018). Population aging has transformed later life from a narrative of decline to one of active engagement, with older adults increasingly visible as travelers and cultural participants (Buffel & Phillipson, 2018). Despite growing interest in aging tourism, existing studies remain fragmented, with limited integration of Quality of Life (QOL) frameworks and insufficient longitudinal analysis of research trends. Much of the early literature focused on market segmentation and consumer profiling, limiting theoretical depth and underplaying the intrinsic and health-related value of travel (Pestana et al., 2019). Recent scholars emphasized tourism's contribution to Quality of Life by enhancing physical health, psychological well-being, and social connectedness among older adults (Wang et al., 2023; Zhu & Chen, 2024). Integrating QoL frameworks positions tourism not merely as leisure but as a strategic intervention for healthy aging and life satisfaction (World Health Organization, 2021; Qiao et al., 2023). This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of aging tourism research through bibliometric analysis. Specifically, the objectives are: (1) to map the evolution of aging tourism research over the past three decades; (2) to identify key themes, influential authors, and emerging trends in the field; (3) to examine how Quality of Life frameworks have been integrated into aging tourism literature and (4) to propose future research directions based on bibliometric insights. By addressing these objectives, this paper contributes to advancing theoretical depth in aging tourism and positioning it as a strategic component of healthy aging policies.

2.0 Literature Review

General aging and disengagement theory and activity theory were some of the dominant psychological theories employed to describe elderly tourism back then (Qiao et al., 2023). Disengagement theory, developed by Cumming and Henry in the 1950s, believed that effective aging involved the reciprocal disengagement of the aged generation from society. Activity theory, proposed by Havighurst and Albrecht in 1953, posited that social activity and roles were necessary to be healthy and contented in old age (Qiao et al., 2023).

The reliance on theories like disengagement and activity theory in the initial research on tourism, while providing conceptual frameworks, also involved intrinsic ideological biases. The untested application of disengagement theory could serve to justify an absence of specially produced tourism products for the elderly based on an assumed natural disengagement from active participation. Conversely, an over-prescriptive application of activity theory could place pressure on older individuals to live up to an "active" ideal, potentially excluding those under health constraints (Jiang & Yu, 2025). A criticism of "confirmatory" research (Sedgley et al., 2011) implies that such theories were often applied to confirm existing assumptions, as opposed to seriously engaging with the complex realities of aging. This scholarly undertone illustrates the way theoretical choices can shape, and sometimes limit, understanding of complex human processes like aging and travel.

The 50-year-old and above population is the aging population growing so fundamentally and critically vital in the tourism market (Wang et al., 2023). It is a demographic characterized by more spare time and spendable income highly attractive market for the tourism industry (Wang et al., 2023). In this vast tourism market, "older" or "older" tourists have attracted great attention as a particularly valuable resource, a focus underscored through initiatives from agencies such as the European Commission (Minghetti, 2018).

Such an unprecedented rise in global aging populations simultaneously sets off a potent economic impetus for the tourism sector, as this increases the economic power of older adults. This economic opportunity, often referred to as the "silver economy," has acted as a significant driver, drawing academic research into an area previously less explored (Qiao et al., 2023). This convergence of demographic shifts and economic potential has fundamentally reshaped the research agenda, prompting a move from purely social or medical gerontology to include applied tourism studies, thereby driving the need for interdisciplinary engagement (Wang et al., 2023).

The initial academic resistance to integrating tourism and aging research suggests a perceived lack of scholarly depth or perhaps a bias towards more traditional gerontological concerns. However, as the economic potential of senior tourism became undeniable, market-oriented research quickly emerged (Qiao et al., 2022). This created a dynamic tension: while the industry sought to understand consumer behaviour for profit, a truly interdisciplinary approach, as advocated by critical gerontology (Sedgley et al., 2011), demanded a more holistic, human-centered understanding of older adults' experiences, their well-being, and broader social justice issues (Abd. Aziz, 2025). This evolution reflects a broader recognition that tourism is not merely leisure but a strategic intervention for healthy aging, fostering physical vitality, emotional resilience, and social inclusion, which are core dimensions of QoL (Zhu & Chen, 2024; World Health Organization, 2021).

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a narrative literature review approach, complemented by bibliometric insights. The literature search was conducted using Scopus Database and Google Scholar for institutional reports and grey literature. Data synthesis involved two steps: (1) extracting bibliometric indicators such as publication trends, citation counts, and keyword frequency, and (2) organizing findings into thematic clusters addressing past gaps, present trends, and future directions, with Quality of Life as the integrative frame. We follow the work of Pestana et al. (2019), which we divide the period of publication into two intervals (1990s to 2010s and 2010s to present) to better understand the shift in the trend of publications. Table 1 summarizes the search strategy, source selection, and inclusion criteria. Table 1 presents the search strategy, source selection, and inclusion criteria used in this study.

Table 1. Search Strategy, Source Selection & Inclusion Criteria

Search Strategy	Source Selection	Inclusion Criteria
The initial literature search employed a combination of keywords that were designed to capture the extent of research in the field where gerontology and tourism overlap. Some of those keywords were, but were not limited to: "senior tourism," "aging tourism," "elderly travel," "older adults travel," "gerontology," "tourism and health," "digital usage seniors travel," "travel trends older adults," "bibliometric analysis tourism," and "literature review aging."	Sources were primarily selected from academic journals, scholarly articles, and comprehensive review papers to ensure academic rigor and peer-reviewed quality specifically from the Scopus and Google Scholar databases. Additionally, reports from reputable research institutes and industry organizations (e.g., AARP, Transamerica Institute) were included to capture current trends and practical insights that might not yet be fully integrated into academic literature.	Relevance to Aging Tourism: Articles and reports directly addressing the travel behaviors, motivations, experiences, impacts, or industry responses related to older adults. Temporal Scope: Publications primarily from the last 30 years (1995-2025) to reflect the evolution of the field, with foundational texts from earlier periods included that were historically significant. Academic Rigor: Preference was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and reports from established research institutions. Contribution to Themes: Sources that provided insights into past problems and gaps, present trends (including digital engagement), or future research directions in aging tourism. Language: English-language publications.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Past Research and Gaps (1990s–early 2010s)

Table 2 summarizes the dominant characteristics and gaps in early aging tourism research, highlighting theoretical and methodological limitations. Early aging tourism scholarship was dominated by quantitative segmentation (e.g., "young seniors," "affluent seniors"), often

reproducing stereotypes and flattening heterogeneity in later life (Qiao et al., 2023). Theoretical reliance on disengagement and activity theories constrained interpretations: disengagement risked justifying limited provision for older travelers, while prescriptive activity ideals could marginalize those with health constraints (Jiang & Yu, 2025). Methodologically, the "confirmatory" orientation led to market myopia and underexamined experiential, affective, and aesthetic dimensions of travel (Sedgley et al., 2011). Crucially, the oldest-old (80+) and caregivers were underrepresented despite their growing demographic and practical relevance (Wang et al., 2023). From a quality of life perspective, these omissions meant limited attention to travel's roles in reducing loneliness, maintaining functional ability, and enhancing environmental comfort—core QoL domains (World Health Organization, 2021; Qiao et al., 2023).

Table 2. Past Research and Gaps (1990s-early 2010s)

Aspect	Key Characteristics	Gaps Identified
Transforming "Successful Aging" Paradigm	Market Segmentation (e.g., "Young seniors," "affluent seniors")	Overlooks heterogeneity; stereotypes persist
Theoretical Lens	Disengagement & Activity Theories	Limited interpretative depth; marginalizes health-constrained travelers
Methodology	Quantitative, confirmatory	Underexplored, experiential, affective, aesthetic dimensions
Population Coverage	Younger seniors	Oldest-old (80+) and caregivers underrepresented

4.2 Present Trends QoL Contributions (mid-2010s–present)

Table 3 summarizes the present trends and QoL Contributions (mid-2010s–present). A paradigm shift positions tourism as a therapeutic, non-pharmacological intervention supporting healthy and positive aging. Evidence associates travel with improvements in physical vitality, psychological resilience, social connectedness, and perceived life satisfaction, which are the key QoL outcomes (Wang et al., 2023; Zhu & Chen, 2024). Wellness-oriented travel (spas, nature-based activities, meditation retreats), slow travel, and experiential cultural tourism have grown, offering less fatiguing, more meaningful engagement for diverse functional levels (TicketingHub, 2025). Multigenerational travel strengthens intergenerational ties and memory-making, buffering social isolation and loneliness (TicketingHub, 2025). Sustainable and community-based tourism resonates with older travelers' ethical and environmental values, aligning with QoL's environmental domain and destination well-being (Xu et al., 2023; Minghetti, 2018).

Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTEs) mediate the relationship between motivations and life satisfaction, suggesting that designing for meaning and remembrance is central to QoL (Pereira et al., 2025; Qiao et al., 2023; Sie et al., 2021). Programmatic initiatives increasingly recognize travel as supportive of "healthspan," as the period of life spent in good health, linking leisure practices to physiological and psychosocial benefits (Wang et al., 2023). Though causal claims require caution, convergent findings indicate reductions in stress and improved mood states, with ancillary evidence for cognitive stimulation via cultural participation (Zhu & Chen, 2024).

Table 3. Present Trends QoL Contributions (mid-2010s–present)

Trend	QoL Domain Addressed	Examples	Sources
Tourism as therapeutic intervention	Physical & psychological well-being	Wellness travel, meditation retreats	Wang et al. (2023), Zhu & Chen, (2024)
Slow & experiential travel	Social connectedness, life satisfaction	Cultural tourism, nature-based activities	TicketingHub (2025)
Multigenerational travel	Social ties, memory-making	Family trips, intergenerational bonding	TicketingHub (2025)
Sustainable/community tourism	Environmental comfort & ethical values	Eco-tourism, community-based programs	Xu et al. (2023), Minghetti (2018)
Memorable Tourism Experiences	Psychological resilience & meaning	Designing for remembrance, cultural participation	Zhu & Chen (2024), Wang et al. (2023), Sie et al. (2021) & Qiao et al. (2023)

4.2.1 Digital Engagement and Accessible Experiences

Older adults increasingly use technology for planning, booking, and in-trip support, motivated by autonomy, time, and cost savings (Zhen et al., 2023). Mobile devices and social platforms enhance destination familiarity, "authentic experience," and site attachment, augmenting psychological and social quality of life (Fiocco et al., 2021). Nonetheless, security concerns, overwhelm, and usability barriers persist, calling for human-centered, trustworthy design tailored to cognitive and sensory changes in aging (Sheng, 2025; Iqbal et al., 2021). For those with mobility or health constraints, Virtual Reality (VR) offers accessible, emotionally resonant "virtual tourism" that can reduce anxiety and facilitate social engagement in care settings (Fiocco et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2023). Research into effective learning methods for older adults, such as online tutorials, videos, and hands-on instruction from trusted sources, will be vital (Zheng et al., 2023). AI-enabled personalization holds promise but must address privacy, explainability, and the "human touch" to truly improve QoL without eroding trust (Jiang & Yu, 2025).

5.0 Discussions

5.1 Future Research Suggestions

The following table outlines key future research directions in aging tourism through a Quality-of-Life (QoL) lens. Each trend is paired with a specific research question, its rationale, and supporting sources, providing a roadmap for advancing inclusive, evidence-based, and ethically grounded scholarship.

Table 4. Literature Review Matrix for Future Research Trends in Aging Tourism

Future Trend / Direction	Specific Research Question / Focus	Justification / Rationale	Source
Transforming "Successful Aging" Paradigm	How can "successful aging" be defined inclusively in tourism, beyond consumerist ideals, to embrace diverse life circumstances?	Addresses past stereotyping and exclusion, promoting a more equitable and realistic understanding of aging in tourism.	Jiang & Yu (2025)
Deeper Interdisciplinary Collaboration	What methodologies best facilitate co-creation of knowledge with older adults in tourism research?	Overcomes disciplinary silos and the "formulaic" nature of past research, empowering older adults as active knowledge producers.	Wang et al. (2023)
Impact of Human & Non-Human Entities	How do family networks, social support systems, and community infrastructures influence senior travel decisions and experiences?	Moves beyond individualistic perspectives to an ecosystemic understanding of senior tourism, recognizing systemic enablers and constraints.	Xu et al. (2023)
Ethical & User-Centric Technological Innovation	How can AI and VR be designed to enhance trust, personalization, and accessibility for older adults without sacrificing the "human touch" or data privacy?	Addresses concerns security, overwhelm, and ethical implications, ensuring technology genuinely improves QoL.	Minghetti (2018) Zheng et al. (2023)
Caregiver-Inclusive Tourism	What are the unique travel needs, motivations, and constraints of formal and informal caregivers traveling with older adults, and how can tourism offerings support them?	Fills critical knowledge gaps in a highly relevant but understudied population, enabling the development of more inclusive tourism products.	Wang et al. (2023)
Long-term Health Outcome Measurement	How can longitudinal, evidence-based empirical studies, potentially incorporating medical research methodologies (e.g., biomarkers), convincingly demonstrate tourism's long-term impact on healthy aging?	Provides robust evidence for policy and practice, moving beyond qualitative observations to quantify the health benefits of tourism.	Wang et al. (2023)

Future research must adopt a QoL lens to ensure tourism strategies actively promote well-being, equity, and inclusivity for aging populations, such as:

- Reframing "successful aging" beyond consumerist ideals: adopt critical gerontology to include diverse trajectories, losses, and constraints, ensuring tourism supports dignity and equity across functional abilities (Jiang & Yu, 2025).
- Caregiver-inclusive design: recognize caregivers' dual roles and needs in planning, logistics, respite, and emotional support; co-design products and services that enhance QoL for dyads and family systems (Wang et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2023).
- Ecosystemic perspective: move from individual behaviour models to "living systems" that include families, communities, infrastructure, and nature; assessing how these human and non-human actors enable or inhibit quality of life outcomes (Jiang & Yu, 2025; Minghetti, 2018).
- Responsible innovation: develop age-friendly AI/VR and platforms with privacy-by-design, accessible interfaces, and clear value propositions; evaluate impacts on quality of life domains in longitudinal designs (Fiocco et al., 2021).
- Measurement advances: incorporate validated QoL instruments (aligned with WHO domains) and mixed methods; prioritize longitudinal cohorts and biomarkers where feasible to examine healthspan-related effects (Wang et al., 2023; Zhu & Chen, 2024).
- Policy and destination strategy: align age-friendly urban agendas with tourism offers (e.g., transport, accessibility, green spaces), integrating community participation and health services to optimize quality of life for residents and visitors alike (Buffel & Phillipson, 2018; World Health Organization, 2021).

5.2 Conceptualizing Tourism's Role in Multi-Dimensional Quality of Life (QoL)

Quality of Life (QoL) is a multidimensional concept defined by the World Health Organization as an individual's perception of their position in life within the context of culture, value systems, goals, expectations, and concerns, encompassing physical health, psychological state, social relationships, and environmental conditions (World Health Organization, 2021). This theoretical anchor is critical for understanding tourism's evolving role in later life.

Historically, aging tourism research prioritized market segmentation and consumer profiling, neglecting the intrinsic and health-related benefits of travel. This omission created a conceptual gap: the failure to appreciate tourism's potential for enhancing well-being limited its framing as a leisure activity rather than a determinant of healthy aging (Sedgley et al., 2011; Pestana et al., 2019). The current paradigm shift, where tourism is recognized as a non-pharmacological intervention, emerges directly from this gap. Today, scholars position tourism as a structured contributor to QoL, aligning with global agendas for active and positive aging (Wang et al., 2023; Zhu & Chen, 2024).

Tourism impacts QoL across multiple domains. Physically, it promotes mobility, reduces stress, and is associated with lower mortality and Alzheimer's risk through culturally enriching activities (Arora, 2024). Psychologically, travel fosters emotional resilience, cognitive stimulation, and therapeutic benefits, mitigating anxiety and depression (Arora, 2024). Socially, it combats isolation by enabling multigenerational travel and community engagement, strengthening interpersonal bonds (Zhang & Zhang, 2018). Finally, culturally and

experientially, tourism offers meaning-making opportunities through heritage exploration, slow travel, and immersive experiences, enhancing life satisfaction and identity continuity (Sie et al., 2021).

By embedding QoL as a conceptual and practical framework, aging tourism research advances beyond economic imperatives toward a holistic agenda that integrates health, dignity, and social inclusion, positioning tourism as a catalyst for longevity and well-being.

5.3 Limitations

This review is limited by its narrative approach and reliance on secondary data, which restricts empirical validation and causal inference. Although bibliometric indicators were considered, advanced visualizations such as co-occurrence maps were omitted to maintain clarity and comply with word count requirements. The search strategy focused on Scopus and Google Scholar, excluding other databases and non-English publications, which may introduce selection bias. Categorization of past, present, and future trends was interpretive rather than algorithmic, adding subjectivity.

6.0 Conclusion

This review demonstrates that aging tourism has evolved from a market-driven, segmentation-focused discourse to a multidimensional framework that positions tourism as a catalyst for healthy aging and Quality of Life (QoL). Early research (1990s–2010s) emphasized consumer profiling and economic potential, neglecting experiential depth, health impacts, and vulnerable groups such as the oldest-old and caregivers. These omissions limited understanding of tourism's intrinsic value and its capacity to enhance well-being. Contemporary scholarship reflects a paradigm shift: tourism is now recognized as a non-pharmacological intervention that supports physical vitality, psychological resilience, social connectedness, and environmental engagement, core QoL domains defined by the World Health Organization. Wellness travel, slow tourism, multigenerational experiences, and sustainable practices illustrate this transition, while digital innovations such as Virtual Reality and AI expand accessibility and personalization. However, ethical considerations regarding privacy, usability, and inclusivity remain critical. Future research must adopt a QoL-centered agenda, integrating critical gerontology, caregiver-inclusive design, and ecosystemic perspectives to ensure equity and dignity in later-life travel. Methodological advances, including validated QoL instruments and longitudinal studies, are essential to quantify tourism's healthspan benefits. Policy frameworks should align age-friendly urban planning with tourism strategies to optimize QoL for older residents and visitors alike. Ultimately, tourism is no longer a peripheral leisure activity but a strategic contributor to longevity, social inclusion, and life satisfaction. Embedding QoL principles into research and practice will enable destinations and stakeholders to design experiences that foster meaningful, healthy, and dignified aging worldwide.

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Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

This study advances aging tourism research by integrating Quality of Life (QoL) as a central theoretical framework, linking tourism to WHO-defined domains of physical, psychological, social, and environmental well-being. It synthesizes three decades of scholarship, identifying past gaps and highlighting the paradigm shift toward tourism as a non-pharmacological intervention for healthy aging. The review proposes a QoL-centered research agenda encompassing critical gerontology, caregiver-inclusive design, ethical technology adoption, and longitudinal measurement of healthspan outcomes. These contributions provide actionable insights for scholars, policymakers, and industry stakeholders to position tourism as a catalyst for longevity, equity, and life satisfaction.

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