

# Age and Memory for Visual Information on Tourist Destinations

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## Introduction

Older adults are a key leisure travel market segment. Thus, it is imperative to understand age differences in how travelers respond to destination advertising used to prompt the destination selection decision.

While the memory literature often reports that younger adults outperform older adults in memory tasks, recent studies have provided evidence that older adults remember the content of texts in a qualitatively different way. These research results have been interpreted in a life-span cognitive developmental framework which posits that, as we age, we encode information from text in a qualitatively different manner.

To date, no studies have examined age-related memory differences in the organization of pictorial information. However, recent research has examined how *young* adults organize product information in memory and found that encoding instructions can affect what information is encoded and the level of abstraction of the encoding. Such may also be the case when people encode information from pictures of tourist destinations. For this study, the general research question was: When pictures of a tourist destination are viewed, does age and/or encoding instructions affect how this information is organized in memory?

## Method

Ninety younger (mean age = 21) and 90 older adults (mean age = 67) participated in this study. First, subjects completed a brief survey measuring demographic, health, and travel experience. Then, one third of the subjects each received one of three encoding instructions (to pay attention to the features or attributes of the pictures; to pay attention to their impressions of the picture; and no instructions). They then viewed the pictures of the tourist destinations (locations were not identified) for 30 seconds.

After completing a card-sorting task, they recalled in writing what they had seen in each photograph while being prompted as to the location of the picture. Subjects finally rated the attractiveness of each picture, how familiar they were with each tourist destination, and their travel history to these locations. Memory

protocols were coded for a number of dependent variables: correct object; absolute detail; relative detail; absolute location; relative location; conclusion about the scene; factual action; projected action; global summary; personal reference; embellishment; assessment of the picture; judgment; mistake; repeated object; and notation of an absent object. Data analyses of memory protocols used Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) to determine significant differences and interactions between age groups and encoding instructions on the scores in each coding category while controlling for participants' education and destination familiarity.

## Results

The analysis of all memory coding categories (by destination and combined) revealed *no age related differences* for memory of pictures of tourist destinations. There was however a main effect for instructions in three categories: assessments ( $f(2) = 3.312, p < .05$ ), absolute details ( $f(2) = 3.831, p < .05$ ), and personal references ( $f(2) = 3.330, p < .05$ ). The results suggest that when subjects were asked to pay attention to "impressions", the number of picture assessments and personal references was higher. The number of absolute details recalled was higher for the "features" instruction.

## Discussion

The lack of age-related differences in memory for pictures of tourist destinations is an interesting finding which has various possible explanations: 1) younger and older adults may process pictures in a similar manner; 2) this study frequently occurred at a facility familiar to the participants which may have reduced anxiety levels; 3) the recall of pictures of vacation destinations could be considered a relevant social-cognitive task.

Little research has been conducted concerning differences in memory for the content of pictorial stimuli. This is an area ripe for investigation, not only in the area of gerontology, but also in tourism and in advertising.

## References

Available upon request.