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COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TRAVEL CHALLENGES AMONG ELDERLY TRAVELLERS IN CHINA AND MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

With the ageing of global populations, elderly tourism has become a prominent and expanding industry segment, especially in Asia. This study aims to do a comparative analysis of the challenges encountered by older travellers in China and Malaysia, two nations that are undergoing significant demographic transitions towards an ageing population. Employing a qualitative research approach, in-depth semi-structured interviews were performed with 20 older travellers (10 from each nation) to investigate their travel experiences and challenges. Research indicates common challenges including physical and health constraints, accessibility barriers, technological unfamiliarity, susceptibility to frauds, and nuanced instances of age discrimination. Notable distinctions were observed: Malaysian respondents prioritised religious and nutritional requirements, whereas Chinese participants

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underscored the significance of rest intervals and pacing. The study offers practical insights for governments, tourism providers, and destination managers to tackle these difficulties and create inclusive, safe, and enjoyable travel experiences for elderly travellers.

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Introduction

The global population is rapidly ageing. In 2025, approximately 1.2 billion individuals were 60 and older, with the amount predicted to climb to 1.4 billion by 2030 (World Health Organization [WHO], 2025). The United Nations (2025) predicts that by the late 2070s, people over the age of 65 will outnumber youngsters under the age of 18. In the Asia-Pacific area alone, roughly one in seven persons (approximately 721 million people) were aged populations in 2024, and this figure is projected to surpass 25% by 2050, reaching around 1.3 billion (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA Asia-Pacific], 2025). As worldwide populations continue to age, elderly tourism has evolved as a key market within the international travel business. In 2024, the market was valued at around USD 1.72 trillion, with the Asia-Pacific region dominating 54.9% of the worldwide share (Grand View Research, 2025).

China and Malaysia are undergoing substantial demographic transformations that mirror these global trends. In 2025, 23% of China's population was aged 60 and above, and the country is expected to reach "aged society" status by 2026 (Statista, 2025; The Star, 2025). In comparison, Malaysia recorded 11.6% of its population aged 60 and above in 2025, with projections indicating that it will become an aged nation by 2040 (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2024; The Star, 2024).

However, as these markets grow, a significant contextual gap has emerged in the post-pandemic travel era, particularly in understanding how elderly travellers navigate evolving tourism systems across different regions. Both nations have rapidly accelerated their transition toward "fully digital" tourism ecosystems. For the elderly, this shift has created a practical "digital wall," where essential activities such as booking transport, accessing health declarations, and

navigating cashless payment systems have become primary barriers to participation (Lopes et al., 2020; Teh, 2018; Wu & Wang, 2024; Yang et al., 2013). Although the necessary infrastructure is in place, the readiness of elderly travellers to engage with this digital-first environment remains a critical and unresolved challenge in both countries.

In addition to technological barriers, elderly travellers also face significant physical constraints, including reduced mobility, chronic health conditions, fatigue, and sensory limitations. These factors limit their ability to navigate large-scale attractions, endure long walking distances, and cope with crowded environments (Goh et al., 2026). Notably, the extent and impact of these challenges may differ across socio-cultural and environmental contexts. However, such variations remain underexplored.

This practical reality is further intensified by a clear academic gap in the current elderly tourism literature. While existing studies provide some insights into aspects such as transportation and healthcare (Geng et al., 2025), they remain limited in scope. More importantly, there is a lack of comparative research examining the challenges faced by elderly travellers between Southeast Asia and East Asia. Most prior studies have relied on single-location case analyses rather than cross-national comparisons (Fatima et al., 2020), thereby overlooking how diverse socio-cultural landscapes shape the experiences of elderly tourists.

Hence, this study seeks to address these gaps by identifying and comparing the specific travel challenges and lived experiences encountered by elderly tourists in China and Malaysia. The findings are expected to offer valuable guidance for policymakers and service providers in creating more inclusive and supportive travel environment.

Literature Review

Elderly Tourism

The term “elderly travellers,” also referred to as a senior or grey travellers, typically describes individuals aged 60 and over—a categorization widely adopted in both demography and tourism studies (WHO, 2024). This group is highly heterogeneous, exhibiting substantial variations in health status, mobility, financial resources, cultural backgrounds, and travel motivations (WHO, 2024). Within tourism literature, these individuals represent the core of “elderly tourism,” a specialized segment of the tourism industry focused on designing, marketing, and delivering travel products and services that cater to the physical, psychological, social, and cultural needs of older adults. This includes domestic and international travel for leisure, health and wellness, cultural enrichment, and family engagement (Patterson & Balderas, 2018).

Elderly tourism has gained prominence as a global phenomenon, propelled by rapid demographic changes. The global population aged 60 and above is projected to rise from approximately one billion in 2019 to 2.1 billion by 2050 (WHO, 2024), driving the growth of the “silver economy” within the tourism sector. This demographic shift has far-reaching implications for both policy and market development, prompting public and private stakeholders to invest in age-friendly infrastructure, wellness-oriented experiences, and accessible travel options (UNFPA Asia-Pacific, 2025). In the Asia-Pacific region—where population ageing is particularly rapid—elderly tourism is viewed not only as an economic opportunity but also as a social responsibility.

Travel motivations among elderly tourists are shaped by a desire for health preservation, leisure, cultural participation, and family connections (Chang et al., 2022). Their preferences often include travelling during off-peak seasons, following short and manageable itineraries, staying in comfortable accommodations, and joining group tours that encourage social interaction while allowing self-paced exploration (Chang et al., 2022). Such preferences reflect a need to balance physical limitations with meaningful and enjoyable travel experiences.

National contexts play a crucial role in shaping the development of elderly tourism. In both Malaysia and China, dedicated initiatives were designed with the aim to provide senior-friendly travel packages, accessible destinations, and health-focused tours tailored to the unique needs of older travellers (The Malaysian Reserve, 2023). In Malaysia, these efforts are supported by the National Policy for the Elderly, which promotes well-being and active ageing, alongside enhancements in healthcare services, specialized geriatric care, and community programs that encourage recreation, social engagement, and lifelong learning (Hamid, 2016). The Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) programme further strengthens senior tourism by offering long-term retirement visas, enabling retirees to reside in Malaysia and enjoy its cultural heritage, tropical climate, and high-quality healthcare (Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, n.d). Complementing these policies are senior citizen discounts on public transportation, accommodations, museums, and attractions (Low, 2023), as well as the expansion of aged healthcare services through geriatric units and training initiatives (Asrulsani et al., 2023).

Similarly, China has integrated elderly tourism into broader national strategies, such as the Healthy China 2030 plan and the Sustainable Development Plan for the Elderly. These frameworks aim to enhance healthcare and long-term care through nursing homes, community care centres, and in-home services. The tourism industry supports these initiatives by offering “silver tourism trains” with spacious seating, onboard medical staff, health monitoring, and themed cultural programs (WHO, 2024; China Daily, 2025). Additionally, slow-travel cultural bed-and-breakfast experiences incorporate traditional health services, blending leisure with wellness. Together, these collaborative efforts in both Malaysia and China illustrate a shared commitment to merging healthcare, accessibility, and cultural engagement—effectively appealing to and serving the rapidly growing elderly travel market.

These examples from Malaysia and China demonstrate how national policies, infrastructure investments, and service innovations can collectively foster a more inclusive tourism landscape for older adults. As the ageing population continues to expand, the capacity of destinations to cater to elderly travellers will not only determine their competitiveness in the “elderly tourism” market but also contribute to broader goals of social inclusion, public health, and sustainable economic growth. Understanding these dynamics is therefore crucial for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and researchers seeking to optimize tourism offerings for this rapidly growing demographic.

Challenges Faced by Elderly Travellers

While older tourism offers tremendous prospects for economic growth and social involvement, it also poses unique obstacles that influence travel behaviours and service requirements for this generation. Elderly travellers frequently face physical and health-related limitations, such as reduced stamina, chronic illnesses, sensory impairments, and mobility constraints, necessitating easy access to healthcare services, barrier-free facilities, and supportive environments on their journeys (Chang et al., 2022; Maresova, 2023).

Accessibility and infrastructure inadequacies continue to be significant barriers. Inconsistent communication of accessible amenities in transportation, accommodations, and attractions might delay trip planning and limit destination appeal for senior visitors (Domínguez Vila & Darcy, 2025).

In the digital age, low digital literacy exacerbates these issues. Elderly travellers may struggle to navigate online booking platforms, use digital navigation tools, or make electronic payments, leading to reduced autonomy and increased exposure to errors or fraudulent actions (Domínguez Vila & Darcy, 2025; Li et al., 2024). Concerns about safety, notably the possibility of scams or unverified travel brokers, deter independent travel, particularly in areas with weak consumer protection and a high prevalence of informal agents (Sugunaraj et al., 2022).

Aside from practical limitations, social attitudes and ageism add another layer of complexity. Disrespectful behaviour, stereotyping, or ignoring of the requirements of elderly visitors can have a negative impact on their dignity and travel experience (Kolos & Kenesei, 2023). Cultural variables also have a substantial impact on older travel behaviour and expectations. For example, Malaysian elderly travellers frequently prioritise religious compliance, therefore access to halal meals, prayer facilities, and modest service offering is crucial (Saad et al., 2024). In contrast, Chinese elderly travellers choose group outings, family engagement, and itineraries that correspond to their physical pace, reflecting cultural traditions and communal travel standards (Huang et al., 2024).

Despite these findings, much of the extant research is limited to single-country or destination-specific contexts, limiting our understanding of universal vs culturally particular difficulties. Cross-cultural studies are crucial for finding shared difficulties and context-dependent demands (Chang et al., 2022; Domínguez Vila & Darcy, 2025). However, they remain scarce. A comparative approach is especially useful given Malaysia and China's disparities in demographic trends, cultural and religious aspirations, technological readiness, governmental contexts, and infrastructural quality.

A qualitative comparative analysis of these two countries can reveal how common barriers such as health restrictions, accessibility issues, digital literacy gaps, and safety concerns interact with country-specific factors such as Malaysia's travellers' religious requirements and China's structured group tour culture. Such an understanding is required to develop culturally sensitive, practical recommendations for legislators, destination planners, and service providers. Finally, addressing these difficulties in a comprehensive manner is critical to assuring dignified, inclusive, and supportive tourism experiences for the growing global number of older travellers.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative inductive exploratory design using a multi-case study approach to investigate the lived experiences of elderly travellers in China and Malaysia. An inductive exploratory design was deemed most appropriate as it allows for the discovery of nuanced themes directly from the participants' narratives without the constraints of pre-existing theoretical frameworks, particularly regarding these two distinct Asian contexts. By utilizing a multi-case study approach, the research treats China and Malaysia as two distinct "cases," allowing for a robust cross-national comparison of how different socio-cultural and policy environments shape elderly tourism experiences. Participants were selected using purposive

sampling to ensure they met specific criteria: being aged between 60 and 85 years and having travelled domestically or internationally within the last two years. This age range was chosen to capture the experiences of elderly travellers who often face more significant health and accessibility challenges. To reach individuals who might have a limited digital presence, snowball sampling was also employed, leveraging the networks of initial participants to recruit a more diverse sample. A total of 20 participants (10 from Malaysia and 10 from China) were interviewed, a sample size sufficient for thematic depth in qualitative case studies. Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews lasting between 30 to 45 minutes, conducted in major senior-friendly destinations including Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Langkawi in Malaysia, and Beijing, Xi'an, and Shanghai in China. All sessions were audio-recorded with written informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and, where necessary, translated into English by bilingual researchers to maintain original sentiment and context. The data were analysed using Thematic Analysis, following an inductive coding process to generate overarching themes that captured both universal challenges—such as ageism, technological barriers, and safety concerns—and country-specific nuances, such as religious considerations in Malaysia and group-oriented travel preferences in China. Data saturation was reached by the 20th interview, at which point no new information or themes emerged, ensuring the credibility, depth, and completeness of the findings.

Findings

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The study involved 20 elderly travellers aged between 60 and 85 years, evenly split between Malaysian and Chinese participants. Most respondents were retirees, with varied educational backgrounds and travel experience. The majority reported travelling at least once a year, with trips ranging from domestic short breaks to international holidays. Gender distribution was balanced, and most participants preferred travelling with family members or in organized groups. Table 1 depicts the profiles of respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Malaysian Elderly Travellers (n=10)	Chinese Elderly Travellers (n=10)
Age Range	65–70: 4	65–70: 5
	71–75: 3	71–75: 2
	76–80: 2	76–80: 2
	81–85: 1	81–85: 1
Gender	Male: 5	Male: 5
	Female: 5	Female: 5
Marital Status	Married: 8	Married: 9
	Widowed: 2	Widowed: 1
	Secondary: 3	Secondary: 4
Education Level	Diploma/Degree: 5	Diploma/Degree: 4
	Postgraduate: 2	Postgraduate: 2
Travel Frequency	Once a year: 6	Once a year: 5
	Twice a year: 4	Twice a year: 5
Preferred Travel Mode	Group tours: 6	Group tours: 8
	Independent: 4	Independent: 2

Destination Type	Domestic: 4	Domestic: 3
	International: 6	International: 7

Source: Authors

Shared Challenges Faced by Elderly Travellers

Theme 1: Physical and Health Limitations

All respondents highlighted the impact of physical limitations on their travel experience. Fatigue from long walking distances, difficulty with stairs, and managing chronic conditions such as arthritis, hypertension, or diabetes were commonly mentioned. A Malaysian participant (M4) remarked:

“I enjoy sightseeing, but after walking for more than an hour, my knees start hurting. If there are too many stairs, I will just wait for my friends below.”

A Chinese participant (C7) shared a similar concern:

“In places like the Great Wall, I couldn’t climb very far. I wished there were more rest areas so we can enjoy without feeling exhausted.”

Both groups stressed the importance of accessible facilities, wheelchair ramps, handrails, and nearby medical support.

Theme 2: Unfamiliarity with Technology

The shift towards digital booking, mobile navigation, and e-payment systems presented significant difficulties for participants. Many preferred to rely on family members or travel agents. As explained by a Malaysian respondent (M2):

“I can use WhatsApp, but book hotels or paying online makes me nervous. I’m afraid I will press the wrong button”

Similarly, a Chinese participant (C5) commented:

“My son helps me buy tickets on his phone. I don’t understand these apps, especially when they are in English.”

Theme 3: Vulnerability to Scams

Both Malaysian and Chinese elderly travellers reported instances of overcharging, misleading promotions, and unregulated taxi services. A Malaysian participant (M7) recounted:

“In one local market, the prices doubled when they saw we were tourists. It felt unfair, but we didn’t want to argue.”

From the Chinese side, a respondent (C3) shared:

“A driver charged us triple for a short ride. We didn’t know the normal rate, so we paid. Later, our guide told us it was too much.”

Theme 4: Age Discrimination

Subtle ageism was reported, often in the form of being ignored, spoken to impatiently, or assumed to be incapable of independent decision-making. A Malaysian respondent (M9) expressed:

“Some young staff just talk to my daughter instead of me, even though I am the one asking the question.”

Similarly, a Chinese participant (C1) recalled:

“When I asked for directions, they spoke too fast, as if I couldn’t understand. It made me feel unwelcome.”

The shared challenges reported by both groups (physical limitations, technology anxiety, and vulnerability to scams) are justified by previous studies. For instance, Che Had et al. (2023) note that the transition into old age is frequently accompanied by physiological deterioration and psychological shifts that impair daily functioning and mobility. Consequently, some elderly travellers report having to exert significant effort just to navigate and utilize standard travel facilities (Wan et al., 2022). Moreover, "technostress" phenomena are common among elderly travellers. Elderly travellers always feel alienated by app-centric travel. This technology anxiety in elderly travellers add the emotional side: anxiety, resistance, fear of getting scam, and hesitation when digital devices or systems become unavoidable (Park et al., 2026; Shin & Baek, 2023).

Differences Between Malaysian and Chinese Elderly Travellers

Malaysian Travellers

For Malaysian participants, religious considerations were a key priority, especially when travelling abroad. Availability of halal food, prayer facilities, and culturally respectful services influenced destination choice. As noted by M5:

“If I can’t find halal food, I feel uncomfortable. Sometimes I bring instant noodles just to be safe.”

Accessibility concerns were also raised more frequently for domestic destinations, with reports of uneven elderly-friendly infrastructure. M8 remarked:

“Even in famous local spots, there are places without ramps or clean toilets for seniors.”

Chinese Travellers

Chinese elderly travellers placed greater emphasis on the pacing of tours, preferring itineraries with sufficient rest breaks. C6 explained:

“We like to visit many places, but not too fast. I need time to enjoy and take photos, not just rush from one place to another”.

Physical challenges were particularly noted in large heritage sites, where extensive walking or climbing was required. C9 shared:

“Some historical sites are beautiful but very tiring. After a few hours, I cannot continue.”

While Malaysian and Chinese elderly travellers share common challenges—physical limitations, technology barriers, vulnerability to scams, and age discrimination—distinct cultural and infrastructural differences shape their travel priorities. Malaysian seniors are particularly concerned with religious requirements and domestic accessibility gaps, while Chinese seniors focus on pacing and managing physical exertion in large-scale attractions.

These differences can be justified by variations in socio-cultural values, demographic structures, and tourism system development in each country. In China, Confucian values emphasise health preservation, harmony, and collective experiences, leading seniors to prefer slower-paced itineraries and to carefully manage physical exertion (Kamonthon, 2026; Meng et al., 2024). This explains their concern with pacing, especially when visiting large and crowded attractions. In contrast, Malaysian seniors’ priorities are strongly influenced by religion. As Malaysia is predominantly Muslim, travel decisions often revolve around access to halal food, prayer facilities, and modest environments, making religious compliance a key determinant of satisfaction (Said et al., 2022).

Infrastructure also contributes to these differences. China’s extensive and mature tourism system, with large-scale attractions and high visitor volumes, requires seniors to focus on mobility and endurance (Gao et al., 2022). Meanwhile, Malaysia still faces gaps in age-friendly infrastructure, such as accessible transport and senior-oriented facilities (Noor et al., 2022; Rashid et al., 2022). As a result, Malaysian elderly travellers are more concerned with basic accessibility and service readiness. Overall, these variations reflect the interaction of cultural norms, religious obligations, and infrastructural development, highlighting the importance of context-specific elderly tourism strategies and universal accessibility. Table 2 below depicts the summary of the findings.

Table 2: Themes, Subthemes, and Representative Quotes

Theme	Subtheme	Representative Quote
Similarity		
Physical & Health Limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fatigue & mobility issues Need for rest facilities 	<p>“After walking for more than an hour, my knees start hurting.” (M4)</p> <p>“I wished there were more rest areas so we can enjoy without feeling exhausted.” (C7)</p>
Unfamiliarity with Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty with booking apps Language barriers in apps 	<p>“Booking hotels or paying online makes me nervous.” (M2)</p> <p>“I don’t understand these apps, especially when they are in English.” (C5)</p>
Vulnerability to Scams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overpricing in markets Taxi fare exploitation 	<p>“The prices doubled when they saw we were tourists.” (M7)</p> <p>“A driver charged us triple for a short ride.” (C3)</p>

Age Discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being overlooked by staff • Patronising communication 	Some young staff just talk to my daughter instead of me.” (M9) They spoke too fast, as if I couldn’t understand.” (C1)
Differences		
Malaysian-specific	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Halal food availability • Domestic infrastructure gaps 	“If I can’t find halal food, I feel uncomfortable.” (M5) Even in famous local spots, there are places without ramps.” (M8)
Chinese-specific	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tour pacing • Large tourist site challenges 	“We like to visit many places, but not too fast.” (C6) “Some historical sites are beautiful and big but very tiring to cover all.” (C9)

Source: Authors

Conclusions

Elderly travellers in both China and Malaysia encounter a set of interconnected issues that greatly influence their travel experiences. Among the most notable are physical and health constraints, unfamiliarity with technology, vulnerability to frauds, and subtle kinds of age discrimination. While these issues are generally shared, cultural and infrastructural variances give birth to diverse priorities for each group. Malaysian seniors place high importance on the provision of halal meals and culturally appropriate services, reflecting their religious needs and cultural expectations, but Chinese seniors are more concerned with pacing and the physical challenges of touring huge heritage sites. Addressing these concerns demands a double approach—ensuring universal accessibility, safety, and inclusivity while also customising methods to the specific needs of each country’s elderly travel industry.

From an academic perspective, this study makes an essential contribution to the growing literature on older tourism by adopting a comparative approach between two culturally dissimilar but demographically similar Asian nations. Previous research has largely focused on single-country situations, frequently disregarding the intricate interplay between universal and country-specific demands of senior travellers. By identifying similar and different issues, this study presents empirical evidence linking cultural expectations, infrastructure readiness, and travel behaviours. These findings expand the theoretical understanding of older tourism and support the integration of accessibility, cultural sensitivity, and technology adaptation into the broader discourse on inclusive tourism.

In practical terms, the research gives significant insights for politicians, destination managers, and service providers wanting to improve the elderly travel experience. In Malaysia, the findings indicate the need to boost halal food accessibility and to renovate elderly-friendly facilities in both urban and rural areas. In China, the results highlight towards the need of developing itineraries that contain more frequent rest stops and lower walking distances, particularly at heritage sites. Across both nations, offering multi-channel booking systems that cater to both digital-savvy and digitally challenged seniors, strengthening anti-scam measures, improving price transparency, and training tourism workers in age-sensitive communication are critical approaches. Furthermore, integrating cultural and religious requirements into

tourism products is vital to ensuring that services meet both universal accessible demands and culturally particular expectations.

Despite these contributions, the study has major drawbacks. The very small sample size of 20 participants—ten from each country—limits the generalisability of the findings. The geographical breadth was likewise confined to chosen metropolitan and heritage attractions, perhaps excluding perspectives from older tourists in rural or less-developed areas. Additionally, reliance on self-reported interviews may have introduced recall or social desirability bias, and the study's focus on problems may have emphasised the good parts of elderly travel experiences.

Future research should therefore try to enlarge the sample size, cover a broader range of geographical locations, and examine mixed method approaches that combine qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys to strengthen validity. There is also space to study the impact of future technology, such as AI-powered travel assistants and augmented reality navigation aids, in boosting accessibility and engagement for elderly travellers. Further research might also study the positive and motivational aspects of elderly tourism, as well as cross-generational travel dynamics, such as how younger family members affect elderly travel decision-making.

By addressing these research gaps and implementing the practical measures identified, policymakers and industry stakeholders can work towards developing a tourism environment that is age-friendly, respectful, inclusive, and responsive to the evolving needs of an ageing population in both China and Malaysia

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- Author Contribution Statement:** All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Nurzehan Abu Bakar was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, and overall supervision of the study. Lin Xue Song, Nur Habibah Irdina Musa, Mardiana Natasha Arbain handled data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. Aida Shafinaz Khairuddin, Nik Jasmira Jamaludin contributed to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.
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