

Visual and Textual Stereotypes of Aging in Taiwanese Silver Tourism Marketing Communication

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Abstract

Since 2024, Taiwanese travel agencies have increasingly promoted travel packages tailored for older tourists, with websites featuring abundant visual and textual marketing messages aimed at this growing segment of the silver economy. While such campaigns highlight the economic importance of older consumers, existing literature cautions that social ageism may be subtly embedded in silver marketing, reinforcing narrow and stereotypical views of aging. This study investigated how such stereotypes are reproduced in Taiwanese silver tourism websites and examined how older adults themselves (aged 50 and above) perceive the messages. Using survey data, the analysis found that participants expressed low appreciation for textual content that foregrounded age or suggested physical decline as a defining feature of older adulthood. Similarly, visual portrayals of older people in animated form or aligned with images of severe impairment were evaluated negatively. By contrast, depictions of coupledness and active companionship were viewed as more respectful and appropriate. These findings suggest that older consumers in Taiwan prefer marketing communication that avoids overt age salience and resists deficit-oriented portrayals. Instead, they favor representations that reflect vitality, social connection, and autonomy. The study contributes to ongoing discussions of ageism in marketing communication by demonstrating how promotional messages may either reinforce or challenge stereotypes of later life. It also offers practical implications for the development of more inclusive, appealing, and socially responsible marketing strategies in the expanding silver tourism sector.

Keywords: silver tourism, ageism, marketing communication, older adults, Taiwan

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Introduction

Population ageing has become a defining demographic trend in many societies, particularly in East Asia. In Taiwan, the rapid growth of the older population has been accompanied by increasing attention to the silver economy, with tourism emerging as a key sector targeting older consumers. Since 2024, Taiwan's Tourism Administration has actively promoted the Phoenix/Golden Years Age-Friendly Travel Program Certification, encouraging travel agencies to design products and services specifically for older adults (Tourism Administration, 2023). In response, Taiwanese travel agencies have increasingly developed and promoted silver tourism packages, utilizing websites as primary platforms for communication. These websites rely heavily on carefully designed visual and textual marketing messages to attract older travelers and to frame later life as a desirable and legitimate market segment.

While the expansion of silver tourism reflects growing recognition of older adults' purchasing power, scholars have raised concerns that marketing practices may simultaneously reproduce ageist assumptions. Ageism refers to the stereotyping, marginalization, or devaluation of individuals based on age, often operating through subtle and normalized representations rather than explicit discrimination (Butler, 1969; Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2020). In marketing communication, ageism may be embedded in language that emphasizes decline, dependency, vulnerability, or special needs, as well as in imagery that portrays older adults as fragile, homogeneous, or fundamentally different from other consumer groups.

Tourism marketing plays a particularly influential role in shaping cultural meanings of ageing, as it not only promotes destinations but also constructs images of who is imagined as an appropriate traveler. Previous research indicates that older adults in tourism advertising are often depicted either as physically constrained, risk-averse, and in need of care, or conversely as exceptionally youthful, healthy, and active (Chen, 2015; Ylänné-McEwen, 2000). Although the latter representation appears positive, both patterns may impose narrow expectations on later life and fail to reflect the diversity of older adults' identities, capabilities, and preferences.

Despite growing academic interest in ageism in tourism and marketing, relatively little research has examined how older adults themselves interpret and evaluate silver tourism marketing messages, particularly in the Taiwanese context. Many existing studies focus primarily on discourse or content analysis of promotional materials, leaving the perspectives of the intended audience underexplored. To address this gap, the present study investigates how age-related stereotypes are reproduced in Taiwanese silver tourism websites and examines how adults aged 50 and above perceive and respond to these visual and textual representations. By foregrounding audience perception, this study aims to contribute to more inclusive approaches to tourism marketing and to broader discussions of ageism in marketing communication.

Literature Review and Theoretical Background

Ageism has been widely recognized as a persistent social issue affecting how older adults are represented across media, institutions, and everyday interactions (Amundsen, 2022; Butler, 1969). In marketing contexts, ageism often operates implicitly, shaping assumptions about older consumers' abilities, needs, and lifestyles. Research on grey or silver marketing

suggests that even campaigns designed to appeal to older adults may inadvertently reinforce deficit-oriented views by emphasizing physical limitation, safety concerns, or age-based categorization (Berg & Liljedal, 2022).

Within tourism studies, representations of older travelers have attracted increasing attention (Chen, 2015; Ylänne-McEwen, 2000). Scholars have noted that tourism marketing frequently constructs older adults as either passive recipients of care or as idealized “successful agers” who maintain youthfulness and activity (Chen, 2015; Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). Although the latter appears positive, it may still marginalize those who do not identify with such ideals and obscure the heterogeneity of older adults’ experiences (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000; Hummert, 2011). Visual imagery is particularly powerful in this regard, as images communicate normative assumptions about ageing, capability, and social roles in ways that may be more immediate and emotionally resonant than text (Chen, 2016).

Marketing communication theory emphasizes that meaning is not fixed at the point of production but is negotiated through audience interpretation (Fairclough, 2001). From this perspective, understanding how older adults perceive and evaluate marketing messages is essential for assessing whether representations are experienced as respectful, appealing, or stigmatizing. Subjective age, or perceived cognitive age, has also been identified as an important concept in ageing research, as many older adults perceive themselves as younger than their chronological age (Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2020; Leventhal, 1997). This discrepancy may influence how age-salient marketing messages are received.

Building on these insights, the present study adopts an audience-centered approach to examine older adults’ responses to visual and textual representations commonly used in Taiwanese silver tourism websites. By linking ageism theory with marketing communication and tourism studies, the research seeks to illuminate how promotional messages may either reinforce or challenge stereotypes of later life. Specifically, this study focuses on four aspects of older adults’ perceptions and preferences. Based on these considerations, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do older adults’ subjective age and age identity relate to their perceptions of silver tourism marketing?

RQ2: How do older adults evaluate textual marketing slogans commonly used on Taiwanese silver tourism websites?

RQ3: What are older adults’ preferences regarding visual marketing representations used in silver tourism promotions?

RQ4: How do older adults’ preferences regarding travel companions influence their responses to silver tourism offerings?

These research questions provide a framework for understanding how silver tourism marketing may align with older adults’ self-perceptions, lifestyle expectations, and social preferences, offering practical implications for designing inclusive and appealing promotional strategies.

Methodology

Participants

This study collected 101 valid questionnaire responses from adults aged 50 and above in Taiwan. Participants were recruited as potential users of silver tourism services. The sample

included respondents across multiple age groups, ranging from individuals in their fifties to those aged 80 and above. In addition to reporting chronological age, participants were asked to indicate their perceived cognitive age in order to capture subjective age identity.

Survey Design

The questionnaire consisted of four main sections. The first section collected demographic information, including gender, chronological age, and perceived cognitive age.

The second and third sections measured participants' evaluations of textual and visual marketing representations commonly used on Taiwanese silver tourism websites. The textual items included marketing slogans that varied in the extent to which they foregrounded age, emphasized physical condition, or framed travel as a lifestyle-oriented experience. The visual items depicted different portrayals of older adults, including animated representations, images associated with physical impairment, and depictions of coupledom or active companionship.

All textual and visual items were rated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not attractive at all) to 5 (very attractive).

The final section explored participants' preferences regarding travel themes and tour design, including preferred travel companions and the availability of supportive services.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed to examine differences in preferences for marketing messages across groups. Specifically, ANOVA allowed for the comparison of responses among different chronological age groups as well as among groups defined by perceived cognitive age. By examining between-group differences, this analysis helped to identify how preferences for visual and textual marketing representations varied across age cohorts and subjective age identities, thereby providing a clearer understanding of similarities and differences in how older adults interpret silver tourism marketing messages.

Findings

Subjective Age and Age Identity

The analysis revealed a clear discrepancy between participants' chronological age and their perceived cognitive age. On average, respondents perceived themselves as psychologically younger than their actual age, with the mean perceived age being approximately ten years younger.

This subjective age gap suggests that many participants do not primarily identify with chronological or age-based labels commonly employed in silver tourism marketing. Rather than defining themselves through age categories, respondents tended to align their self-identity with psychological youthfulness and ongoing vitality, which may shape how they evaluate age-targeted marketing messages.

This suggests that marketing messages emphasizing chronological age or physical decline may be perceived as less appealing by older adults with younger subjective age.

Evaluations of Textual and Visual Marketing Representations

The survey results revealed consistent patterns in participants' evaluations of silver tourism marketing messages. Textual content that explicitly foregrounded age or framed older adulthood in terms of physical decline received relatively low attractiveness ratings. Participants reported that such messages felt reductive and misaligned with their self-perceptions, reinforcing age-based stereotypes rather than reflecting their lived identities.

Visual representations elicited similarly differentiated responses. Animated portrayals of older adults were frequently evaluated negatively, as participants perceived them as unrealistic or infantilizing. Likewise, images emphasizing severe physical impairment were viewed unfavorably, with respondents expressing discomfort at being represented primarily through vulnerability or limitation.

In contrast, visual depictions highlighting coupledness and active companionship were evaluated more positively. Images portraying older adults traveling with partners or companions were perceived as respectful, relatable, and emotionally appealing. Participants interpreted these representations as emphasizing social connection and shared experience rather than age salience or decline.

Conclusion

This study examined how older adults perceive visual and textual representations commonly used in Taiwanese silver tourism marketing, focusing on the relationship between age identity and responses to marketing messages. The findings revealed that participants generally perceived themselves as psychologically younger than their chronological age, which may explain why age-salient or decline-focused textual messages were often evaluated negatively. Visual representations emphasizing severe impairment or infantilizing depictions were similarly received unfavorably, while portrayals of coupledness, companionship, and active engagement were perceived as respectful and appealing. Taken together, these patterns suggest that older consumers prefer marketing communication that minimizes overt age salience and highlights vitality, autonomy, and social connection.

Specifically, these findings can be mapped onto the four main aspects addressed in this study: (1) subjective age and age identity, showing that participants generally perceived themselves as psychologically younger; (2) evaluations of textual marketing slogans, indicating low appreciation for age-salient or decline-focused content; (3) preferences regarding visual marketing representations, with favor for depictions of coupledness and active companionship and avoidance of infantilizing or impairment-focused images; and (4) preferences concerning travel companions, highlighting the value of traveling with partners or family rather than alone or with strangers. These patterns collectively illustrate how older adults' self-perceptions shape their responses to silver tourism marketing messages.

For tourism marketers, these findings imply several practical strategies: promotional materials should emphasize active and socially connected experiences, such as traveling with partners, family, or friends; avoid imagery or language that overemphasizes physical decline or infantilizes older adults; and design marketing messages that highlight autonomy, vitality,

and diverse lifestyle possibilities, rather than solely age-specific services or safety concerns. By aligning promotional strategies with older adults' self-perceptions and social identities, travel agencies can create more appealing, respectful, and inclusive silver tourism offerings.

Overall, this research contributes to broader discussions of ageism in marketing and underscores the importance of audience-centered, lifestyle- and relationship-oriented framing in silver tourism communication.

Limitation and Future Work

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the findings are based on a survey sample of older adults in Taiwan and may not be generalizable to other cultural contexts. Second, a limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings and prevent a comprehensive understanding of older consumers' perspectives. Future research may build on this work by incorporating qualitative interviews, cross-cultural comparisons, or longitudinal designs to further explore how older consumers negotiate age-related representations in tourism marketing over time.

Despite these limitations, this study provides empirical insight into older adults' preferences for silver tourism marketing and underscores the importance of nuanced, audience-centered approaches to representation in the expanding silver tourism sector.

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