

# BOOMERS AND SENIORS: THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND LEISURE PARTICIPATION

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**Abstract.**—The 76 million Americans in the Baby Boomer population are the force behind the changing demographic picture of society today. Boomers' spending habits and lifestyle choices will also have a powerful influence on retirement and leisure in the coming decades. Boomers will redefine retirement and are expected to demand more than current senior programs and facilities offer. It will be profoundly important for recreation professionals to understand the leisure values of this cohort in order to provide adequate programs, facilities, and services. The purpose of this study was to explore the recreation and leisure values and preferences of tomorrow's seniors—as compared to current and past generations of seniors—to try to understand what boomers will be seeking in community recreation programs. Differences in the recreation and leisure values and preferences of boomer generation men and women are also explored.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The United States is home to nearly 76 million Baby Boomers (people born between 1946 and 1964). The first wave of America's boomer generation will turn 65 years old in the year 2011 and their varied life experiences, values, and expectations will shape their notions of retirement (Cochran 2005). Since their births, the boomer generation has received significant attention from demographers, politicians, marketers, and social scientists. Boomers are unique in their popular culture and values, and they are healthier, wealthier, and more educated than any past generation (Freedman 1999). Boomers are known for working hard, playing hard, and spending hard (Ziegler 2002).

Boomers are going to redefine retirement as they have redefined every stage of their lives (Dychtwald 1999). Based on their past and current lifestyles, they are expected to remain active in retirement, demanding dynamic, vibrant programs rather than being the passive recipients of services (Cochran et al. 2006). In response, recreation professionals will need to recognize that boomers have different leisure values and interests than past generations of seniors. These professionals must be prepared to deliver a wide range of leisure opportunities and to address a new set of demands from the boomer generation (Cochran 2005).

## 1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the recreation values and community recreation preferences of tomorrow's seniors. Previous research provides significant information about leisure motivations, leisure constraints, and the impacts of leisure satisfaction on the lives of seniors in various age groups, specifically those age 70 years and older (Ragheb and Griffith 1982, Russell 1987, Crawford et al. 1991, Valler and O'Connor 1991). However, little is known about the leisure value differences between boomers and today's seniors or about the differences between men and women in these two age groups. This study focused on non-moral leisure values regarding leisure program participation. Non-moral leisure values can be defined as "personal assessments of the worth or utility of leisure" (Jeffres and Dubos 1993, p. 205). Examples include the social benefits of leisure, the physical benefits derived from an activity, or even the feeling of general goodwill that can result from participating in leisure activities (Kretchmar 2004).

## 2.0 METHODS

We conducted a mail survey focusing on leisure participation values and divided the respondents by age into "Boomers" and "Current Seniors." Further analysis was conducted by gender. The six categories of leisure values on the survey were "Competitive," "Educational," "Physiological," "Social," "Relaxation," and "Aesthetic." The overarching research question was,

**Table 1.—Demographics**

| Age Group        | Male ( <i>percent</i> ) | Female ( <i>percent</i> ) |
|------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Boomers (n= 114) | 31                      | 69                        |
| Seniors (n=71)   | 46                      | 54                        |

“Is there a statistically significant difference between boomers’ and seniors’ gender preferences and leisure participation values in each of these six areas?” In other words, do the leisure activity preferences of male and female boomers and seniors differ because of their sense of competitiveness, need for education, desire for socialization, physiology, desire for relaxation, and/or aesthetic factors?

## 2.1 Participants

A voter registration list was obtained for two townships in western New York. A short list of residents over the age of 50 was compiled. This process yielded a population pool of 4009 persons. After obtaining approval from Institutional Review, we mailed surveys to a random sample of 1002. Two hundred and eighteen surveys were returned after a second reminder was mailed, resulting in a response rate of 22 percent. This percentage is generally considered to be a low response rate for a survey (Babbie 1990, Aday 1996), but according to Vissner et al. (1996) and Keeter et al. (2006), a low response rate on direct mail opinion surveys does not necessarily yield inaccurate results. Demographic information about the participants is provided in Table 1.

## 2.2 Survey

The survey was modified from an existing Customer Satisfaction Survey administered at the local senior center. Survey items also included elements from the Cochran Baby Boomer Quiz (Cochran 2005) to address leisure participation values and the importance of participation in recreation activities. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of 23 different reasons why they might participate in leisure and recreation activities (for example, “to compete against others,” “because I am good at it,” and “to improve my skills or knowledge”). Response options ranged from 4-“very important” to 1-“not important”. Each of the 23 reasons belonged to one of the six categories of non-moral values (Competitive, Educational, Physiological,

Social, Relaxation, and Aesthetic). The Competitive Value measured the importance of competitiveness as a motivation to participate in recreation activities. The Educational Value measured the importance of participating in recreational activity for educational purposes. The Physiological Value measured how important recreational activities were for physiological development and relaxation for the participant. The Social Value measured how important it was to participate in recreational activities for the purpose of being with family, friends, or others. The Relaxation Value measured the importance of “doing something different from work” or having time to oneself. Finally, the Aesthetic Value measured the importance of “simply for pleasure” and “to enjoy nature” in recreation. The items that corresponded with each subscale are listed in Table 2.

The second section of the survey requested demographic information about age, gender, level of education, gross annual income, and race.

**Table 2.—Leisure participation values**

| Value                | Sub-items                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Competitive</b>   | To compete against others<br>Because I am good at it<br>To show others I can do it<br>To improve skills or knowledge<br>For a challenge<br>For excitement<br>For risk and adventure |
| <b>Educational</b>   | To learn new skills and abilities<br>To be creative<br>To expand my intellect                                                                                                       |
| <b>Physiological</b> | For physical health or exercise<br>Relaxation of mind, body, spirit                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Social</b>        | To keep me busy<br>To help my community<br>To be with my family<br>To do things with my friends<br>To meet new people<br>For cultural interaction                                   |
| <b>Relaxation</b>    | Something different from work<br>To be alone<br>To be away from family                                                                                                              |
| <b>Aesthetic</b>     | Simply for pleasure<br>To enjoy nature                                                                                                                                              |

## 2.3 Leisure Participation Values

Respondents' composite scores were tallied for each subscale; the possible scoring range for each subscale depended on how many items were in that subscale. For example, 7 items were related to competitiveness and each item could be scored between 1 and 4, for a total composite range of 7 to 28. Likewise, only 2 items were in the Physiology and Aesthetic subscales, for a total composite range of 2 to 8. During analysis, composite scores for each of the six subscales were divided into three levels: "high," "medium," and "low." For example, for Competitiveness, a composite score of 7-14 = Low, 15-21 = Medium, and 22-28 = High. For Physiology and Aesthetics, a composite score of 2-4 = Low, 5-6 = Medium, and 7-8 = High.

## 2.4 Reliability

Reliability analyses (Cronbach's alpha) were conducted on the four subscales and the composite items. The Recreation and Leisure Participation subscale was found to have a high internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha = .85$ ), and six composites yielded an internal consistency coefficient of .74. Face validity for the instrument was established through consultation with a panel of experts.

## 2.5 Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS®), version 16.0 (SPSS, Chicago, IL), was used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics were calculated for demographic items and all subscales. Frequency statistics and chi-square analysis were conducted to answer the research question regarding the difference between male and female boomers and seniors' leisure participation values.

## 3.0 RESULTS

The mean age of the participants was 60.47, SD = 7.090. Of the participants, 61.6 percent were classified as boomers and 38.4 percent were classified as seniors based on age.

The chi-square analysis revealed a significant difference between observed and expected responses of males and females regarding the level of importance of three of the six composite variables for leisure participation:

educational values ( $\chi^2_{(2)} = 10.281, p < .05$ ), physiological values ( $\chi^2_{(2)} = 10.733, p < .05$ ), and social values ( $\chi^2_{(2)} = 7.360, p < .05$ ). See Table 3. Educational values are related to learning new skills, being creative, and expanding knowledge and understanding. Fewer male boomers (25.7 percent) than female boomers (55.8 percent) reported a "high" preference for the educational value of leisure participation. Physiological values measure participation based on health or exercise and the relaxation of mind, body, or spirit. Our findings revealed a difference between male and female boomers regarding their preference within the physiological value of recreation activities. Significantly more male boomers (17.1 percent) than female boomers (1.3 percent) had "medium" composite scores for physiological values. Social values are related to being with family and friends, meeting new people, or engaging in community and cultural interactions. More male seniors (30.8 percent) reported being "low" on the social value scale for leisure participation than did female seniors (5.4 percent). This difference implies that male seniors place less importance on the social value of leisure than female seniors.

There were no statistically significant differences between the genders for both the boomer and senior groups regarding level of preference for the other three leisure participation values: "competitive," "relaxation," and "aesthetic."

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore what tomorrow's seniors are seeking in community recreation programs by collecting information about their recreation and leisure values. Leisure programming includes a number of approaches and theories, but the key for recreation planners and leisure service providers is always to understand the values of the cohort being served (Cochran et al. 2009). This study identified significant differences between men and women and between today's seniors and soon-to-retire boomers in three areas of recreation/leisure participation values. Further, the results provide insight into the potential differences in leisure activity patterns between boomers and seniors by gender, therefore allowing recreation professionals to develop a variety of meaningful leisure opportunities beyond today's senior programs.

**Table 3.—Level of preference for specific leisure participation values among male and female boomers and seniors (percentages and chi-square tests)**

| Variables             |        | Percentages |        |      | $\chi^2$ |
|-----------------------|--------|-------------|--------|------|----------|
|                       |        | High        | Medium | Low  |          |
| Competitive (N=172)   |        |             |        |      |          |
| Boomers (n=107)       | Male   | 12.5        | 71.9   | 15.6 | .527     |
|                       | Female | 13.3        | 65.3   | 21.3 |          |
| Seniors (n=65)        | Male   | 6.7         | 76.7   | 16.7 | 1.716    |
|                       | Female | 17.1        | 65.7   | 17.1 |          |
| Educational (N=176)   |        |             |        |      |          |
| Boomers (n=112)       | Male   | 25.7        | 37.1   | 37.1 | 10.281*  |
|                       | Female | 55.8        | 28.6   | 15.6 |          |
| Seniors (n=64)        | Male   | 40.7        | 37.0   | 22.2 | 3.368    |
|                       | Female | 59.5        | 32.4   | 8.1  |          |
| Physiological (N=182) |        |             |        |      |          |
| Boomers (n=114)       | Male   | 80.0        | 17.1   | 2.9  | 10.733*  |
|                       | Female | 93.7        | 1.3    | 5.1  |          |
| Seniors (n=68)        | Male   | 74.2        | 19.4   | 6.5  | 2.491    |
|                       | Female | 81.1        | 18.9   | .0   |          |
| Social (N=173)        |        |             |        |      |          |
| Boomers (n=110)       | Male   | 14.7        | 58.8   | 26.5 | 3.11     |
|                       | Female | 28.9        | 43.4   | 27.6 |          |
| Seniors (n=63)        | Male   | 19.2        | 50.0   | 30.8 | 7.360*   |
|                       | Female | 27.0        | 67.6   | 5.4  |          |
| Relaxation (N=175)    |        |             |        |      |          |
| Boomers (n=112)       | Male   | 5.9         | 32.4   | 61.8 | .355     |
|                       | Female | 9.0         | 33.3   | 57.7 |          |
| Seniors (n=63)        | Male   | 3.7         | 25.9   | 70.4 | 1.645    |
|                       | Female | .0          | 33.3   | 66.7 |          |
| Aesthetic (N=179)     |        |             |        |      |          |
| Boomers (n=113)       | Male   | 65.7        | 22.9   | 11.4 | 3.720    |
|                       | Female | 82.1        | 12.8   | 5.1  |          |
| Seniors (n=66)        | Male   | 62.1        | 27.6   | 10.3 | .705     |
|                       | Female | 70.3        | 18.9   | 10.8 |          |

\*p-value significant at the .05 level. There were significant differences between observed and expected responses of boomer and senior males and females regarding the preference of leisure activities for *Educational*, *Physiological*, and *Social* leisure participation values.

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The content of this paper reflects the views of the authors(s), who are responsible for the facts and accuracy of the information presented herein.