

Flocking Behaviors: The Role of Sociality in the Snowbird Experience

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Introduction

In many warmer-climate destinations of the United States and abroad, communities economically depend upon a reliable annual flow of winter seasonal visitors, most often mature travelers in their retirement years who seek to escape the cold of their primary homes. These migrant visitors – commonly referred to as “snowbirds” – often opt to stay in RV (recreational vehicle) or mobile home park accommodations. Research on winter migration tourism has been common and globally widespread in recent decades (Sheng et al., 2014), with an expanding breadth focusing on the phenomena of RV travel. This is an economically impactful tourism segment: in 2017, \$6.3 billion dollars of direct economic output in the U.S. were attributed to RV campgrounds and travel, and an estimated 8.9 million U.S. households own an RV (RVIA, 2017). Research on the nature and impact of mostly stationary RV and mobile home (“RV/MH”) park-based winter visitors has been more limited (Sheng et al., 2014). This type of accommodation has been popular with snowbirds of the “Silent Generation” (ages 73-90, as of 2018) but “Baby Boomers” (ages 54-72) are increasingly becoming the dominant retired generation in the U.S. Past research has noted that the characteristics and behaviors of this younger cohort may not be fully understood by destinations and tourism stakeholders (Lehto et al., 2008). There is a timely impetus to investigate seasonal visitors, particularly those who stay at RV/MH parks, as generational shifts occur in the U.S. and abroad.

Importantly, there may be differences between generations in their preferences for social interaction and certain activities. This research asks two primary questions: first, what differences are exhibited between generational groups of winter visitors in terms of sociality-related variables, such as activity preferences and travel party characteristics? Second, do winter visitors who stay in RV/MH park accommodations have different sociality characteristics than winter visitors who own a home or stay in other accommodations?

Winter visitor data collected in Yuma County, Arizona during the 2017-2018 winter season is used to address these research questions. Located in the sunny desert near the California and Mexico borders, Yuma County is known for its abundance of RV/MH parks that cater to snowbirds, with over 40 parks and an estimated 21,728 total lots. Like in many winter destinations, visitors to Yuma tend to be of older generations, and they also often share other common characteristics such as state of origin or nationality (as many are from northern U.S. states or Canadian provinces). Understanding the role of sociality in the Yuma snowbird experience may offer insights about the appeal of winter destinations and about the desirability of certain accommodation styles, amenities, and attractions. This information may enable destination marketers and tourism planners to continue to reach and appeal to their target demographics amidst an era of potentially shifting traveler interests and personalities.

Literature Review

Stemming from the generational theory of Howe and Strauss (1991), birth cohorts have gained attention in the last few decades as an important segmentation variable for understanding consumer preferences and developing effective marketing strategies (Huang & Petrick, 2010; Meredith & Schewe, 1994; Pennington-Gray, et al., 2003). Research has shown that there are

significant differences in personality traits across generational cohorts which are likely attributed to changes in social and historical contexts, rather than just age, which is a common confounding variable (Twenge, 2001). The Baby Boomer generation has attracted much attention due to the relative size of the cohort, and many researchers have sought to understand the consumption behaviors of this particular group (Pennington-Gray et al., 2003). Research has highlighted key generational characteristics: Boomers tend to emphasize having fun while on vacation (Wei & Milman, 2002), are commonly drawn to outdoor adventure activities (Naidoo et al., 2015), and they like to be active, challenge themselves and learn new things in their leisure time (Patterson & Pegg, 2009; Sperazza & Banerjee, 2010). In their maturity, Boomers are expected to be more active and adventurous than the Silent Generation has been, and perhaps less interested than their predecessors in certain activities such as visiting historic sites and gambling at casinos (Lehto et al., 2008). In work contexts, Boomers have been found to place high value on social considerations such as developing friendships (Twenge et al., 2010).

Sociality can be defined many ways but is often used to encapsulate the more processual aspects of social interaction and relationship building (Long & Moore, 2013). One impetus for studying sociality indicators within a framework of market segmentation arises from Fiske's social relations theory (1992), which proposes a model of communal sharing. This model expresses that people who are classified into the same group and considered roughly equivalent in terms of the domain are prone to focus more on their commonalities than differences, facilitating kindness and altruism within the group. Friendship and love are generally a reflection of communal sharing, and "rituals involving stereotyped repetitive actions" (p. 691) are often a characteristic of how groups are comprised and maintained. This may be relevant to understanding the appeal of Yuma as a winter destination, as visitors tend to share common demography (e.g. age, state of origin, ethnicity), style of living (e.g. staying only certain months in relatively similar-style homes), and rituals (e.g. returning yearly, attending snowbird social events, being members of local churches, recreating at RV resort pools or local fitness centers).

Participation in shared activities is an important aspect of sociality and community-building that is often emphasized within the RV/MH park lifestyle. McHugh and Mings (1991) list the fostering of an active social life and sense of community through the offering of clubs, programs and events (often coordinated by a designated social director) as common characteristics of successful RV parks. Activities are often intended to bring together visitors who share interests and backgrounds, and in turn help winter visitors form a sense of collective identity (McHugh & Mings, 1996). This notion coincides with the sociality model of Bratman (2006), who proposes that shared intention and shared values are central to the dynamics of sociality, often manifested through shared activities. Sheng et al. (2014) identify friendliness and caring management as major determinants of travelers' choices of RV parks and destinations, reflecting the earlier work of Hoyt (1954), which suggests that ease of socializing is a key factor in park selection.

Drive-based RV travel can also be highly sociable. Younger RVers commonly travel as families or in groups of friends (Wu & Pearce, 2017b). Although mature-aged RVers usually travel in pairs, it is common for couples to travel with others who they meet along the road (Hillman, 2013; Patterson et al., 2011). In a study of senior "grey nomad" RVers in Australia, the desire to socialize and build friendships were found to be some of the primary motivations for participation in an RV rally event (Wu & Pearce, 2017a). RVing grey nomads commonly express appreciation for their extended RV "family" and show a commitment to contributing positively to their RV community (Pearce & Wu, 2018). In both North American and Australian examples,

the ability to form social networks and develop a sense of fellowship with other travelers have been found to be key draws of the RV lifestyle, whether nomadic or more stationary (Hardy & Gretzel, 2011).

The concept of family is also critical in the investigation of sociality in tourism, but arguably under-investigated partly due to restrictive definitions of the term “family” (Obrador, 2011). There could be utility in viewing tourism as a “home making practice” (Obrador, p. 417) with a focus on social networks and domestic relationships. Rather than viewing tourism as an escape from everyday routines, it may be seen as a mode in which families continue to act out and develop their social roles and relations (Larsen, 2008). Research has found that the majority of mature travelers prioritize spending “quality time with family away from home” (Lehto et al., 2008, p. 242) and visiting friends and family. Seasonal residency may expand what it means for a place to be “home,” as established RV parks may resemble small towns, with a core of returning seasonal residents who know each other well and maintain a sense of community (Mings & McHugh, 1989). Stedman (2006) expresses that while seasonal residents may be commonly viewed as “outsiders” of the broader community, such visitors may actually exhibit higher-than-average place attachment toward the destination community.

Methodology

Responding to Larsen’s (2008) assertion that tourism sociality and “co-presence” are important yet often overlooked in “everyday” spaces, this research integrates variables that reflect cohabitation, common activities, and regular routines. This research utilizes data from two surveys that were part of a single study: first, an electronic and paper survey of seasonal residents from four Yuma County RV/MH parks that agreed to participate in the research (n=305); and second, a mail survey using the Dillman (2000) method sent to randomly-selected Yuma County homeowners with permanent addresses out of county (n=349; 35% response rate). Data were collected between October of 2017 and April of 2018. Other Arizona visitor research (Happel and Hogan, 2002; ISSR, 2007) offered guidance for the challenges of defining and sampling transient, multi-home populations across accommodation strata.

Questions addressed winter visitors’ demographics, travel preferences, and behaviors, including the number of years visiting Yuma, length of stay, places visited, activities participated in, and impressions of Yuma as a winter destination. “Winter visitor” was defined as someone who stayed in Yuma County for more than 30 days. The samples were delimited to Baby Boomer (ages 54-72) and Silent Generation (ages 73-90) cohorts only and the homeowner sample was delimited to include only properties located outside of RV/MH parks (n=223; referred to as “non-park”) so that it could be used as a discrete sample in comparison to the RV/MH park sample (n=242). Before delimiting for age cohorts, the average age of the RV/MH park sample was 69.6 years (SD = 8.1) and the non-park (homeowner) sample was 73.9 years (SD = 7.3). The ethnicity of both samples was predominantly white (92% for RV/MH; 97% for non-park).

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS. Cross-tabulation analyses were used to create a descriptive overview of the survey responses. Chi-square values were computed for the comparison of activity participation between the two cohort groups (Baby Boomer vs. Silent Generation) for the two samples (RV/MH park vs. non-park). Factor analysis was employed to confirm the groupings of Likert-scaled satisfaction variables. Factorial ANOVA was then used to

compare group means for the destination satisfaction variables. Two-way between-groups ANOVA with Tukey post-hoc tests were used to determine whether there was a significant difference regarding the positive experiences among the different travel party groups depending on the years of visitation in Yuma. Sub-sample sizes were insufficient in some categories to determine significance; in such cases, descriptive statistics have been included for discussion.

Results

Several variables were used to illustrate various aspects of sociability within the travel experience. Table 1 provides a descriptive overview of the two samples and generational groups, showing that most travel parties consisted of around two people who stayed about 4 to 5 months. Many had been visiting for more than 10 years, particularly in the non-park sample. Table 2 illustrates travel party types by generational cohort and sample. Most respondents visited with family only, but mixed parties and friend groups were relatively common, as were individuals traveling alone. Solo travelers were more frequent within the older age cohort, likely reflecting a loss of partner later in life. In response to a separate survey item regarding the top reason for visiting Yuma, across nearly all samples and cohorts, “friends /family members are staying in Yuma” was the most common response, with about 30% of RV/MH respondents and 56% of non-park respondents.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of winter visitor samples and cohorts

Variable	Sample 1: RV/MH park Baby Boomers (n=150)	Sample 1: RV/MH park Silent Generation (n=92)	Sample 2: Non-park Baby Boomers (n=96; 43%)	Sample 2: Non-park Silent Generation (n=127; 56%)
% respondents male/female	47/53	57/43	47/53	54/46
Mean age per group (SD)	65.2 (4.9)	77.9 (3.7)	67.4 (4.3)	78.9 (4.2)
Travel party size mean (SD)	2.3 (1.7)	1.8 (0.6)	2.59 (2.1)	2.30 (1.3)
# nights stayed mean (SD)	114.9 (45.7)	123.9 (39.1)	145.6 (47.9)	141.7 (50.0)
% visiting for more than 10 years	14	47	63	72

Table 2. Travel group type by generation and sample

Sample	Generation	Friends only	Family only	Family and friends	Business associates	Traveling alone
RV/MH park	Baby Boomer % (n)	3.3 (5)	79.4 (119)	13.3 (20)	--	4.0 (6)
	Silent Gen. % (n)	5.4 (5)	66.4 (61)	5.4 (5)	--	22.8 (21)
Non-park	Baby Boomer % (n)	5.3 (5)	71.5 (68)	17.9 (17)	--	5.3 (5)
	Silent Gen. % (n)	4.2 (5)	75.0 (90)	10.0 (12)	0.8 (1)	10 (12)

Factor analysis of six overall satisfaction variables revealed two primary components, “positive experience in Yuma” and “intent to revisit.” Both composite variables were found to have high mean scores, between 4 and 5 (agree and strongly agree) for all groups. These consistently high satisfaction values, combined with several low subsample category sizes, resulted in very few significant differences being detected between cohorts, types of activities, and the satisfaction variables when analyzed using two-way between-groups ANOVA. Even though the results of the analysis did not show significant differences, Table 3 demonstrates the positive experience scores with consistently high means across the groups.

Table 3. Winter visitors’ positive experience score (mean from 1-5 Likert scale) by travel group and sample

Travel group	Sample	Mean	SD	n
Friends only	RV/MH park	4.63	.48	10
	Non-park	4.17	.76	8
	Overall	4.43	.64	18
Family only	RV/MH park	4.30	.71	187
	Non-park	4.28	.67	165
	Overall	4.29	.69	352
Family and friends	RV/MH park	4.35	.71	24
	Non-park	4.44	.51	27
	Overall	4.40	.61	51
Traveling alone	RV/MH park	4.22	.54	27
	Non-park	4.36	.61	15
	Overall	4.27	.56	42
Overall	RV/MH park	4.31	.69	248
	Non-park	4.30	.65	215
	Total	4.30	.67	463

Notes: Agreement items were on a 1-5 Likert scale, with 1= strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. Differences between groups were not found to be statistically significant.

Pearson chi-square results for activity participation are presented in Table 4. The RV/MH park and non-park samples were considered separately. Within each sample, several activities showed significant differences between generations. Baby Boomers participated significantly more frequently in: visiting a park; visiting a museum, gallery, or historic site; walking, hiking, and biking; boating; photography and other artistic pursuits (non-park only); and dining out regularly (non-park only). The Silent Generation more often participated in visiting a farm or agricultural attraction (non-park sample only) and attending a community festival (RV/MH park only).

Table 4. Winter visitors' activity participation rates (%) by generation and sample

Activity participated in during visit	Sample 1: RV/MH park visitors			Sample 2: Non-park visitors		
	Baby Boomers partic. rate (%)	Silent Generation partic. rate (%)	Chi square	Baby Boomers partic. rate (%)	Silent Generation partic. rate (%)	Chi square
Visiting a national, state, or regional park	64.6	40.2	6.67**	40.6	22.8	8.100**
Visiting a museum, art gallery, or historic site	53.3	39.1	4.64*	47.9	22.8	15.25***
Attending a live performance	62.0	65.2	0.15	32.3	33.3	0.03
Sightseeing or touring	70.7	59.8	2.80	50.0	52.0	0.09
Visiting a casino	49.3	54.3	0.21	44.8	43.1	0.06
Shopping	86.0	81.5	2.18	75.0	76.4	0.06
Visiting a farm/agricultural attraction	61.3	55.4	0.62	42.7	56.9	1.00*
Visiting a military site	50.7	48.9	0.03	51.0	41.5	1.99
Riding ATVs/OHVs	19.3	16.3	0.05	43.8	35.0	1.75
Walking/hiking/biking	72.7	43.5	17.03***	68.8	52.0	6.25*
Golfing or attending a golf event	53.3	51.3	0.08	29.2	26.0	0.27
Boating (motorized and non-motorized)	10.0	3.3	4.16*	13.5	5.70	4.00*
Attending a boat/air/car/gem/home show, etc.	39.3	30.4	2.25	37.5	29.3	1.66
Photography, painting, jewelry making, etc.	17.3	12	0.312	18.8	8.9	4.51*
Visiting historic downtown or waterfront	84.3	78.3	0.111	73.6	71.3	0.14
Attending a community festival	42.0	63	7.17**	42.7	47.2	0.45
Dining out at restaurant at least once every 5 days	54.0	48.9	0.49	62.5	48.0	4.61*

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Discussion and Conclusion

This research represents an exploration toward greater understanding of social dimensions within the snowbird experience. Overall, these findings support previous literature that sociality factors such as companionship and enjoyment of group activities may be key criteria of winter destination selection and the appeal of RV/MH parks. The homogeneity of visitors' demographics, common activity interests, and satisfaction with Yuma support Fiske's idea of communal sharing, although future research would be needed to dedicatedly test this model. While activity participation is not always synonymous with sociality, it can be a telling indicator of whether people enjoy spending time in sociable situations. To quote Putnam (2001), people generally do not bowl – or play golf – alone. Across most activities, participation rates were higher with Baby Boomers than with the Silent Generation. These findings offer further support for the suggestion from Patterson and Pegg (2009) that tourism operators should avoid the “one-size-fits-all” approach of marketing to older tourists, as the Baby Boomer generation has exhibited more diverse interests in their maturity than previous cohorts. Overall, these findings are consistent with the previous literature regarding Baby Boomers' preferences to stay active, enjoy the outdoors, and/or try new things (Naidoo et al., 2015; Patterson & Pegg, 2009; Sperazza & Banerjee, 2010; Wei & Milman, 2002). To some extent, these results may be representative of the cohort's comparative physical ability levels. Furthermore, it was found in this research that many of the activities which revealed significant differences between generational cohorts also showed significant differences when years of tenure as a visitor was used as a proxy for generational cohort. It may be that newer visitors like to explore and try more activities than longer-tenure visitors, who perhaps have a “been there, done that” mentality. Most of the activities more popular with the non-park sample (e.g., boating, ATVing, and artistic pursuits) are more equipment intensive and are likely better enabled by homeownership.

Investigating travel parties also yielded interesting results. While a relatively small segment, the frequency of solo travelers is notable in light of the traditional emphasis of tourism on socialization with co-travelers, as well as the growing trend of tourism aimed at visiting friends and relatives, as have been noted by Larsen (2008). While no significant difference was found between the satisfaction variables and types of travel parties, this result in itself is meaningful. While “traveling alone” had slightly lower satisfaction scores, the mean values were still quite high. For the RV/MH park sample, this could be reflective of an engaging social atmosphere created by parks, in line with past research. Within a mature population, many people who are visiting alone may be in new territory as solo travelers, so this high satisfaction score is a positive note for destinations catering to visitors in their later years. This emphasizes the potential importance of social and activity programming for RV/MH parks and other housing communities.

Overall, these findings help to illuminate the possibilities for activity, sociability, and enjoyment afforded by the snowbird lifestyle. For these possibilities to be most fully realized, destination managers and promoters should review their own tourism offerings and promotional strategies through a critical lens. While prior research pertaining to cohorts' tourism and leisure choices has revealed certain generational personality and behavioral tendencies, it is important to note the limitations of cohort-based marketing approaches. Hitchings et al. (2018) warn against over-reliance upon assumptions regarding older travelers: first, it still cannot be concluded whether Baby Boomers' predilection for more active lifestyles will persevere as they age; second, the travel industry's assumptions about this generation's consumptive behaviors may actually be

producing such behaviors rather than just catering to them. In light of these points and the findings of this present research, managers and marketers of snowbird destinations, attractions, and activities will likely benefit from adopting an open mind about what may interest and appeal to older visitors. As Baby Boomers become the dominant snowbird segment, destinations will need to be adaptive to shifting desires, personalities, and travel behaviors. These changes will likely be ongoing as the cohort matures. Considering how common it is for winter visitors to visit or be visited by family members during their winter stay (many who are presumably from different generations), it is important for snowbird destinations to offer a broad array of attractions and activities in order to provide a satisfying tourism experience to a greater demographic variety of visitors. Destinations should consider how they can successfully engage the market segments of winter visitors' younger family members to encourage repeat visitation and help prevent relinquishment of owned family vacation properties if older family members become deceased. A continually responsive destination with a diversified set of visitor offerings will be more competitively positioned and more resilient to what changes may come.

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