

Creating Jobs for Sustainable Tourism: A Phenomenological Study of Active Seniors' Satisfaction with Tourism Employment Programs

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Abstract

With the growth of the tourism industry, numerous job opportunities are being created worldwide. Senior citizens preparing for a second career can find employment opportunities within the tourism sector. This study adopts a phenomenological approach, focusing on individuals who have participated in senior tourism job creation programs. The purpose of this study is to provide implications for advancing sustainable tourism through the creation of senior employment opportunities. The academic implication of this study lies in examining qualitative dimensions of satisfaction related to senior tourism job creation through a phenomenological analysis of senior roles and their expanding participation in the tourism industry. The social implications include establishing a theoretical framework for senior tourism job creation, emphasizing the importance of collaborative efforts among the public sector, private sector, and academia, and presenting practical implications for the realization of sustainable tourism.

주제어 : Sustainable tourism, Phenomenological approach, Active senior, Job satisfaction

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I. Introduction

The World Travel and Tourism Council announced that in 2016, global production in the travel and tourism sector was \$ 7,163 billion, 10.2% of global GDP, increasing 3% from last year (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2017. 03).

The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) announced that global tourism to reach a record \$11.7 trillion GDP contribution in 2025, accounting for 10.3% of the global economy and supporting 371 million jobs (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2025. April, 9). The service sector is considered more desirable to create jobs than the manufacturing sector worldwide, and South Korea has a large portion of the service sector, accounting for 70 percent of employment (Han, 2017).

According to the Ministry of the Interior and Safety's analysis of the "2025 Resident Registration Population Statistics" released on the 4th, the elderly population aged 65 and over last year was 10,840,822, an increase of 584,040 (5.69%) from the previous year (10,256,782) (The chosun daily, 2026.01.04.). By 2025, South Korea is expected to enter a super-aged society, with one in five people aged 65 or older, and individuals aged 50 to 80 projected to account for approximately 40% of the total population (Oh, 2025). The senior market is considered one of the fastest growing sectors in the tourism industry (Schröder & Widmann, 2007; Traboulsi, Frau, & Cabiddu, 2018). With this growth in the tourism industry, many jobs are being created around the world. Senior citizens preparing for a second career can find employment opportunities in the tourism industry.

Today, as life expectancy increases, more people are anxious about life after retirement. World Health Organization (2015) suggests that by 2020 population aged 60 years and older will outnumber children younger than 5 years old and by 2050, they will represent nearly 22 percent of the world's population, totaling approximately 2 billion.

Many senior citizens are living active lives (Vági, Fegyó, Zainkó, Németh, & Kolesinski, 2012). In Korea, these senior citizens who actively seek and challenge

what they want to do after retirement are commonly referred to as ‘active seniors.’ After retirement, these active seniors seek to keep their connection to society by participating in socio-economic activities, rather than being alienated, but today they do not have the right opportunity. Along with this social phenomenon, the government seeks to present various policies on how to create jobs for senior and provide opportunities after retirement. This reality highlights the importance of sustainable job creation in the tourism industry.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted at the 2015 U.N. summit, highlight that tourism is a major area that contributes to sustainable development in developing countries. Today, sustainable tourism is defined by various scholars in various meanings as the trend of the times changes. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), it emphasizes the creation of jobs in tourism at its No. 8 goal, “Develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products” (UNWTO, 2017). Tourism can contribute to sustainable development by the creation of quality jobs, in turn contributing to economic growth.

In academic studies, sustainable tourism is defined as tourism. which meets the needs of tourists, industry, environment, and destination and takes into account both current and future economic, social and environmental impacts (Joo & Kim, 2018). This means that through a sustainability-oriented perspective, it encompasses the needs of both the present and future generations, and that the influence of tourism industry stakeholders must be taken into account in order for the tourism industry to grow (Liu, Tzeng, Lee, & Lee, 2013; Zolfani, Sedaghat & Zavadskas, 2015). Tourism employment must return to local residents, promoting regional distribution of economic benefits for sustainable tourism (Shakeela, Ruhanen, & Breakey, 2011). Creating senior jobs isn’t just about employment; it simultaneously promotes economic participation, social integration, and local cultural revitalization. Yoon (2016) shows that participating in senior tourism itself helps improve quality of life by strengthening health and social networks.

The purpose of this study is to provide implications for moving towards sustainable tourism by creating senior jobs. The academic implication of this

study is to measure the qualitative and quantitative satisfaction on the creation of senior tourism jobs through phenomenological studies on senior roles and expansion of seniors in the tourism industry. The social implications of this study are to establish a theoretic framework of theory in creating senior tourism jobs, highlight the importance of cooperative measures between the public sector, private sector and academia, and embodying implications for sustainable tourism.

II. Literature review

1. Active Seniors in Tourism Research

Active seniors are typically defined as older adults — often 50+ or 60+ — who have time, financial resources, health, and motivation to engage actively in leisure, travel, and social activities, in contrast to more passive or less mobile older travelers. They prioritize well-being, cultural experiences, learning, and interpersonal interaction in travel contexts (Chang, 2023).

It highlights that this generation is heterogeneous with diverse lifestyles, cultural backgrounds, health conditions, and economic resources, suggesting that age alone is insufficient to define their tourism behavior. The study emphasizes the importance of designing tourism products and services tailored to the specific needs and preferences of active senior travelers, and notes emerging research themes including innovation, digital engagement, and dynamic capabilities in tourism experiences for this segment.

2. Emergence and Definition of Active Seniors

Choi, Zheng, and Lee (2025) explain that the term active seniors were originally introduced by Bernice Neugarten to reflect a generation of older adults who remain socially, physically, and culturally active after retirement. This generation differs from past definitions of older adults through its enthusiastic participation in lifelong learning, voluntary work, and organized activities, indicating a shift toward proactive aging. Also, “Active seniors are identified as a

significant and diverse cohort within senior tourism literature, requiring tailored tourism experiences that reflect their lifestyle and motivational differences” (Kim et al., 2025).

3. Active Senior Generation in Leisure and Quality of Life

A Korean academic study on leisure behavior defines the active senior generation as individuals who continue to pursue dynamic lifestyles after retirement, emphasizing intrinsic motivation for leisure participation rather than purely economic or physical factors. It argues that active seniors increasingly allocate time and resources to leisure activities, which positively influence life satisfaction and overall well-being, and notes the lack of clear conceptual definitions in prior research (Oh, 2025). Yoon (2016) found that various tourism satisfaction factors felt by seniors during tourism activities—such as the destination’s attractions, activities, food, accommodation, and convenience facilities—positively affect seniors’ life satisfaction.

4. Active Seniors and Social Participation

Lee and Park (2020) examine the cultural and educational motivations of active seniors, finding that this generation seeks meaningful engagement through culture and arts education, which influences their social participation needs and perceptions of successful aging. The study supports the perspective that active seniors adopt a future-oriented life view and actively pursue value-added activities beyond passive retirement roles.

III. Methods

The purpose of this study is to conduct phenomenological studies focusing on those who have experience in participation of senior tourism job creation programs. This study aims to understand the essential meanings of tourism job attractiveness and job satisfaction as experienced by active seniors (Szivas, Riley, & Airey, 2003), positive socio-economic effects from sustainable tourism,

and quality work for the underprivileged job (Kang, Kim, & Lee, 2008; Kwon & Lee, 2016; Jang, 2018). Therefore, this study is conducted on the basis of personal experience, subjective opinions, and qualitative research methods are used more than quantitative research methods.

Based on Husserl's phenomenological philosophy, the methodological approach of this study is to describe experience as it is, to understand the nature of experience and to describe concepts (Shim, Jang, Jung, & Lee, 2019). The analytical method of this study aims to focus on the nature of participants' experience in senior tourism job creation programs, excluding subjective interpretations by researchers. As shown in Table 1, interview for this study were conducted with participants in the Senior Citizen Tourism Job Creation Program hosted by the Korea Tourism Organization in June 2019.

〈Table 1〉 The Program of Active Senior Tourism Job Creation

	Participant No. (%)	Certificated No. (%)	Employment No. (%)
Management	50 (100%)	44 (88)	10 (20%)
Interview participants		15 (30)	
Organizer	Korea Tourism Organization		
Period	June 17th, 2019 ~ June 21st 2019		

Note. Interviews conducted with participants of this program

Table 2 shows the interview results regarding actual employment cases after the training program and the type of training program, and the questions are as follows.

〈Table 2〉 Interview questionnaire

Item	Questions
Personal information	Age / Gender / Marital status Occupation (if none, no information)/ Length of employment
Questions regarding the Engaged Tourism Job Program:	Could you tell us about your motivation for participating in the training program? What are the strength and weaknesses of the training program? Could you tell us about your satisfaction with the training program? Could you tell us about any improvements you could make to the training program?

To collect data, five field interview sessions are planned within five months from the start of the study. A total of 15 participants were interviewed, with

each interview conducted as a semi-structured session lasting 20 to 30 minutes. The interview questions focused on sustainable tourism and tourism-related employment. Analysis of the interview data was conducted using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step analysis method, which is widely used in phenomenological research (Colaizzi, 1978; Shim, Jang, Jung, & Lee, 2019).

IV. Analysis

In accordance with the academic method used in phenomenological research, it was structured as meaning unit → subtopic → essential theme. A thematic phenomenological analysis was conducted based on participant narratives. The analysis focused on work and meaning in Act II, active seniors' perceptions of their work experiences, and the nature of their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with tourism and hotel job programs

1. Formulate meanings

This step involves repeatedly reading the entire statements of research participants to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The interview analysis results were categorized into positive and negative opinions. Meaning Units 1, 2, 3 and 4 have positive connotations and are as follows:

Meaning Unit 1: Participant A responded, "Act 2 of life... I am grateful for the opportunity I have been given and will work hard with a spirit of service." Participant C stated, "I feel happy that I have a place to go to work," indicating that she perceives work not as a "livelihood," but as a "meaning of existence" and a "gratitude."

Meaning Unit 2 emphasizes emotional satisfaction and relational value over financial rewards, with phrases like, "Regardless of the amount, I felt a small happiness" and "My salary was small, but my family's joy was great."

Meaning Unit 3: Participant D stated, "I have the physical strength to support me... and I feel confident that I can produce more output than the existing workforce." Participant F responded, "I can adapt to any situation." This

demonstrates a strong belief in self-efficacy and job competency.

In Meaning Unit 4, Participant B expressed a desire for social connections and a sense of belonging, stating, "Meeting people is important," and "Although it was a short relationship, I gained experience through interaction."

Meaning Units 5 and 6 reflect negative connotations and can be described as follows. In Meaning Unit 5, Participant A responded, "Housekeeping is not appropriate for older people." Participant B responded, "I've experienced inappropriate job assignments and violations of my dignity, as they offered me the most demanding and lowest-paying positions."

In Meaning Unit 6 Participant C responded, "I wonder what the intentions were behind this program," and Participant E responded, "It didn't utilize the participants' experience or abilities." This demonstrates a discrepancy between the program's intentions and participants' expectations.

2. Cluster meanings into themes

Sub theme 1, "Work as Meaningful Engagement in Later Life," reflects that work is not simply a means of livelihood, but rather a means of gratitude, service, and continuity of life. Subtheme 2 emphasizes "Emotional Rewards Over Financial Compensation," where family reactions, self-esteem, and daily rhythm are considered more important than salary level. Subtheme 3, "Strong Sense of Competence and Adaptability," reflects that active seniors perceive themselves as "ready-to-go" rather than "support staff." Subtheme 4, "Perceived Mismatch Between Ability and Job Allocation," reflects frustration, anger, and disregard for physically demanding job assignments. Subtheme 5, "Distrust Toward Program Intent and Outcomes," reflects that the lack of a clear explanation of policy objectives and outcomes led to dissatisfaction. Subtheme 6, "Social Connection as a Core Value of Participation," emphasizes that education and training are perceived as a platform for social connection before jobs.

3. Essential Themes: Develop textual (what) and structural (how) descriptions

As shown in Table 3, the contents of the essential themes are as follows.

〈Table 3〉 Essential Themes

Theme	Contents
Theme 1	Active Seniors Experience Work as a Source of Meaning, Dignity, and Gratitude in the Second Half of Life
Theme 2	Emotional Fulfillment and Self-Worth Often Outweigh Financial Compensation
Theme 3	A Critical Gap Exists Between Active Seniors' Perceived Competence and the Low-Skilled Jobs Offered
Theme 4	Program Dissatisfaction Emerges When Institutional Goals Fail to Align with Participants' Life Experiences and Expectations

Based on the above, the topics derived are as follows. “Participants perceived employment in later life not merely as a source of income but as a meaningful opportunity for gratitude, contribution, and continuity of life.” “Despite physical demands, many active seniors expressed strong confidence in their competence and adaptability, highlighting a perceived mismatch between their capabilities and the low-skilled positions offered.”

V. Discussion and Results

As a method of phenomenological research by Colaizzi (1978) for senior tourism jobs for sustainable tourism. Senior citizens interested in a second career can discover rewarding opportunities in the tourism industry. The sector offers a wide range of roles that leverage interpersonal skills, life experience, and adaptability—qualities often found in older adults. Tourism employers frequently value maturity, strong communication, and reliability, making this an attractive field for those seeking new professional paths later in life.

The social and practical implications of this study are as follows. First, The findings suggest that active seniors derive greater satisfaction from tourism employment when their accumulated life experience and professional skills are meaningfully utilized. Tourism employment programs should therefore move beyond simple auxiliary roles and be redesigned to incorporate positions such as cultural interpreters, local storytellers, program facilitators, or mentors. Systematic assessment of seniors' prior careers can enhance role-person fit and

job satisfaction.

Second, participants' satisfaction was influenced more by a sense of meaning, recognition, and social contribution than by financial compensation alone. This indicates the need for management practices that emphasize respect, feedback, and inclusion. Practitioners should position active seniors not as welfare beneficiaries but as valuable members of the tourism workforce.

Third, senior employment in tourism contributes directly to the social sustainability of destinations by promoting social inclusion and active aging. Policymakers and destination managers should incorporate the quality of senior employment into sustainable tourism frameworks and evaluation indicators, alongside environmental and economic dimensions.

Fourth, the study highlights dissatisfaction associated with short-term, project-based employment and limited continuity. To enhance sustainability, tourism employment programs should adopt longer-term or sequential job structures that allow active seniors to progress from participation to advanced or mentoring roles. Collaboration among local governments, tourism organizations, and private-sector stakeholders is essential to establish stable employment pathways.

Fifth, as tourism services increasingly rely on digital technologies, some active seniors experience barriers related to digital skills. Rather than using digital competence as a selection criterion, programs should provide tailored digital training and foster intergenerational collaboration to support seniors' effective participation in technology-mediated tourism environments.

Finally, satisfaction was closely linked to the extent to which seniors felt their perspectives were considered during program planning and implementation. Practitioners should institutionalize participatory mechanisms, such as focus group interviews and regular feedback sessions, to ensure that seniors' lived experiences inform the design and refinement of tourism employment programs. The social implications of this study are to build a theoretical framework in creating senior tourism jobs, highlight the importance of cooperation measures among the civil sector, the government, and the academic community, and embody the implications for sustainable tourism. This will contribute to the qualitative growth as well as the quantitative growth of jobs in the tourism

sector. The results of this study may give implication to human resource development, long life education. In particular, the result of this study will provide a concrete example of how to train senior workers in the government sponsored programs as well as company's training course.

This study will provide grounds for theoretical framework that can be helpful for the implementation of future tourism job education through the categorization of contents presented in this study along with feedback of senior tourism job-related education conducted by the government. After presenting the results of qualitative research in terms of the satisfaction of senior job creation programs for sustainable tourism, we will conduct a survey focusing on those who participate in senior tourism jobs projects to conduct follow-up studies related to this research topic.

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