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Travel and spending characteristics of the mature biker: An exploratory study

Kelly Ann Way  
*University of Arkansas - Main Campus, kway@uark.edu*

Lona J. Roberts  
*University of Arkansas - Main Campus, ljrobert@uark.edu*

Jean Turner  
*University of Arkansas - Main Campus, jturner@uark.edu*

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The Changing Motorcycling Market

A national trend of bikers over the age of 50 is evolving. Boomers are taking to the highways, roads, interstates and motorcycle festivals of America. According to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (2008) in 2003, 25.1% of motorcycle riders were 50 years old and older. Fifty years ago, the typical motorcycle rider was under 25 and searching for freedom through their motorcycles and the open road. The first exposure of these riders to motorcycles was through the world wars. Returning soldiers had observed that motorcycling was the main form of transportation in many European countries. Later, motorcycle riding was showcased in such movies as *Easy Rider*, *The Wild One*, and *Rebel without a Cause*, tying motorcycle riding to rebellion and freedom for many young Americans in the boomer generation (Dulaney, 2005).

Current movies such as *Wild Hogs* combined with celebrity riders such as Jay Leno, Harrison Ford and Arnold Schwarzenegger may have helped promote and enhance today’s image of the mature biker (Hersh, 2003). As the mature adult population continues to surpass any other age segment in the nation (516 million mature adults currently) (AARP, 2009), it is projected that motorcycle sales and participation will see the largest growth in the market segment composed of those age 50 and above. In 2002, Harley Davidson sold 263,653 motorcycles to the 50 and older segment (Nauen, 2003), solidifying the mature rider market of the motorcycle culture. Harley Davidson stated the reason for increased sales in the mature
adult market was simple, “they’re the ones with the cash” (Nauen, 2003). The riders making up the mature market are on average, better educated, more affluent and have greater expectations than the generation before them. They form a large and influential sector of the market (Avcikurt, n.d.).

While some of these mature riders have been riding since they were teenagers, many have picked up riding in recent years. The mature rider has traded in his or her minivan and khaki pants for a hog and have strapped on leather. Many are fulfilling lifelong dreams, or even fantasies, that were put on hold because of family commitments and responsibilities. The mature rider typically has more time and money to spend on recreational activities (Hersh, 2003). Evidence of their resources is seen in the sales to mature riders of cruising and touring motorcycles which sell for upwards of $50,000. Moreover, mature riders typically have more leisure time to participate in day and overnight touring, attend motorcycle festivals and enjoy long distance trips.

One motorcycle event that allows participants to enjoy scenic day trips, live entertainment and interaction with other motorcycling enthusiasts is Bikes, Blues, and Bar-B-Que (BBB). This event, held annually in Fayetteville, Arkansas, has seen a tremendous growth in participation of mature bikers. BBB has taken only 10 years to become one of the four largest motorcycle rallies in the country (Wallworth, 2009). In 2006 and 2007, the event had an estimated attendance of between 300,000 and 400,000 bikers from all fifty states and several other countries. In 2008, approximately 400,000 bikers were in attendance.

Despite the growing popularity of motorcycling, very little data exists identifying the interests of the mature rider. The current study investigates the mature riders’ spending habits
at motorcycle festivals (rallies), their leisure motivations regarding motorcycle riding and a demographic profile of the age 50 and older biker. The study contributes to a research area that is currently lacking, especially relative to the market growth realities described above.

The research questions of the study included: (1) What are the spending characteristics of the BBB age 50 and older tourists relative to hotel, restaurants and shopping? (2) What are the BBB 50 and older tourists shopping for in particular? (3) What are the shopping motivations of the age 50 and older BBB attendees? (4) What souvenir characteristics are important to a mature BBB attendee when selecting a BBB souvenir?

Literature Review

Adults over the age of 50 compose an important segment of the travel and tourism market. With an aging population, including the big bulge created by the baby boomers, joining the mature travel market, the question arises as to whether the travel industry and marketers fully understand the needs and wants of this market segment (Lehto, Jang, Achana, and O’Leary, 2008). Lehto, et al. reported that research in gerontographics has indicated that older consumers are not all alike. A variety of factors explain the various types of consumer behavior observed among midlife and older adults. Sixty percent of US travelers identified shopping as their favorite travel activity (Littrell, Paige, and Sung, 2004). These researchers continued discussing mature travelers as an increasingly important travel segment due to their level of wealth, high discretionary income, low consumer debt, increased free time, their tendency to travel greater distances and to travel for longer periods of time.

Many theories attempt to explain mature adults’ motorcycle purchasing patterns and participation in biker events and rallies. Nauen (2008) theorized that many mature adults are
trying to gain back the freedom they once had. They are not waiting for retirement but rather living their lives in the moment. Schouten and Alexander (1995) theorized that the core values of the subcultures of bikers were personal freedom, patriotism and American heritage and machismo. Schouten and Alexander continued by stating that biker values may resonate with the boomers’ subculture or they may simply be attracted to the style and mystique of the motorcycle culture.

Glasmer (1999) proposed that early theories might provide insight into the growth in numbers of midlife and older bikers. These older theories focused on appropriate physical and social behaviors for older adults relative to their role in society, health issues, cognitive decline and personality stability. Theories such as Continuity Theory suggest that in later life, most people reflect the same personality traits and are engaged in the same activities that they have been for a lifetime (Neugarten, Havighurst, & Tobin, 1968). Because of decreases in frailty among older adults, the extension of the healthy lifespan into the 80s and even 90s, and the improvement in the economic status of older adults, today’s gerontologists focus on what has been termed Successful Aging (Hooymann & Kiyak, 2008). Successful aging results from the integration of positive physical and functional health, high cognitive functioning, and active involvement with society (George, 2006; Rowe & Kahn, 1998). The 50+ bikers are exhibiting many of the characteristics that contribute to successful aging. The motorcycle festivals keep them engaged physically, cognitively, and socially. Glamser (1999) reported that many older riders expressed appreciation of the fellowship and camaraderie of motorcycling. In addition, he found older adults had reduced responsibilities which allowed them to pursue the hobby of motorcycling. Their appreciation of the camaraderie and use of their leisure time for
involvement in the boomer biker movement speak loudly about this cohort of midlife and aging adults’ investment in successful aging as they move toward their later years.

Priest and Gass (1997) suggested that there is a certain amount of high-risk recreation and sensation seeking equating to stress required by human beings which helps maintain sufficient levels of endorphins in the brain. Motorcycling is typically perceived as a risky activity and may be attractive to boomers whose lives have become routine and too safe.

According to Mediamark Research, Inc (2003), motorcycle riders are more likely than average to crave excitement and enjoy showing off. Many older riders are characterized by the touring bikes or cruisers which feature more relaxed seating positions and favor an off-road styling that may suggest rides on “the wild side.” Motorcycle manufactures and sales teams are actively pursuing the older, richer, thrill seekers with bikes that promise comfort and style. Midlife and older adults have become a vital market for many products and services. Mature adults today do not consider themselves old. They see themselves as active, attractive, fashion conscious, energetic, adventurous and knowledgeable about products and services. In order to respond to this critical segment of the tourism market, refined and accurate demographic profiles of boomer riders are needed.

Methods

Data Collection

This research is a quantitative study. The researchers developed an attendee questionnaire which was administrated during the four day 2009 Bikes, Blues, and Bar-B-Q (BBB) event held in Fayetteville, Arkansas.
The sample consisted of 750 attendees of the BBB festival resulting in the return of 721 useable surveys. Of the 721 useable surveys, 253 indicated the participant was 50 years of age or older. These 253 respondents became the focus of this paper.

Investigators were posted at three different locations during the event: in front of the BBB headquarters tent, in the food vendor area and in front of the merchandise vendor area. As attendees milled around the rally, they were approached by the researchers and asked to participate in the study. Data were collected on all four days of the festival at varying time intervals. Respondents were given an official BBB t-shirt from previous years as an incentive to complete the questionnaire.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire contained six sections. The first section focused on demographic information allowing the investigators to create a profile of the age 50 and older BBB attendees. The second section included questions relating to the age 50+ attendees’ shopping motivations. A Likert scale was used to measure the participants’ shopping motivations in general. The items were not limited to motivations for shopping when travelling. Questions in this section included: *Shopping is truly a joy, I try to accomplish just what I want to on a shopping trip, Shopping feels like an escape, I am disappointed if I have to go to another store(s) to complete my shopping, I enjoy shopping for its own sake, not just for the items I may purchase, I buy what I really need, During shopping I feel the excitement of the hunt, While shopping I feel a sense of adventure, Shopping is a nice “time out”, I continue to shop because I want to and While shopping, I’m able to forget my problems, and compared to other things I could do, the time spent shopping is truly enjoyable.* A 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree,
2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree and 5=strongly agree) was used to determine the degree to which a participant agreed or disagreed with each statement. Section three of the instrument asked the participants to identify the characteristics that were important when shopping for a souvenir. Questions in this section of the questionnaire included: The store/kiosk/vendor area is neat and tidy, Actual artisans are available to discuss their work or answer questions, The area displays the raw materials and tools used to make the item, The vendor encourages me to touch and feel the products, The salespeople are well-trained with details about the production of the item, In the store/vendor area I can experience the local lifestyle of the area I am visiting, The area is well-lit, The salespeople know about the general lifestyle of the local community, and The store/vendor area allows me ample opportunity to linger and soak up local culture. Again, a similar 5-point Likert scale was employed. Section four focused on the important characteristics of official BBB merchandise for the over 50 years attendees. These questions included: I will purchase an official BBB t-shirt while at the event, I will purchase other official BBB items while at the event, I do not like the official BBB shirt design and will purchase a t-shirt, hat, etc. from a street vendor, I think the official BBB headquarters are easily accessible to the participants, I wish the BBB staff would offer more designs of the logo on t-shirts, I would like to see a wider selection and sizes of the t-shirts with the official BBB logo, I like the official BBB logo, I think the price of the BBB official t-shirt is too expensive and I will purchase a BBB t-shirt because my friends did. The same 5-point Likert scale as used in sections two and three was used in section four. Section five requested that participants indicate their reasons for shopping at the BBB festival. These questions included: Shopping is nearby, Hours of event are convenient, Well laid out event, Easy to drive to, Safe place to shop, Low prices, and Many
friends shop here. This section also used a 5-point Likert scale but with different weights from those used previously: 1=highly unappealing, 2=unappealing, 3=neutral, 4=appealing, 5=highly appealing. The final section of the questionnaire asked questions related to the attendees spending, shopping and traveling habits while at the event.

Data Analysis

SPSS (version 17.0, Chicago, IL) was used for data analyses. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequencies, were calculated for all appropriate items on the questionnaire in response to research questions. This analysis procedure provides an accurate profile of the segment of attendees age 50 and older attending the event.

Findings

Participants 50 and older completed and returned 253 questionnaires during the BBB festival. The majority of the age 50 and older respondents were male (59%) and female (34%), 7% of the participants age 50 and older did not indicate their gender. This age group represented roughly one-third of the total respondents surveyed. Exactly 25% of the midlife and older bikers reported earning an annual salary of $30,000 to $50,000 while 22% reported an annual income of $50,000 to $75,000. Many of these participants were retired or self employed (37%), followed by employed in the professional area (27%), skilled craftsman (17%) and 11% were employed in the public sector or military. The respondents hailed from a variety of the states including Arizona, Iowa, New York and Indiana. However, 43% of this group of respondents were from Arkansas with an additional 46% coming from neighboring states such as Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri and Texas. Sixty-five percent of the respondents in this study were returning BBB festival attendees, 34% of whom spent an average of 1-2 days at the event.
When asked if they would return for another BBB event in the future, 91% of the respondents stated they would.

Descriptive statistics were used to determine the spending characteristics of the mature BBB tourists relative to hotels, restaurants, and shopping. Thirty-six percent of the respondents reported that they intended to spend $51 to $100 on shopping and souvenirs at the BBB event, 29% intended to spend $101 or more. Respondents also contributed to the local economy in the areas of food and accommodations. History has proven that hotel occupancy rates reach 100% in the Northwest Arkansas region during the BBB event. The data provided by these respondents indicated that the 32% of the respondents resided in the local community or lived within driving distance of the event. Another 26% of the respondents stayed in a hotel outside of Fayetteville. The average respondent intended to eat out in Fayetteville restaurants at least twice for breakfast (41%), twice for lunch (40%) and twice for dinner (37%) while they were at the festival. This data does not include food provided by vendors at the actual festival. Thirty-one percent of the participants planned to or had already attended 2-3 biker events in 2009. Of those, 75% indicated they had purchased or would purchase a t-shirt at those events.

In order to determine what merchandise the BBB tourist was shopping for in particular, the researchers asked questions that were directly related to the official BBB merchandise. Forty-one percent of the respondents indicated they were shopping for family and friends and 56% stated they were solely shopping for themselves. Forty-nine percent of the respondents knew exactly where to locate official BBB merchandise. Sixty-eight percent purchased official BBB merchandise rather than buying from street vendors providing non-licensed BBB merchandise which only 25% reported doing. When asked if they felt the price of the official
BBB t-shirt ($20) was appropriate, 37% felt that the price was too high, while only 15% indicated the price was right and 38% were indifferent about the price. Fifty-eight percent liked the official BBB logo while 43% would like to see additional designs of the logo on t-shirts at future events. Fifty-three percent would like to see a wider selection of sizes of t-shirts sporting the official BBB logo.

It was also found that when shopping for souvenirs, attendees 50 and older indicated that their shopping motivations were determined by the shopping area being neat and tidy (58%) and well lit (36%). Mature bikers want vendors or salespeople who can answer their questions (33%) and want to be able to touch and examine the souvenirs (34%) prior to purchasing.

Souvenir characteristics deemed important to the 50+ bikers included experiencing the local lifestyle or culture while shopping (34%) and wanting to see the raw products or tools used to create the souvenirs (37%).

Conclusion

The findings provided an accurate demographic profile of the midlife and older BBB attendees and their spending patterns. It was determined that the average BBB attendee was a male, over 50 years of age. He rode his motorcycle (61%) up to 400 miles to attend the event. The average 50 and older boomer biker stayed in an area hotel and ate out in Fayetteville restaurants an average of six times during their time at the event, which was typically two days. In addition, midlife and older bikers planned to spend from $51 to over $200 on official BBB souvenirs while at the event.
The information related to characteristics of the boomer attendees’ shopping preferences and their beliefs on shopping are extremely important to the motorcycle community. Prior to this study there was no clear profile of the shopping habits of mature bikers. This study provides a more definite profile of age 50 and above attendees their perspectives which will improve understanding of how to market merchandise to this segment of the market at biker festivals.

Researchers recommend that additional BBB official merchandise offerings be grouped into age appropriate designs, be designated through age specific segment marketing tactics, include additional sizes of existing merchandise, new merchandise categories such as denim and leather vests, do-rags/bandanas, key chains, expanded colors and expanded fashions, and more fashionable women’s t-shirts.

Future research should focus on the gender distribution of participants in the biker festivals such as BBB. As increasing numbers of mature women begin to participate in these activities, the preferences and shopping habits should be examined. The researchers plan to continue this study over a number of years to establish a pattern of shopping behaviors, housing and dining preferences, motorcycling accessories, and other market products appropriate for the growing numbers of boomer bikers. The researchers will continue to explore other factors relevant to tourism, hospitality, and apparel related to varying demographic profiles of the baby boomers’ increasing impact on the changing market of motorcycles and festivals centered around bikers.
References


