

Enhancing the Quality of Life for Thai Elderly through Tourism: Insights from the Private Sector

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Abstract

As Thailand transitions into a complete aged society, improving the quality of life for seniors has become a key socio-economic priority. Tourism stands out as a powerful tool for promoting comprehensive well-being in this demographic. This research article aims to analyze the tourism models developed by the private sector to enhance the quality of life for the elderly, and to propose guidelines for sustainable senior tourism development from a private-sector perspective. This qualitative study gathered data from documents, publications, and websites, as well as interviews with eight entrepreneurs, tour guides, and tour leaders who operate businesses related to or specifically serve elderly travelers. The data was subsequently subjected to content analysis through the researchers' perspective.

The research findings indicate that private sector entrepreneurs play a vital role in designing activities and services that promote the physical, mental, and social well-being of the elderly, with a primary focus on safety and age-appropriate experiences. However, the costs associated with both private and group tours vary significantly. This cost factor may act as a major barrier to tourism access for the Thai elderly. Consequently, a multi-stakeholder collaboration involving government agencies, the private sector, independent organizations, and local communities is essential to ensure long-term continuity and sustainability. In conclusion, the CHAN Model—comprising Cultural, Health, Soft Adventure, and Nature tourism—is proposed as an integrative framework to strengthen and standardize the Thai senior tourism sector. Briefly, cultural tourism helps boost cognitive and mental stimulation, social integration and reduced isolation, and sense of purpose and self-worth. Health tourism raises physical rejuvenation and pain management, mental health and stress reduction, and empowerment and autonomy. While soft adventure tourism lifts physical vitality and functional mobility, nature tourism

uplifts psychological restoration and sensory stimulation. If these four tourism sectors are well-integrated, they create a “quadruple-win” scenario.

Keywords: Quality of life development for the elderly, Tourism, Private stakeholders

Background and Statement of the problem

Since 2004, when Thailand first transitioned into an aging society with an elderly population of 4,281,681, the country has progressed into a complete aged society. Currently, the number of elderly citizens has reached 9,307,575 out of a total population of 64,953,635. This represents 14.33% of the total population (Department of Provincial Administration, Ministry of Interior, 2026). As Thailand’s elderly population continues to rise steadily (Figure 1), enhancing the quality of life for seniors has become a critical priority in policy-making and social development. Promoting Active Aging is no longer limited to healthcare or social welfare; it must also encompass participation in economic, social, and cultural activities which serves as a fundamental conceptual framework for aging policy development across numerous countries (WHO, 2002).

Despite Thailand’s continuous expansion of welfare and geriatric healthcare measures—such as the age-tiered living allowance and the 'Universal Coverage Scheme' (Gold Card) providing free medical services—these initiatives remain largely rooted in a care-based approach. While essential, such reactive strategies may be insufficient for the long-term enhancement of the quality of life for the Thai elderly population. In light of these challenges, it is essential to prioritize initiatives that encourage social participation and the creation of meaningful life experiences for the elderly. Existing research indicates that participation in social and recreational activities is positively correlated with higher life satisfaction levels and serves as a significant diminishing factor against the risk of depression among the elderly. As a multifaceted activity, tourism has the potential to boost senior quality of life and active aging by integrating relaxation, education, social engagement, and wellness (Qiao, G. and et.al., 2022; Sedgley, D. and et.al., 2011).

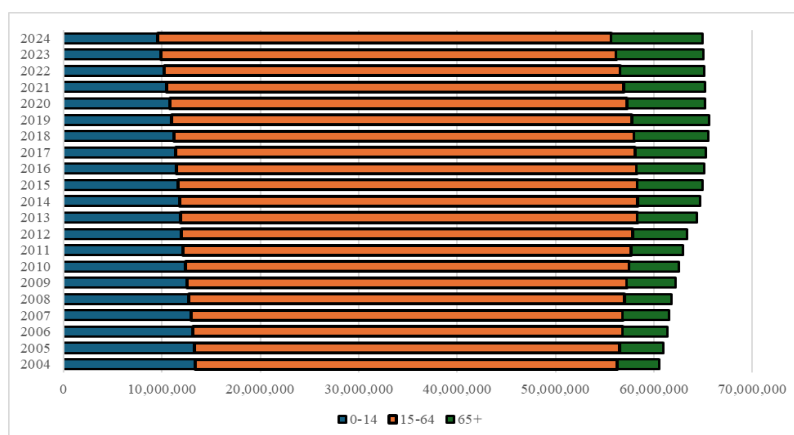


Figure 1 Population Demographics Across Three Age Groups (Children 0–14, Working Age 15–64, and Seniors 65+) during 2004–2024

Note: From “Official statistics registration systems” by Department of Provincial Administration, Ministry of Interior, 2026

Therefore, elderly tourism represents more than simple relaxation; it functions as a proactive driver of Active Aging, contributing significantly to the well-being of the older population. Research by Kim, Woo, and Uysal (2015) demonstrates that travel experiences have a direct impact on the life satisfaction and personal well-being of older adults. Furthermore, the Wellness Tourism framework proposed by Mueller and Kaufmann (2001) suggests that tourism can serve as a vital instrument for promoting both physical and mental health, particularly among populations requiring preventive care.

In preparation for the coming years, Thailand is inevitably transitioning into a Super-aged Society, where the population aged 65 and over will exceed 20%. This shift will impact various social systems, including healthcare, medical services, the economy, and tourism. It presents a new challenge for all sectors — particularly the private sector. Tourism entrepreneurs must prepare and develop specific strategies for senior tourism to ensure a comprehensive and holistic approach to serving Thailand’s elderly travelers.

Hence, it is essential to expand the conceptual framework from 'Economic Tourism' toward 'Tourism for Active Aging.' In this paradigm, the private tourism sector develops beyond its role in revenue generation and consumption to function as a social mechanism for enhancing the quality of life for the elderly. By developing products and services tailored to the physical and psychological capacities of older adults, the industry can effectively mitigate social isolation, foster engagement, and cultivate a sense of

purpose. At the macro level, the Silver Economy concept—supported by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2014)—identifies the aging population as a significant economic force capable of driving the second and third demographic dividends. Developing specialized sectors like senior-centric tourism is therefore essential for creating dual economic and social value. Aligning the quality of life of older adults with national economic drivers represents a key strategic move for sustainable development.

Objective

1. To analyze the tourism models developed by the private sector to promote the quality of life for the elderly.
2. To propose a roadmap for sustainable senior tourism from a private-sector perspective.

Expected benefits

1. To upgrade the standards for designing and planning tourism models that promote elderly well-being, while generating business growth opportunities in the senior market and ensuring the sustainability of the tourism sector.
2. To benefit government and private organizations related to elderly tourism and contribute to the advancement of educational programs and academic research in related fields.

Conceptual Framework

The Concept of Senior Quality of Life (QoL) and Active Aging

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2002) defines the elderly as individuals aged 60 years and older. Furthermore, the WHO categorizes this population into three subgroups: the Elderly (aged 60–74), the Old (aged 75–90), and the Very Old (aged 90 and above). Conversely, in developed regions such as Europe and North America, and in accordance with the United Nations (UN) definition, individuals aged 65 and over are classified as elderly. The quality of life for the elderly is a multidimensional concept encompassing physical, psychological, social, and environmental dimensions. Key components that define their quality of life include maintaining good health, achieving

life satisfaction, engaging in social interactions, and fulfilling meaningful roles within society.

The concept of Active Aging is a framework developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) that aims to promote the holistic well-being of the elderly — encompassing physical, mental, and intellectual health. It encourages social participation and a high quality of life to enable seniors to remain self-reliant for as long as possible. This is a rights-based approach, asserting that elderly individuals are entitled to these fundamental standards. The framework consists of three key pillars: (1) Health, (2) Security, and (3) Participation (WHO, 2002).

Concepts of Senior Tourism

Senior Tourism refers to itineraries specifically designed with activities, services, and facilities that align with the unique limitations and needs of older adults. The travel patterns and behaviors characteristic of retirees and senior tourists prioritize high-quality, age-appropriate experiences where value for money is a key consideration. Furthermore, this segment relies heavily on safety standards, reliable service, and comprehensive health and wellness care. Ideal destinations for senior tourists are those that offer easy accessibility, are located within close proximity to urban centers, and provide appropriate facilities and amenities (Korawan Sangkakorn and et.al., 2012).

Despite being regarded as a high-potential market with strong spending power, seniors exhibit distinct differences in their travel patterns and how they make travel decisions (Sangpikul, 2008; Littrell et al., 2004).

Strategic Advancement of the Senior Tourist Market

As provided by United Nations (2022), by 2050, it is expected that one in six people will be over 65 years old. The surge in the older population has gained significant interest within the tourism sector worldwide. Happiness can be defined as desirability, considering external criteria, such as virtue or holiness. Highly social activities like leisure and tourism are considered to have positive effects on the elderly’s mental health. The tourism experience facilitates healthy aging through three primary dimensions: physical revitalization via nature-based tourism; emotional well-being fostered by social engagement with peers, relatives, and local communities; and spiritual enrichment derived from transcendent travel experiences. (Chen, S. and et.al., 2026)

The contemporary tourism landscape is characterized by a growing interest in niche segments, specifically educational and soft adventure tourism, alongside an emphasis on cultural heritage and volunteering-based travel (Camara, E. and et.al., 2024). Social engagement serves as a critical determinant of well-being in later life, acting as a primary buffer against depression and social isolation. Within the tourism sector, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) are increasingly tasked with arranging 'memorable experiences' that highlight physical health benefits, particularly through interventions situated in natural environments. (Patterson & Balderas-Cejudo, 2023)

Role of the Private Sector in Tourism

In Thailand, the travel business refers to the organization of activities or services related to taking tourists to various destinations, both domestically and internationally. This includes providing facilities such as accommodation, meals, tour programs, and guide services. These operations are primarily conducted by the private sector. Furthermore, such businesses are regulated by the Department of Tourism, Ministry of Tourism and Sports, under the Travel Business and Guide Act, B.E. 2551. Operating without a license is considered illegal and subject to penalties, including the permanent revocation of the right to apply for a license in the future (Department of Tourism, Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2026).

Hence, the private sector is the main driver in developing tourism offerings, especially in the design of wellness, cultural, and experiential travel models. Furthermore, the flexibility and adaptability of the private sector enable it to respond effectively to the demands of the elderly demographic.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, utilizing secondary data from documents, research papers, publications, and various websites related to elderly tourism and the role of the private sector both nationally and internationally. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with eight participants, including business operators, tour guides, and tour leaders. The participants were selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria: they must operate a business related to elderly tourism or

have direct experience providing services specifically for seniors, and they must have at least five years of professional or business experience in the field.

Moreover, the study used semi-structured interviews covering four primary themes: (1) perspectives and experiences in senior tourism; (2) specifically designed activity patterns and services; (3) observed impacts on the quality of life of the elderly; and (4) challenges, obstacles, and policy recommendations. Data obtained from interviews and other sources were compiled and subjected to content analysis from the researchers’ perspective. The data were categorized according to primary points and presented as key themes.

Research Results

The data obtained from interviews with a total of eight participants—comprising business operators, tour guides, and tour leaders—can be categorized into the following four primary themes:

1) Perspectives and experiences in senior tourism: Informants noted an increasing trend among Thai senior travelers. This insight was largely gained through their experience guiding tours in Thailand and developed countries, especially in Europe. Consequently, this has driven a significant interest in targeting the senior traveler segment. Regarding the business operators, it was found that there has been a significant increase in senior groups requesting tour services over the past ten years. This has led to the implementation of targeted marketing strategies for the elderly segment, such as public relations efforts specifically branding tours as 'senior-only' and offering specialized promotions. Besides, these companies have selected strategic partners and suppliers who also prioritize the elderly market. On average, the sampled private sectors have been operating under these principles for approximately eight years.

“I have experienced two types of tours for seniors over 60: private group bookings with their own age group, and joining mixed groups with other travelers.”

(Tour operator 2)

“I have experience organizing temple tours that include merit-making and the symbolic release of animals to save them from slaughter.”

(Tour guide 1)

2) Specifically designed activity patterns and services for the elderly: Because the elderly differ significantly from other age groups, the core principle of caring for and serving this demographic is a heightened attention to detail. For example, domestic tour programs combine sightseeing with wellness-enhancing activities, such as visiting national parks paired with hot spring bathing, or visiting hill-tribe handicraft groups followed by local cooking classes. Not only that, daily itineraries are planned to minimize travel time, typically including visits to two attractions and one activity per day. However, the data indicates that tourism patterns for the elderly must prioritize safety and comfort. In addition, if tour guides possess knowledge or have undergone training in first aid and psychology, it significantly enhances the confidence and trust of the service users.

“Designing tour programs for older adults requires a primary focus on their physical and psychological capacities. Accommodation must feature appropriate accessibility, such as elevators, low-rise buildings, or minimized walking distances, to ensure both convenience and safety. Nutritional services must prioritize hygiene and incorporate pre-screened data regarding food allergies. Furthermore, tourism activities and site selection must be centered on risk mitigation, while transportation should offer high levels of comfort and emergency restroom facilities. Regardless of the destination type, safety remains the overarching priority.”

(Tour guide 3)

“The duration of travel for distant destinations is a critical factor in senior tour planning. High-altitude terrain and stairs present both time-management obstacles and heightened safety risks for elderly participants. Due to limited physical issues, packed single-day programs result in “cumulative fatigue,” where the impact of overactivity is felt more distressingly in the following days than in average tourists.”

(Tour operator 4)

3) Observed impacts on the quality of life of the elderly: It was found that the majority of elderly travelers are highly active and energetic, demonstrating a strong desire for independence and self-reliance. They appear cheerful and enjoy a satisfying experience. Many clients become repeat customers and actively refer new customers, leading to a growing customer base.

“From my observations, some clients have so much fun they forget they’re even tired. Some might struggle to walk on the first day, but by the second, they’re walking faster than the guide! The customers really love it; they tell me that every single time.”

(Tour guide 2)

“Our company has focused on senior tour programs for a long time, and the feedback has been excellent. Some Subdistrict Administrative Organizations (SAO) even hire us specifically to organize trips for their elderly residents. We’ve been doing this for two consecutive years now, and their evaluations always come back with high praise.”

(Tour operator 1)

4) Challenges, obstacles, and policy recommendations: Research findings indicate that specialized facilities—such as elderly-friendly buses, vans equipped with ramps, or extra-soft seating—result in higher tour program costs. This factor may serve as a significant barrier to access for Thai elderly tourists. Nonetheless, maintaining high standards for assistive equipment remains essential. Regarding accommodation, attractions, and various service points, current infrastructure is relatively supportive and well-suited for senior tourism. Also, there is a relatively limited workforce specializing in elderly tourism. While there are personnel who understand senior needs or have undergone geriatric care training, a significant labor shortage occurs during peak tourism seasons. This scarcity of qualified professionals poses a major challenge to the industry's growth.

“Key obstacles in senior tourism involve participants withholding critical health data and risk disclosures. Additionally, environmental and logistical factors beyond the organizers' control—including weather, traffic, and third-party service quality—pose risks to the overall execution and safety of the tour.”

(Tour guide 3)

“Uncontrollable environmental variables, such as unpredictable weather, can be mitigated through early forecasting and preventative measures. Logistical challenges specific to elderly travelers—including forgetfulness (e.g., medication) and physiological needs (e.g., frequent or prolonged restroom use)—require a slow-paced itinerary that allows for sufficient time at each destination. Service delivery must be efficient and emotionally supportive; it is critical to avoid conflict or insensitive language that may cause emotional distress. While travel obstacles are inevitable, proactive planning can minimize their impact.”

Finally, immediate access to emergency medical facilities throughout the journey is essential for rapid intervention”

(Tour operator 2)

Summary of the Study

Elderly tourism is an activity that aligns with the concept of quality of life for seniors meaning that participation in social activities and appropriate leisure can enhance overall well-being. As the result, the private sector in the tourism industry does not only play an economic role but also serves a social function in increasing the quality of life for the Thai elderly population.

The private sector has placed increasing importance on the development of elderly tourism, driven by a steady rise in market demand. Tourism is viewed not merely as a leisure activity anymore, but as a vital instrument for physical and psychological rehabilitation. Consequently, tourism models aimed at enhancing the quality of life for seniors should focus on wellness tourism that provides both physical and mental well-being—such as Thai traditional massage and health rehabilitation programs. Furthermore, cultural tourism that emphasizes learning about local ways of life and traditional wisdom should be integrated, as these experiences contribute significantly to the physical and mental health of the elderly.

Regarding the guidelines for sustainable elderly tourism development from a private sector perspective, two key areas are identified: (1) Service Design and Infrastructure: The private sector is actively enhancing facilities to accommodate the elderly. Examples include scheduling fewer daily activities, prioritizing low-impact movements, and ensuring strict safety standards during transportation. This also includes providing accessible accommodation featuring ramps and safety-compliant bathrooms. (2) Social and Economic Value Creation: Senior tourism fosters social participation and reduces feelings of isolation. Additionally, it generates revenue for local communities, creating a positive impact on both the well-being of the elderly and the broader economic system

Discussions

The research findings align with the World Health Organization's (WHO) Active Aging framework across five key dimensions, as follows:

1) Psychological Well-being and Self-Esteem: The study reveals that travel experiences play a crucial role in relieving depressive symptoms. The tourism industry is responding by developing lifelong learning initiatives that encourage seniors to explore new interests. By facilitating social interaction, these programs combat the sense of social isolation often felt by the elderly. These observations support (Ratanapaitoonchai, 2014) conclusion that outdoor leisure activities are vital for triggering the release of 'happiness' neurotransmitters.

2) Universal Design and Infrastructure: Insights from industry stakeholders reveal that infrastructure is the 'make-or-break' factor for elderly well-being. By reconstructing facilities with Universal Design features like accessibility ramps and grab bars, businesses provide more than security—they empower seniors with functional autonomy. This independence is recognized as a primary benchmark for a high quality of life.

3) Impact of the Silver Economy: Private sector perspectives identify the elderly as a high-potential segment characterized by significant purchasing power and extensive leisure time. In Thailand, the cultural status of the elderly as the 'pillars of the home' means their preferences often drive family spending. By expanding Wellness Tourism through offerings like regional superfoods and medical-leisure packages, the industry can stimulate community-based economic growth. This strategy upgrades industry standards and shifts the market toward a more inclusive, family-oriented travel model.

4) Responsibility and Safety: The private sector identifies trust as the primary driver of service excellence. Utilizing guides with Elderly Care Training effectively reduces stress for both seniors and their relatives. Ultimately, these safety-first initiatives are directly linked to improved life satisfaction, reinforcing the social value of specialized tourism services.

5) TravelTech: As technology adoption grows among the elderly, the private sector has an opportunity to provide accessible digital platforms. Booking applications that prioritize ease of use help seniors maintain their independence and self-reliance.

This technological empowerment is essential for ensuring that older adults feel capable and autonomous in their travel trails.

Tourism facilitates social engagement, reducing isolation and improving self-worth for seniors. This finding aligns with the Successful Aging framework proposed by Rowe and Kahn (1997), which posits that maintaining high levels of social engagement and meaningful social roles is a fundamental component of aging successfully." Rather than being mere 'consumers,' elderly travelers act as 'participants' in social and cultural exchanges. Group travel with peers, cultural immersion, and nature-based activities all foster social engagement, which yields positive effects on psychological well-being. This is corroborated by the research of Kim, Woo, and Uysal (2015), which confirms that meaningful travel experiences significantly impact long-term life satisfaction and subjective well-being. Consequently, it is imperative to design senior tourism initiatives that prioritize appropriate and meaningful participation.

The tourism industry acts as more than just a financial driver; it is a vital social tool for promoting senior well-being. A critical finding of this study is that tourism can cultivate a 'sense of life meaning' for older adults, which aligns with the Japanese concept of *Ikigai*. The work of Akihiro Hasegawa (2003) supports this, indicating that seniors who possess a sense of *Ikigai* exhibit significantly lower levels of depression and higher overall life satisfaction. Thoughtfully designed tourism, including cultural learning and life-reflection programs, empowers seniors to perceive their own worth and contribution to society. These observations corroborate the research of Michiko Kumano (2018), which suggests that a sense of purpose (*Ikigai*) emerges through maintaining social roles and engaging in activities that carry personal significance.

Enhancing the quality of life for the elderly alongside driving the economy through domestic tourism is a key policy in many countries. For instance, in Japan, private sector providers offer comprehensive services specifically for the senior demographic. A notable example is Japanet Takata Co., Ltd., which offers specialized 10–12 day cruise programs around the Japanese islands. These cruises provide sightseeing experiences and activities designed to promote both physical and mental health. All Japan Tours offers specialized group travel services tailored specifically for seniors, featuring custom-designed coaches that prioritize safety and comfort. These vehicles are equipped with spacious seating and

individualized climate control systems. The vehicles also support assistant installations, such as wheelchair-accessible boarding systems, to meet the specific requirements of the elderly demographic. This approach produces a high quality of life and cultivates 'Ikigai'—a sense of purpose—enabling the elderly to recognize their own self-worth. (Japanet Takata, 2026)

This research links the concept of Active Aging (WHO, 2002) with senior tourism frameworks to establish a clear standard for Thai elderly tourism, namely the CHAN Model. The details of this model can be summarized as follows: C stands for Cultural Tourism which promotes the spiritual and social well-being of the elderly. Stepping out of a daily routine to navigate new environments builds confidence. H stands for Health Tourism which promotes the physical and mental well-being of the elderly. It often includes personalized dietary plans. This can be further integrated into Wellness-Oriented Cultural Tourism on an international scale, or to take care of foreign senior tourists in the future. A stands for Soft Adventure Tourism which refers to a pattern of activities that promotes mobility or consists of low-impact activities that are beneficial to the elderly. Unlike traditional tours, it usually takes place in remote or natural settings to create highly intensive social bonds. And N stands for Nature Tourism which puts emphasis on nature by applying the 'Forest Bathing' concept tailored for the elderly demographic. Nature acts as a powerful social balancer; meanwhile, nature tourism encourages movement without the “clinical” feel of a gym. (Figure 2)

The practice of Forest Bathing (Shinrin-Yoku) has transitioned from an 1980s Japanese wellness tradition into a significant focal point for medical and therapeutic tourism. Current research suggests that by immersing oneself in forest environments through multisensory engagement, individuals can get benefit from the forest's restorative properties. This process doesn't just promote relaxation; it may actively manage chronic conditions like hypertension by simultaneously reducing psychological stress and optimizing autonomic nervous system responses. (Li, A. and et.al., 2025) While hiking is often goal-oriented, forest bathing prioritizes the 'here and now' through sensory awareness, making it a unique tool for boosting immune function and mental clarity. Because the needs of older adults are different, forest environments must be designed with flexibility in mind to accommodate varying functional abilities. By prioritizing

accessibility, these spaces are transformed into inclusive hubs for active aging, ensuring that the psychological benefits of nature are available to everyone, regardless of physical constraints. (Spiegel, Y. and et.al., 2025)

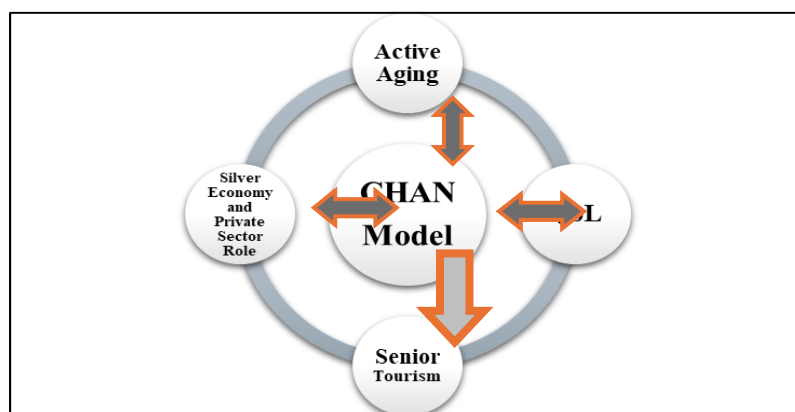


Figure 2 CHAN Model

Note: From Researcher, 2026

If CHAN model is well-managed, it creates a “quadruple-win” scenario: (1) elderly tourists foster active aging, (2) private stakeholders achieve sustainable profitability, (3) local culture and the economy are revitalized, and (4) the public sector reduces the healthcare burden.

Recommendations

The recommendations for this research can be divided into two parts: (1) Policy and Practical Recommendations, and (2) Recommendations for future research. Regarding the policy recommendations, there should be coordinated cooperation among the public sector, the private sector, and local communities to develop creative and elderly-friendly tourism models. It is essential to establish common standards that are easily applied to the specific context of each area. For example, there should be a development of curricula or knowledge bases concerning basic first aid and geriatric psychology, in which relevant public health and medical agencies should actively participate. A collaborative consortium between the hospitality and medical sectors is recommended to repurpose hotels as Wellness & Recovery Hubs. By integrating the unique strengths of both industries,

this partnership transforms hospitality into a space dedicated to preventive care and rehabilitation.

The establishment of senior tourism standards for human resource development should be considered to ensure personnel possess the necessary expertise in elderly care. Under this partnership, hotel staff will undergo specialized training provided by partner hospitals. Additionally, a direct emergency communication channel with medical teams will be established to ensure immediate response. Dining and wellness programs are developed by medical experts. By utilizing nutritionists and physical therapists from partner hospitals, hotels can provide customized wellness regimes that are both safe and effective for diverse guest profiles. This includes creating safety protocols and ensuring fair, equitable access to all available services.

While Universal Design promotes inclusivity, the high cost of implementation remains a barrier. Improving existing facilities to be 'senior-friendly' requires significant investment. From installing elevators to non-slip floor treatments, the costs are substantial, yet these modifications rarely produce a direct return on investment (ROI) in the near future. Government intervention is essential to share the financial load and ensure these accessibility standards are adopted nationwide. The government should implement tax incentives to encourage immediate action. For instance, allowing businesses to claim a double tax deduction (e.g., 200% of the actual expenditure) on renovation costs would significantly lower the barrier for entrepreneurs to invest in these improvements.

Regarding recommendations for future research, empirical studies should be encouraged to examine the long-term effects of tourism on the quality of life of the Thai elderly. Additionally, as data from the private sector provides vital insights that help clarify management and development strategies, future studies could expand into quantitative research or apply the models developed in this study to different subgroups of seniors based on their specific stages of aging. Likewise, to strengthen the theoretical framework, future research should implement impact-measurement tools for tourist quality of life. By conducting pre- and post-activity assessments, researchers can generate stronger evidence for the benefits of inclusive travel. Furthermore, the CHAN Model should be tested across diverse geographical areas and demographics to enhance its generalizability and validity.

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