



Older Adults' Perceptions of Digital Cultural Tourism in 'Super-Aged' Nations: The Case of Finland and Japan

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Abstract. Older adults have been recognized as a key tourist segment for cultural tourism. Despite the growing population of older adults, limited research have explored their experiences and needs within digital cultural experiences. Therefore, this research note takes on an exploratory approach in understanding older adults' perceptions towards digital cultural experiences in the context of two 'super-aged' nations: Finland and Japan. The findings illustrate that differences do exist, and that Finnish older adults are found to be more open to technology-use in the context of digital cultural experiences than their Japanese counterparts. Implications for e-tourism research and management are discussed.

Keywords: Cultural tourism · Digital services · Older adults · Digital divide · Hofstede

1 Introduction

Activities related to arts, culture and heritage remain a crucial element within tourism experiences. Current research has identified that particularly for older adults, participating in cultural tourism activities is a major motivator for travel [1]. For 'super-aged' countries, i.e. countries in which more than 20% of the population is aged 65 or older, cultural tourism becomes ever more important. Meanwhile, the cultural tourism field has seen a transformational shift towards more digital experiences such as online-streaming and virtual tours. Despite the growing population of older adults, limited research have explored their needs within digital cultural experiences [2]. Therefore, this study responds to the academic call by Wang [2] and Pesonen et al. [3] for more studies to examine older adults and technology, specifically within tourism. This research note explores the perceptions of older adults towards digital cultural experiences. The research is unique, whereby it focuses on two of the world's 'super-aged' nations i.e., Finland and Japan (the West and the East).

2 Barriers and Drivers of Technology Use Among Older Tourists

The tourism industry has seen a rise of digitalization and the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in recent decades [4]. This change has impacted the means of interaction between consumers and other tourism stakeholders [4]. From finding information, omnichannel communication, and purchasing and managing bookings have transformed consumers to prosumers, who actively partake in value creation through digital services [5]. The older adult segment, usually seen as the least likely to adopt new technologies [3], are a heterogeneous group as travellers, with varying technological expertise and user backgrounds [6]. A study by Thébault et al. [6] revealed that the majority of older adults have altered their information seeking behaviour with the development of ICT, e.g. actively reading peer reviews when making tourism-related purchase decisions.

Besides digital platforms and social media, the rapid progress of technological innovations and their implementation to markets has created novel opportunities for tourism more broadly. Robotics, artificial intelligence, wearable technology, applications of virtual and augmented reality, etc. stretch the boundaries of tourism business further into the digital sphere, offering new possibilities for designing tourism experiences [5, 7]. However, many of these technological innovations are designed for the needs of younger generations [8], despite older adult travellers being recognized as a key target group [6]. The e-tourism industry as a whole need to address this gap between older adult users and the use of new technologies in tourism.

Besides age, tourists' cultural background can affect how they use and perceive new technologies [9, 10]. Culturally similar tourists are more likely to exhibit similar behaviours due to deeply ingrained cognitive processes which have been materialized from everyday lives and societal values [11]. One of the most cited cultural theories is from Hofstede, who proposed six dimensions of (national) culture: power distance, individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, short vs. long term orientation, masculinity and indulgence [11]. Research exploring the influence of culture on technology adoption, specifically within tourism, remains fairly understudied. A recent study demonstrated how different national cultural orientations influence not only tourists' satisfaction, but also the type of digital application used when traveling [12]. American tourists (low uncertainty avoidance) were identified as more optimistic and demonstrated greater satisfaction with personalized technologies, while South Korean tourists (high uncertainty avoidance) prioritized the informativeness (i.e. quality and credibility) of information to feel satisfied [12]. Additionally, German tourists (high uncertainty avoidance) were reported to prefer technology with consumer-generated content due to the perceived credibility [9]. Despite this, they refrained from actively engaging with such digital channels due to privacy concerns [9]. While the emerging literature on technology adoption in tourism highlights cultural background as a key influencing factor, far less research has specifically explored the demographic of older adult tourists between different countries [13]. As such, further research is needed to better understand this important group of tourists who constitute up to 20% of super-aged countries' population.

3 Methods

An exploratory research approach was adopted as studies examining older adult tourists and digital technologies are fairly limited [2, 19]. Hence, exploratory structured interviews with older adults in both Finland and Japan were conducted to gain familiarity and insights on the topic area. The structured interviews collected data related to participant demographics, lifestyle, and their experiences in using digital cultural services. Participants were purposefully sampled in both countries based on the following criteria: 1) older than 60 years old, 2) has participated in cultural tourism whether on-site or online and 3) lives in urban areas. 10 Finnish and 5 Japanese older adults were interviewed. Interviews were conducted in Finnish, Japanese and English and lasted between 20 to 60 min. Following the interviews, data were analysed based on thematic analysis. This exploratory study was not intended to provide generalizability, but rather, to provide a starting point for understanding the needs and perceptions of the elderly when using technology in two different, 'super-aged' cultural tourism contexts.

4 Results and Discussions

In both Finnish and Japanese groups, all of the participants lived in urban or suburban areas. Both participants in the Japanese and Finnish sample were between 65–74 years old. In line with previous studies [3], older adult tourists can be seen as a diverse user group with the majority (but not all) expressing a desire to use digital cultural experiences. Those who did use technology for digital cultural tourism predominantly used laptops and smartphones. The television played a greater role in digital cultural tourism amongst the Japanese older adults than the Finnish.

Findings suggest that Finnish older adults are more adept and familiar with technology as their current use of technology include online banking, online services, and theatre live streaming. Meanwhile, older Japanese adults do not fully engage with online services and primarily use basic forms of technology such as online video streaming on the smartphone (e.g. YouTube) and watching documentaries on the television. The difference in technology use may be explained by Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance dimension. Based on Hofstede's [15] theory, Japanese are characterized as being an extremely uncertainty avoidant (92%) society in comparison to the Finnish (59%). All five Japanese respondents preferred not to use technology for digital cultural services. In fact, one of the participants highlighted, "*I'm not used to it. I don't know how it works. Technology is scary.*" (J1, female, 70–74) and other participants raised the issue of privacy concerns with regards to technology use (J2, 4; male, 70–74; male, 65–69). Similar to past findings [9], uncertainty avoidant societies regard technology as riskier and therefore, their extreme fear of risk prevents them from actively engaging with new technology. Although the recent COVID-19 pandemic has encouraged older Japanese adults to explore digital cultural content, all Japanese participants indicated that they turned to existing digital behaviours rather than exploring new types of technology such as live-streaming or live-interaction through chat. Meanwhile, older Finnish adults explained that they were more optimistic about learning to use new technology and engaged with technology holistically, including newer forms of digital cultural tourism

services, e.g. virtual museum tours and online lectures by novelists. All ten participants had experience of using digital cultural services, and in fact, all reported having tried new ones in the past year. As put by one participant: *“I can participate in events that would otherwise be out of reach for me. Services are also often available 24/7 and are free to use”* (F7, female, 70–74).

Interestingly, the advancement of technology was seen to contradict the Japanese’s personal values and as seen in one quote, *“the more we use technology, the more it consumes us and takes away our social connection and resilience”* (J3, female, 70–74). A vast contrast to current understanding that technology is perceived as a channel for interconnectivity [4]. In the context of older adult tourists in Japan, technology was instead thought to accelerate the feelings of isolation and helplessness. In Finland, the same was visible but to a lesser extent, whereby some older adults expressed the usefulness of technology to stay in touch with friends and relatives and to share experiences on social media (F3, 5, 8; female, 65–69; female 70–74; male, 65–69). As put by one participant: *“Everyone’s on the Internet”* (F3, female, 65–69). Additionally, participants explained that the Japanese prefer to experience cultural activities such as visiting museums and exhibitions by themselves or with their partner (J1, 2, 4; female, 70–74; male, 70–74; male, 65–69), suggesting that cultural activities even if complemented with technology, is not commonly seen as a key activity to form social ties amongst older Japanese adults.

5 Conclusion

Older adults form a large portion of the population in ‘super-aged’ countries such as Finland and Japan. Despite this, they are currently underrepresented and under researched within tourism [2, 7]. This research contributes to the literature on older adults and technology [2] by exploring older adults’ perceptions of digital cultural experiences within super-aged nations. The findings highlight the importance of national culture as an influencing factor on the perceptions of digital cultural experiences amongst older adult tourists, whereby the degree of willingness to adopt technology seems to vary between countries. For example, older Japanese adults were found not to perceive technology as a tool for useful interconnectivity and overall displayed a more reserved and to some extent conservative attitude towards ICT, while Finnish older adults were more open to trying new technologies and using technology to stay in touch with friends and relatives.

Our research has implications for tourism practitioners when considering services for the elderly. The types of technology and channels used for digital cultural experiences should be country specific i.e. when developing digital cultural content for older Japanese adults, more focus could be placed in television documentaries and a focus on smartphone and laptop suited content for older Finnish adults. Additionally, extra support could be given to the Japanese elderly to overcome their fear of using technology. Future research should dig deeper into the notion of super-aged nations in tourism, e.g. by exploring differences in what ‘old age’ is perceived to mean and how it impacts technology acceptance in different tourism consumption contexts. Further, this was a qualitative, exploratory study; future research should employ quantitative methods to determine the generalizability of findings presented here.

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