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Effects of Ecotourism Travel Motivation and Social Relations on Mental State of the Middle-Aged and Elderly Group

Fei-Hu DENG¹, Yuan-Heng GAO², Qiao-Li TIAN³

Abstract

Under the trend of population aging, people expect not only to prolong life expectancy, but to have healthy and quality life in the old age. Along with the independency of children, increasing disposable money and time would enhance the growth of ecotourism market. The accelerating population aging also expands the middle-aged and elderly ecotourism market. Aiming at the middle-aged and elderly eco-tourists to Guilin, total 420 copies of questionnaire are distributed, and 342 valid copies are retrieved, with the retrieval rate 81%. The research results show significantly positive effects of 1.travel motivation on social relations, 2.social relations on mental state, and 3.travel motivation on mental state. According to the results, suggestions are proposed, expecting to help the middle-aged and the elderly participate in tourism activity and establish social relations to enhance the mental state.

Keywords: travel motivation, social relations, ecotourism, the middle-aged and the elderly, mental state, social network, social support.

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Introduction

Along with the change in global population structure, aging has become common social phenomenon. The middle-aged and the elderly have average 10-15 year life after retirement that the arrangement of leisure life in the period is rather important for them. The middle-aged and the elderly, who used to invest time and money in the family, gradually increase the disposable money and time after the independency of children. It would enhance the growth of ecotourism market. Under the trend of population aging, people expect not only to prolong the life expectancy, but also to have healthy and quality life in the old age. Some middle-aged and elderly, on the other hand, have to face more complicated life issues along with increasing age and physical fitness aging, e.g. reducing physical strength and degradation of memory and cognition caused by physical degradation, self-life arrangement after leaving workplaces, and spatial nest time after the leave of children. It has such a middle-aged and elderly group emerge life emptiness and uncertainty and even doubt self-value of existence. Low birth rate becomes a common trend in advanced countries in the world, and decreasing elderly mortality results in increasing elderly population. Consequently, the middle-aged and elderly ecotourism market is annually expanded along with accelerating population aging. The enhancement of living standards has people stress more on recreation. The middle-aged and elderly group has become an important consumption group for domestic and international ecotourism businesses.

By participating in tourism activity, the middle-aged and the elderly could enhance the mental and spiritual activity to further promote the morale and psychological comfort and relieve emotion and pressure to achieve the development of psychological health. Moreover, the middle-aged and the elderly being able to positively participate in ecotourism activity, when facing aging, could develop and maintain interpersonal behavior and social interaction skills as well as opportunities to contact with others so as to acquire fun and meanings in daily life and further adapt to the society with the sense of belongingness. Finally, they could promote the quality of life. On the other hand, an individual cannot be separated from the relationship with the society; they need to interact and connect with others in daily life. Social relation is the interpersonal contact, through which an individual could maintain the social status and acquire emotional support, material explanations and service, and information to contact with the society. In other words, social relation is the interpersonally structural interaction. A lot of research affirmed the positive meaning of social interaction to the health conditions, psychological well-being, and life adjustment of the middle-aged and the elderly. Domestic research on the middle-aged and the elderly mainly focused on the leisure participation motivation and activity type, factors in stopping the middle-aged and the elderly participating in leisure activity, as well as the understanding and analysis of the living needs, health conditions, social welfare use conditions, and social support, but seldom discussed the travel motivation and physical and mental conditions. Effects of

ecotourism travel motivation and social relations on mental state of the middle-aged and elderly group are therefore discussed in this study, expecting to help the middle-aged and the elderly promote the mental state through the participation in tourism activity and the establishment of social relations.

Literature review

Chou (2017) regarded motivation and behavior as two relative concepts; behavior was the activity beyond an individual, while motivation was the internal process to enhance individual activity. Most psychologists extended that motivation was the internal process to induce and maintain individual activity and enhance the activity toward certain goal. Joo, Cho, & Woosnam (2019) mentioned that travel motivation of the middle-aged and the elderly included rest and relaxation, enhancement of social interaction, exercise and fitness, learning, nostalgia, and experiencing exciting perception, as well as getting along with family members, exploring new locations, seeking spiritual comfort, showing off to friends, and escaping from routine work. Wang *et al.* (2017) indicated that travel could replace work to achieve functional balance after retirement. Travel presented meanings of happiness, content, creativity, learning, and physical & mental growth for the elderly. Participation in travel provided opportunities for the middle-aged and the elderly contacting with others and the sense of belongingness to the society. Chikuta, du Plessis, & Saayman (2017) stated that travel could provide the environment to create new social structural relationship to be willing to and capable of engaging in tourism activity to reveal self-value and further promote individual social relations. Sharma & Nayak (2018) indicated that tourism market should positive integrate and adjust to “physical health”, “mental health”, and “social health” for the successful aging of the middle-aged and the elderly and cope with future life with more positive and optimistic attitudes to achieve individual successful aging. Papadimitriou, Kaplanidou, & Apostolopoulou (2018) mentioned that the middle-aged and the elderly could create individual new social relations through travel to reveal self-value; the research also pointed out the importance of travel to reduce old age crises. The following hypothesis is therefore proposed in this study.

H1: Travel motivation presents significantly positive effects on social relations.

Chang (2017) regarded social relations as interpersonal contact, through which an individual could maintain social status and acquire emotional support, material explanation and service, and information related to social contact. In other words, social relation was the interpersonally structural interaction relationship. Klein & Kantor (2018) considered that social relations were composed of social network and social support, where social network, from the structure of social relations, referred to the quality of social relations, while social support, from the

function of social relations, referred to the quality of social relations. Sheppard & Fennell (2019) indicated that social relations focused on spouse, children, relatives, friends, and neighbors. Woosnam *et al.* (2018) explained that social relations covered social support and social network, and social support presented the function of social network. Luque-Gil, Gomez-Moreno, & Pelaez-Fernandez (2018) stated that people getting along with the social network and being offered physiological, psychological, informational, instrumental, or material assistance allowed individuals better adjusting to pressure, increasing well-being, and enhancing the adaptability. Park *et al.* (2019) pointed out the correlations of gender, age, and physical health conditions with social relations. Tucker & Shelton (2018) mentioned that, from social support, the elderly with bad health conditions would largely depend on others' support and care and reflect the model of support dependency; on the contrary, the middle-aged and elderly group with good health conditions presented relational reciprocity, with mutual support on the social interaction, showed understanding, sharing, and tight connection with the close partners, appeared expectation on reciprocity and interaction, and revealed responsibility to offer happiness to the opposite party. Chu & Luckanavanich (2018) pointed out positive contribution of continuous fitness, social interpersonal activity, and economic production to the mental health and life satisfaction of the middle-aged and the elderly. On the other hand, informal social activity or psychological realization could enhance elderly health in the social integration of the middle-aged and the elderly; when separating from social activity, they might become discouraged and dissatisfied with old age. As a result, the following hypothesis is proposed in this study.

H2: Social relations show remarkably positive effects on mental state.

Huang & Liu (2017) defined mental state as individual cognitive perception of judging contemporary living environment and achieving the life goal, expectation, standard, and concerns, according to the culture and value. Lin & Nawijn (2019) indicated that psychological reaction was not necessarily consistent with real age or physiological conditions; some people with the physiological age of 70, but still kept the innocent heart as a child; some other people might be young or physically healthy, but the psychological state was old and dull with pessimistic and hopeless life. Grønhøj & Thøgersen (2017) regarded the effect of participation in tourism activity on life satisfaction of the middle-aged and the elderly, i.e. the more participation in tourism activity or the longer time, the higher life satisfaction. The two studies showed positive correlations between tourism activity participation frequency and self-evaluation of quality of life of the middle-aged and the elderly. Matzler *et al.* (2019) pointed out the meaning and function of tourism activity to the middle-aged and the elderly as to negatively kill time as well as positively live more happily and meaningfully; and "travel" was the most important activity in the leisure. Pereira & Silva (2018) mentioned that most people, in the old age, would continue the social position and role established in

the middle age, engage in living and social activity, positively participate in various travel and entertainment activities in the society to divert themselves from worries and prevent physical and mental functions from degradation, and further enhance mental state. Chen, Nakama, & Zhang (2017) discovered that the middle-aged and the elderly participating more in travel could remarkably enhance physical & mental health, physiological, psychological, emotional, and social relations, as well as spirit. Zhang *et al.* (2018) revealed positive effects of travel motivation on mental health that the middle-aged and the elderly more constantly participating in travel would have better mental health; besides, economic condition was a key factor in mental health of the middle-aged and the elderly. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed in this study.

H3: Travel motivation reveals notably positive effects on mental state.

Methodology

Operational definition and measurement of variable

Travel motivation. Referring to Ye *et al.* (2019), travel motivation in this study contains three dimensions: (1) Sociality and intellectuality: referring to the engagement in tourism activity for the needs for friendship and interpersonal relationship, and the needs for interpersonal relationship referring to acquiring others' respect or attention; (2) Dominant incentive: referring to people preceding travel for achieving, dominating, challenging, and completing certain affairs; (3) Escape and challenge: referring to people, tending to escape from over-stimulated or complicated life or crowd disputes, seeking for free and independent perception to relax themselves.

Social relations. Referring to Wu *et al.* (2018), social relation is divided into four dimensions in this study: (1) *Social network*: Social network, from the structure of social relations, is the quantity of social relations; (2) *Social support*: Social support, from the function of social relations, refers to the quality of social relations; (3) *Emotional support*: offering concerns, respect, and listening to others in order to have the acceptors feel safe; (4) *Cognitive support*: to have acceptors acquire affirmative feedback or value support through accompany or participation in activity together.

Mental state. Referring to Hsu, Lee, & Chen (2018), mental state includes three dimensions in this study: (1) *Feeling and cognition*: to discuss individual experience in positive feelings of content, well-being, hope, happiness, and enjoyment of beautiful affairs; (2) *Negative perception*: to discuss individual experience in negative feelings and possible worries and effects caused by any negative feelings; (3) *Autonomy and self-esteem*: to discuss individual inner feeling of oneself.

Research object

Guilin, a famous national scenic city and historical city, with various natural and cultural tourism resources was confirmed as the area for developing ecotourism in “ecotourism year” in 1999. Guilin presents rich natural ecotourism resources; green mountains, clear rivers, strange caves, and beautiful stones are the features of Guilin. The significant mountains and rivers present karst topography, with classical and perfect development. Yangshuo Garden, Ten Mile Gallery, Longsheng Terraces, hot springs, Xingan Lingqu, Kitten Mountain, Zijiang, Ba Jiaozhai, and Lipu Yinziyan are natural ecotourism resources in Guilin. Aiming at the middle-aged and elderly eco-tourists to Guilin, total 420 copies of questionnaire are distributed, and 342 valid copies are retrieved, with the retrieval rate 81%.

Reliability and validity analysis test

The reliability of the research dimensions achieves above 0.7, showing high reliability of such research dimensions. The construct validity of the research scale is analyzed with confirmatory factor analysis. From *Table 1*, the research scale appears good convergent validity and construct validity.

Table 1. Confirmatory factor

Research dimension	overall fit	analysis result
travel motivation	$\chi^2=0(P<0.001)$; DF=0; GFI=1.00; CFI=1.00	excellent overall model fit
social relations	$\chi^2=0(P<0.001)$; DF=0; GFI=1.00; CFI=1.00	excellent overall model fit
mental state	$\chi^2=0(P<0.001)$; DF=0; GFI=1.00; CFI=1.00	excellent overall model fit

Results and discussion

Correlation analysis

Table 2 reveals significant correlations among travel motivation, social relations, and mental state. Such a result reveals the possibility of multicollinearity among research dimensions. Researchers could solve the problem with nested model analysis. The remarkable correlations among dimensions also reveal the consistency with research hypotheses.

Table 2. Correlation analysis

research dimension	α	travel motivation	social relations	mental state
travel motivation	0.85			
social relations	0.87	0.24**		
mental state	0.92	0.27**	0.32**	

Overall model discussion

From Table 3, the overall model fit standards $\chi^2/Df=1.583$, smaller than the standard 3, and $RMR=0.006$, show proper results of χ^2/DF and RMR . Besides, chi-square value is sensitive to sample size that it is not suitable for directly judging the fit. The overall model fit standards $GFI=0.951$ and $AGFI=0.916$ achieve the standard 0.9 (the closer GFI and $AGFI$ to 1 revealing the better model fit). This model therefore presents good fit indices.

Table 3. Overall linear structural model analysis result

overall fit	χ^2/Df	1.583
	GFI	0.951
	AGFI	0.916
	RMR	0.006

Note: * stands for $p<0.05$, ** for $p<0.01$, *** for $p<0.001$.

Research hypothesis discussion

Each nested model shows the difference of a degree of freedom that chi-square difference test is utilized. The difference in chi-square value between nested model and the theoretical model achieves the significance, revealing that the path coefficient being set 0 is remarkable. The research results show the significance of the model; the nested model analysis results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Nested model analysis

model	χ^2	$\Delta\chi^2$	GFI	CFI	RMSEA
theoretical model	242.63		0.951	0.981	0.08
Model 1: hypothesis test	247.46	4.83*	0.951	0.981	0.08
Model 2: hypothesis test	253.94	6.48*	0.951	0.981	0.08
Model 3: hypothesis test	259.71	5.77*	0.951	0.981	0.08

Conclusion

The research results show that the higher ecotourism travel motivation would result in larger perception of social relations and closer social relations to appear higher motivation to participate in ecotourism travel. The higher motivation to participate in ecotourism travel would assist in social network and confirm the value of the middle-aged and elderly group. The middle-aged and elderly group with higher sociality and intellectuality could better distract the bad mental state. With social support and the real support from family members, relatives, and friends and increase in contact with social network, the middle-aged and elderly group could properly relieve the impact of bad mental state and psychological adjustment after retirement. Social relations refer to social security provided by public sectors or social welfare offered by welfare institutions as well as emotional concerns from family members, relatives & friends, and neighbors. The middle-aged and the elderly therefore would require attachment and rights for the establishment of social relations. Social network provides the middle-aged and the elderly with sense of belongingness and opportunities to control others. The protection of network structure and social support allows the middle-aged and the elderly reducing pressure. Furthermore, social support, emotional support, and network cognition support could prevent the middle-aged and the elderly from being lonely, sad, and self-doubted to further enhance the perception of mental state. Higher ecotourism motivation would enhance mental state perception; and, travel motivation show higher correlations with sociality and intellectuality, escape and challenge, dominant incentive, and mental state. For this reason, ecotourism motivation could positively guide the psychological reaction of the middle-aged and elderly group and timely reduce the negative perception. Ecotourism participation allows the middle-aged and the elderly notably enhance physical & mental health, physiological, psychological, emotional, and social relations, and spirit. It reveals positive effects of ecotourism motivation on mental health that the middle-aged and the elderly with constant ecotourism participation would have better mental health.

Suggestions

From the research results and findings, the following practical suggestions are proposed in this study.

1. In current society with multiple and rapid change and common interpersonal interaction, people often feel stressful. Pressure results in negative psychological perception to cause diseases. Apparently, pressure would deeply affect people's physiological and psychological health. Aiming at the middle-aged and elderly group whose needs are less concerned, domestic or international ecotourism could enhance knowledge and establish good spirit. However, quality is the key in ecotourism, aiming to have the middle-aged and the elderly feel excellent

service environment. It is therefore the objective to enhance the quality of national ecotourism and establish good tourism process.

2. To have the middle-aged and elderly group successfully enter ecotourism market, it is necessary to fully understand their needs and attitudes toward life. Under the effect of external environment, an itinerary is the necessary expense. Offering travel schedule, aiming at different groups or age, is important to enhance the middle-aged and the elderly applying leisure time and spending money on well planned and diverse travel schedule.
3. The government departments are suggested to timely grasp the latest data of the middle-aged and elderly group, stress on the social concern service, positively promote the mental state evaluation, establish smooth communication channels, and expand the participation. The government should timely provide administrative support for assisting in the disadvantaged middle-aged and elderly group.
4. The middle-aged and elderly group could seek for their own supporting systems, enhance self-stress resistance, learn pressure relief, reinforce self-supporting network, constantly precede self-enrichment learning, positively participate in tourism activities held by the government or private institutions, and cherish the time with spouse and children.

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