

SHOPPING AND LEISURE ACTIVITY PATTERNS WITHIN  
THE ELDERLY CONSUMER SEGMENT: THE "YOUNG-OLD" AND "OLD-OLD"

Peter L. Gillett, University of Central Florida  
Richard A. Scott, University of Arizona  
Duane L. Davis, University of Central Florida

INTRODUCTION

Consumer research generally confirms that the elderly are less active consumers and shoppers than young adults. But the single-category treatment of older consumers does not provide insight into just when their life-space contraction begins, how rapidly it develops, and how extensive and varied are its effects on consumer lifestyles. The consensus of gerontological research seems to be that approximately 75 years of age marks the transition point into advanced age. Unfortunately, there has been very little investigation of the effects of aging on actual consumer behavior. Particularly lacking is detailed information on shopping and other consumption-oriented leisure activities and how these patterns and their accompanying lifestyle and socioeconomic status change with chronological aging. Compounding the problem, as Bernhardt and Kinneer (1975) point out, most of the existing studies of elderly consumer behavior use quite small samples and unrepresentative "captive audiences" of a single elderly residence or attendants of a single senior center.

The present research purpose is to profile older consumers in a major metropolitan market, comparing younger and older households within the broad "over-65" age category. Following Neugarten (1974) and others, the age split is above and below age 75. The study focuses primarily upon non-institutionalized older persons who are presumed to be at least marginally active in out-of-home pursuits. Specific activities measured here include (1) non-grocery shopping, (2) vacation patterns, and (3) a variety of relatively passive to more physically demanding leisure lifestyle activities. Demographic profiles of both age groups are examined. The study will investigate the extent to which the 75-and-older age group exhibit lower levels of leisure-oriented activity.

METHODOLOGY

Data are provided by a recent personal interview survey of households in Maricopa County (metro Phoenix), Arizona, sponsored by Phoenix Newspapers, Inc. The survey boundaries encompass Maricopa County, including outlying rural areas and small towns. This survey, conducted annually by an independent marketing research firm, follows generally accepted survey research procedures for selecting and interviewing a representative sample of area households. The survey questionnaire consisted of over 800 questions probing detailed shopping patronage, purchases, shopping attitudes, product ownership, lifestyle activities, and detailed demographics.

Personal interviews were completed with 3300 households, including about 600 elderly households (head 65 or older). Institutional addresses, such as dormitories or nursing homes, were not sampled so that the elderly sample includes only independent households engaging in some minimum amount of personal shopping and other outside-the-home activities. For purposes of the present study, elderly consumers were subdivided into two age groups, these being: household head age 65 to 74, and 75 and older. This age split produced subsamples of 433 households aged 65 to 74, and 175 aged 75 and older.

RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate whether independent non-institutionalized households in the broad "over-65" age group exhibit different levels of shopping and leisure lifestyle activities. The survey data provided an opportunity to split the elderly household sample at the 75-year-old break suggested by Neugarten and others as meaningful in differentiating the "young-old" from the "old-old."

Differences in leisure and shopping activity patterns between the two older age groups were mixed. Clearly, the data evidence a reduction in away-from-home activity with advancing age. This pattern was especially apparent, and expected, in the more physically demanding of the recreational activities measured in the survey. But there is less evidence that store shopping activity as measured by the frequency of visits and variety of retail areas and stores patronized, diminishes sharply by age 75. Rather, for many older persons, shopping may continue to be a source of recreation. Most of the "old-old" shoppers continue to drive a car and travel rather widely to shop. Further, household income would not appear to constrain shopping more among the older group.

Most elderly households take vacations and short motor trips, a finding that supports those of other studies of older consumers. Older consumers are found to be above average in foreign travel, air travel, and possession of passports, airline and auto rental credit cards, and traveler's checks. Bartos (1980) reports that "active retirees" and, especially retired women, are active domestic and international travelers, interested in luxury and comfort in travel and more leisurely trips. Vacationing is somewhat less frequent in the 75-and-over age group. But, again, the frequency of vacation travel does not diminish sharply; and, in fact, the frequency of vacations outside the state and foreign visits is similar in both older age groups.

In conclusion, this first look at lifestyle activity levels within the broad "over-65" consumer market offers some evidence that independent elderly households are, indeed, not homogeneous in level of leisure activity and that the age-75 split suggested in gerontological literature has some value to marketers. Nonetheless, the frequent similarity in activity profiles shown here suggests that the factors contributing to a contraction of the leisure-oriented lifestyles of older persons are more complex than chronological age can capture, a point which has been made elsewhere in the literature. More work needs to be done to explore the mix of socio-economic and lifestyle conditions that shape elderly consumers' leisure activities. The variety of shopping and leisure activities surveyed here should be expanded. A wider range of consumption-oriented, outside-the-home activities could be generated that focus upon interests of older persons, females, and single-member households.

The complete paper and reference listing is available on request from the authors.