

Tourist Behavior in Helicopter Charter Service Selection in Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Thomas Hopper¹, Saranpath Hopper², Kampetchara Puriprinya³,

Amornrat Prawatrungrueng⁴, Pornnarong Singsamran⁵

¹*Chief Pilot, Wild West Helicopters, Las Vegas, Nevada, USA*

²*Faculty of Administration, College of Southern Nevada, USA*

³⁻⁵*Faculty of Education, North Bangkok University, Thailand, Email: tommywincent99@gmail.com*

Abstract

This study examined tourist behavior in helicopter charter service selection in Las Vegas, Nevada, USA, with three objectives: (1) to describe behavioral characteristics of helicopter charter tourists; (2) to compare behavioral differences across demographic groups (gender, age, income level, and nationality); and (3) to propose evidence-based service development guidelines. An Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods design was employed, comprising a quantitative phase using a validated Likert-scale questionnaire (n = 400; IOC = 0.87; Cronbach's α = 0.91) and a qualitative phase involving semi-structured in-depth interviews (n = 30; Inter-rater Reliability = 0.84). Results indicated that the primary market segment consists of affluent male professionals aged 35–55, predominantly using helicopter services for aerial sightseeing at an average expenditure of USD 4,250 per trip. Statistically significant behavioral differences were found across all demographic variables ($p < 0.05$). Four key service development priorities emerged: enhancing safety standards, developing 4E experience packages, building luxury hotel partnerships, and investing in social proof-driven digital marketing. These findings contribute to the luxury experiential tourism literature and offer actionable implications for operators seeking to deliver differentiated, segment-specific helicopter tourism services.

Keywords: tourist behavior, helicopter charter, Las Vegas, experiential tourism, luxury tourism

Background and Statement of the Problem

The global tourism industry has increasingly shifted toward experience-oriented consumption, wherein travelers seek meaningful, memorable, and distinctive experiences

rather than conventional sightseeing activities. Pine and Gilmore (1999) conceptualized this transformation as the Experience Economy, emphasizing that consumers derive greater value from immersive experiences than from standardized services. Within tourism, experiences integrating entertainment, education, escapism, and aesthetic engagement tend to generate stronger emotional connections and lasting memories (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Consequently, tourism operators have increasingly developed innovative services enabling visitors to interact with destinations in unique and engaging ways.

Helicopter charter tourism exemplifies this experiential tourism trend. Unlike conventional sightseeing, helicopter tours provide tourists with exclusive aerial perspectives, granting access to vantage points unavailable through ground-based transportation. Such experiences generate perceptions of uniqueness and memorability, which are important determinants of tourist satisfaction and behavioral intention (Kim et al., 2012; Volo, 2009). Prior research indicates that tourists participating in aerial sightseeing value personalized services, safety standards, and scenic exclusivity, particularly in premium tourism segments (Smith & Nichols, 2015). Globally, the helicopter tourism market is projected to grow substantially in the coming decade (Market Research Future, 2025), underscoring the need for empirical investigation into the behavioral factors driving consumer demand.

Las Vegas, Nevada, represents one of the most prominent helicopter tourism destinations in the United States due to its proximity to iconic attractions such as the Grand Canyon, Hoover Dam, and the Las Vegas Strip. The city attracts millions of international visitors annually and generates strong demand for unique, high-value tourism experiences. The expansion of luxury tourism markets has further strengthened demand for helicopter charter services. Research on luxury consumption suggests that high-income travelers seek distinctive, status-enhancing experiences that differentiate them from mass tourism activities (Wiedmann et al., 2009; Williams & Baláž, 2015). This behavior aligns with Veblen’s (1899) concept of conspicuous consumption, in which luxury goods and experiences serve as symbols of social status.

Tourist decision-making is also strongly influenced by digital information channels and online reviews. Travelers increasingly rely on social media, online travel

platforms, and user-generated content to evaluate tourism services (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). For premium services involving high financial costs and perceived safety risks, online reputation management plays a critical role in shaping service selection behavior (Lepp & Gibson, 2003; Sparks & Browning, 2011).

Despite the rapid growth of helicopter tourism in destinations such as Las Vegas, empirical research specifically examining tourist behavior within this niche premium aviation tourism segment remains significantly limited. Existing tourism literature predominantly addresses general travel motivations or broad destination choice rather than segment-specific experiential services such as helicopter charter tourism. Furthermore, while prior studies have demonstrated that tourist motivations and behavioral patterns vary across demographic characteristics such as gender, age, income, and nationality (Crompton, 1979; Pearce & Lee, 2005; Reisinger & Turner, 2003), no study has systematically applied these demographic comparisons to the helicopter charter tourism context in Las Vegas. This study addresses this gap by providing empirical evidence on tourist behavior in helicopter charter service selection and comparing behavioral differences across demographic groups, with practical implications for improving service development strategies in the premium experiential tourism industry.

Research Objectives

1. To describe the behavioral characteristics of tourists who selected helicopter charter services in Las Vegas, Nevada, USA.
2. To compare tourist behavioral differences in helicopter charter service selection across demographic characteristics (gender, age, income level, and nationality).
3. To propose evidence-based service development guidelines for helicopter charter tourism operators in Las Vegas, Nevada, USA.

Significance of the Study

Academic Contributions. This study extends existing theoretical frameworks-Push-Pull Theory and the Experience Economy-to the underexplored context of helicopter charter tourism. It contributes empirical evidence on luxury experiential

tourism behavior and advances mixed-methods research designs applicable to niche experiential tourism markets.

Practical Implications. Helicopter charter operators in Las Vegas can apply the findings to design segment-specific services aligned with each demographic group’s behavioral patterns, thereby strengthening market positioning and customer satisfaction.

Policy Contributions. Policymakers and destination management organizations can leverage the results to support sustainable growth of premium aerial tourism in Las Vegas and comparable international destinations.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

This study integrates Push–Pull Theory (Crompton, 1979; Uysal & Jurowski, 1994) and the Experience Economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) framework to explain tourist behavior in helicopter charter tourism. The independent variables are demographic characteristics (gender, age, income level, and nationality). The dependent variables are tourist behavioral indicators, including purpose of service use, expenditure per trip, service usage frequency, trip duration, and information discovery channel. These behavioral outcomes subsequently inform service development strategies for helicopter tourism operators. Perceived risk (Lepp & Gibson, 2003) is recognized as a potential moderating variable influencing the relationship between demographic characteristics and behavioral outcomes, particularly regarding safety-related decision-making.

Based on the conceptual framework, the following hypotheses were tested:

H1: Gender differences significantly influence helicopter tourism behavior (expenditure and service purpose).

H2: Age differences significantly influence helicopter tourism behavior (purpose and usage pattern).

H3: Income level significantly influences helicopter tourism spending and service frequency.

H4: Nationality significantly influences tourism purpose, route preferences, and trip duration.

Research Methodology

This study employed an Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which quantitative data were collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative data to further explain and expand upon the quantitative findings. The two-phase design ensures methodological triangulation and enhances the credibility of findings.

Phase 1: Quantitative Study

A 63-item Likert-scale questionnaire (5-point scale) was administered to $n = 400$ tourists who had previously used helicopter charter services in Las Vegas. A multi-stage sampling procedure was employed as follows: (1) purposive selection of four major helicopter tourism operation zones in the Las Vegas metropolitan area as primary sampling units; (2) systematic random sampling of tourist departure points within each zone; and (3) convenience sampling of eligible tourists at each departure point. Sampling quotas by location were as follows: Las Vegas Strip ($n = 150$), Downtown Las Vegas ($n = 100$), Henderson ($n = 80$), and Boulder City ($n = 70$). Eligibility criteria required participants to have used a helicopter charter service at least once within the Las Vegas metropolitan area.

Content validity was established through expert panel review (five specialists in tourism management and research methodology), yielding an Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) of 0.87. Reliability was confirmed via pilot study ($n = 30$), producing a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.91, indicating high internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978).

Data were collected from January to June 2025 and analyzed using SPSS Version 29. Prior to inferential analysis, statistical assumptions were verified: normality was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test and histograms; homogeneity of variance was confirmed using Levene's test ($p > 0.05$ for all comparisons). Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation) addressed Objective 1. To address Objective 2, Independent t-tests compared behavioral differences between two-group variables (gender and nationality), while one-way ANOVA (F-test) with Tukey HSD post-hoc tests compared behavioral differences across multi-group variables (income

level, age group, and nationality groups). Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen’s *d* for t-tests and partial eta-squared (η^2) for ANOVA, following Cohen (1988). The statistical significance threshold was set at $p < 0.05$.

Phase 2: Qualitative Study

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 purposively selected participants: 20 tourists (eligibility: prior helicopter charter service use in Las Vegas, willingness to elaborate on service experience) and 10 helicopter tour operators (eligibility: minimum two years operational experience, direct involvement in service design or customer management). Purposive sampling was employed to ensure information richness and diversity of perspectives.

Qualitative data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) supported by NVivo 14 software. Credibility was ensured through data triangulation (cross-referencing tourist and operator perspectives) and inter-rater reliability verification (coefficient = 0.84), indicating strong inter-coder agreement.

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality of responses were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

Research Results

Objective 1: Behavioral Characteristics of Helicopter Charter Tourists

The majority of the sample were male (58.5%), aged 35–55 years (64.2%), held bachelor’s degrees or higher (89.3%), reported household incomes above USD 100,000 per year (71.8%), and were predominantly American nationals (78.0%). Full demographic frequencies and percentages are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Helicopter Charter Tourists (n = 400)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	234	58.5
	Female	166	41.5
Age	18–34 years	62	15.5
	35–55 years	257	64.2
	56 years and above	81	20.3
Education	Below bachelor’s degree	43	10.7
	Bachelor’s degree	198	49.5
	Above bachelor’s degree	159	39.8
Household Income/yr (USD)	< \$100,000	113	28.2
	\$100,000–\$150,000	143	35.8
	> \$150,000	144	36.0
Occupation	Business / Finance	154	38.4
	Technical / Engineering	96	24.1
	Others	150	37.5
Nationality	American	312	78.0
	International	88	22.0

Note. Percentages are based on n = 400 respondents.

Regarding service usage behavior, the majority of tourists (61.0%) used helicopter charter services for the first time. The primary stated purpose was aerial sightseeing (53.5%), followed by special occasions such as anniversaries or birthdays (21.8%), business purposes (16.3%), and photography/video production (8.4%). Most trips lasted between 1.0 and 2.0 hours (57.8%), with an average expenditure of USD 4,250 per trip. Internet and social media were the most frequently cited information discovery channel (58.5%), indicating the strong influence of digital platforms on tourist decision-making. Table 2 presents the complete service usage behavior frequencies.

Table 2 Service Usage Behavior of Helicopter Charter Tourists (n = 400)

Behavior Variable	Category	Frequency	%
Usage Frequency	First time	244	61.0
	2–3 times	114	28.5
	More than 3 times	42	10.5
Purpose of Use	Aerial sightseeing	214	53.5
	Special occasions	87	21.8
	Business purposes	65	16.3
	Photography / video	34	8.4
Duration per Trip	Less than 1 hour	72	18.0
	1.0–2.0 hours	231	57.8
	More than 2 hours	97	24.2
Expenditure per Trip (USD)	< \$2,000	48	12.0
	\$2,000–\$5,000	218	54.5
	> \$5,000	134	33.5
Information Channel	Internet / Social Media	234	58.5
	Word of Mouth	99	24.8
	Travel Agency	67	16.7

Note. Frequencies and percentages are reported for categorical variables. Mean expenditure per trip = USD 4,250 (SD = 1,186); mean planned future usage = 2.14 trips/year (SD = 1.03).

Objective 2: Comparison of Tourist Behavior by Demographic Characteristics

Prior to inferential testing, normality and homogeneity of variance assumptions were verified and satisfied for all behavioral variables at the $p > 0.05$ level. Table 3 presents the results of Independent t-tests and one-way ANOVA comparisons.

Independent t-test results revealed statistically significant behavioral differences between gender groups in expenditure and service purpose ($t = 4.21$, $df = 398$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen’s $d = 0.67$, medium-large effect). Male tourists reported higher average expenditure ($M = \text{USD } 4,680$, $SD = 1,245$) compared to female tourists ($M = \text{USD } 3,820$, $SD = 1,102$), and used the service for business purposes at a higher rate (21.4% vs. 9.6%), supporting H1. Significant differences were also found between American and international tourists in usage frequency and service purpose ($t = 3.87$, $df = 398$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen’s $d = 0.55$, medium effect), supporting H4 (partial).

One-way ANOVA results indicated significant differences across income groups in expenditure and usage frequency ($F = 18.47$, $df = 2/397$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$, medium effect), supporting H3. Post-hoc Tukey HSD tests confirmed that tourists with incomes above USD 150,000 spent significantly more per trip than those earning below USD 100,000 ($p < 0.001$). Significant differences across age groups in service purpose and usage pattern were also found ($F = 12.83$, $df = 3/396$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$, medium effect), supporting H2. Tourists aged 35–55 most frequently used the service for special occasions, while those below 35 favored photography and social media-related experiences. Nationality group comparisons also revealed significant differences in route preference and trip duration ($F = 9.64$, $df = 3/396$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.07$), further supporting H4.

Table 3 Comparison of Tourist Behavior by Demographic Characteristics (n = 400)

Variable	Groups Compared	Statistic	df	p-value	Effect Size	Result
Gender × Expenditure/Purpose	Male vs. Female	t = 4.21	398	< 0.001	d = 0.67	Significant*
Gender × Frequency/Duration	Male vs. Female	t = 2.94	398	< 0.01	d = 0.44	Significant*
Nationality × Frequency/Purpose	American vs. International	t = 3.87	398	< 0.001	d = 0.55	Significant*
Income × Expenditure/Frequency	3 income groups	F = 18.47	2/397	< 0.001	$\eta^2 = 0.09$	Significant*
Age × Purpose/Usage	4 age groups	F = 12.83	3/396	< 0.001	$\eta^2 = 0.09$	Significant*
Nationality × Route/Duration	4 nationality groups	F = 9.64	3/396	< 0.001	$\eta^2 = 0.07$	Significant*

Note. * Significance level $p < 0.05$. Effect sizes: Cohen’s d for t-tests (small ≥ 0.20 , medium ≥ 0.50 , large ≥ 0.80); partial eta-squared (η^2) for ANOVA (small ≥ 0.01 , medium ≥ 0.06 , large ≥ 0.14 ; Cohen, 1988). Tukey HSD post-hoc tests were conducted for all ANOVA comparisons.

Objective 3: Service Development Guidelines

Thematic Analysis of 30 in-depth interviews identified four primary service development themes. These qualitative findings complement and elaborate upon the quantitative behavioral differences identified in Objective 2. Table 4 presents the themes and their prevalence among interview participants.

Table 4 Service Development Priorities from In-Depth Interviews (n = 30)

Priority	Key Content	% Suggested
Safety Standards Enhancement	Independent safety certification; detailed pre-flight briefing; transparent disclosure of pilot credentials. Addresses primary concern of male and high-income tourists.	93.3
4E Experience Package Development	Tailored packages by age and gender group; in-flight commentary; integration of Entertainment, Education, Escapism, and Aesthetics dimensions.	86.7
Strategic Partnership Building	Collaboration with luxury hotels and event companies to reach high-income and 35–55-year-old segments through trusted channels.	80.0
Digital Marketing and Social Proof	User-generated content campaigns; streamlined online booking system; review platform optimization. Targets younger and international tourists.	76.7

Note. Percentages indicate the proportion of interview participants who identified each priority as a primary recommendation.

Discussion

The finding that the majority of helicopter charter tourists held household incomes above USD 100,000 per year (71.8%) and education at bachelor’s degree level or above (89.3%) is consistent with Volo (2009), who identified affluent, well-educated professionals as a primary market for experience-oriented tourism products. The Las Vegas helicopter tourism context extends this finding to aerial tourism specifically, where exclusive views of iconic destinations serve as status-enhancing experiences aligned with Veblen’s (1899) theory of conspicuous consumption and Wiedmann et al.’s (2009) luxury value segmentation framework. Notably, unlike general luxury tourism markets, where conspicuous consumption is largely socially visible, aerial sightseeing experiences offer a form of “private luxury”—consumed in small groups and valued for personal memorability rather than public display—suggesting that prestige value in this segment may operate differently from conventional luxury goods contexts.

The gender-based expenditure difference ($t = 4.21, p < 0.001, d = 0.67$) supports Thrane’s (2016) observation that male tourists tend to allocate higher expenditures to luxury tourism products. However, this finding warrants critical contextualization: the higher expenditure among male tourists in this study may partially reflect the greater proportion of business-purpose trips among male respondents (21.4% vs. 9.6% for females), where corporate budgets rather than personal discretionary income drive

spending. This nuance was not addressed in prior helicopter tourism research (Smith & Nichols, 2015) and represents an important distinction for operators designing gender-targeted marketing strategies.

Significant differences across income groups ($F = 18.47$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$) support Williams and Baláz’s (2015) concept of price inelasticity among high-income consumers in premium tourism services. The medium effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.09$) suggests that while income explains meaningful variance in expenditure behavior, other factors—potentially including perceived service quality, route attractiveness, and social occasion—also contribute significantly. Future research incorporating psychographic variables could shed light on these additional determinants.

The age-group behavioral differences ($F = 12.83$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$) align with the Travel Career Pattern framework (Pearce & Lee, 2005), confirming that tourist motivations evolve across life stages. The finding that younger tourists (under 35) predominantly used helicopter services for photography and social media content creation represents a significant departure from prior helicopter tourism research, which has not explicitly documented this purpose-driven behavior. This suggests that social media platforms are not merely information channels but are actively shaping the tourism purposes and experience expectations of younger market segments—an insight with direct implications for product and marketing design.

The emphasis on safety standards as the highest-priority service development theme (93.3% of interview participants) aligns with Lepp and Gibson’s (2003) risk perception framework and reflects the heightened safety sensitivity associated with aviation-based tourism. The 4E Experience Economy framework (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011) provides theoretical grounding for the qualitative finding on experience package development, confirming that experiential design should address all four dimensions to maximize tourist memorability. The strategic partnership priority supports Kotler and Keller’s (2016) Value Delivery Network concept, while the strong emphasis on digital marketing and social proof reflects Xiang and Gretzel’s (2010) and Sparks and Browning’s (2011) findings on digital information’s role in tourism decision-making.

Overall, these findings highlight that helicopter charter tourism in Las Vegas operates within the broader luxury experiential tourism market, where consumer

behavior is shaped by demographic characteristics, perceived prestige, experiential value, and digital information channels.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the academic literature on experiential and luxury tourism behavior by extending Push–Pull Theory (Crompton, 1979; Uysal & Jurowski, 1994) and the Experience Economy framework (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) to the underexplored context of helicopter charter tourism. The findings support the Travel Career Pattern theory (Pearce & Lee, 2005) by confirming that tourist motivations and usage patterns vary significantly across age groups and life stages. By combining quantitative behavioral analysis with qualitative operator insights, this study advances mixed-methods methodological approaches to studying niche experiential tourism markets. Importantly, the identification of photography and social media content creation as a primary use purpose among younger tourists extends existing theoretical understanding of how digital culture reshapes experiential tourism motivations.

Practical Contributions

For helicopter tour operators, this study highlights the importance of market segmentation strategies targeting affluent middle-aged professionals as the core customer base, while developing specialized offerings for younger, photography-oriented tourists and international visitors. Safety assurance through transparent pilot credential communication and pre-flight briefing is identified as a critical trust-building strategy. The 4E experience package design framework offers operators a structured approach to creating memorable, review-worthy experiences. Strategic collaborations with luxury hotels and digital marketing investments in user-generated content are recommended as cost-effective channels for reaching high-value tourist segments.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was restricted to tourists who had already used helicopter charter services in Las Vegas, which may limit generalizability to other aviation tourism destinations or non-users. Second, self-reported

questionnaire data are subject to recall and social desirability biases; future studies could supplement these with objective booking data or behavioral observation. Third, the study examined demographic variables as primary predictors of behavior; psychographic characteristics, perceived risk, travel motivation, and destination image—which may explain additional variance—were not incorporated. Future research should integrate these variables for a more comprehensive behavioral model.

Additionally, future comparative or cross-cultural studies examining helicopter tourism in other destinations (Hawaii, Grand Canyon region, Dubai, New Zealand) could provide deeper insights into how cultural, geographic, and market factors influence behavior in luxury experiential tourism. Longitudinal designs could track how behavioral patterns evolve alongside digital tourism technologies and shifting market demographics.

Recommendations

Managerial Recommendations

1. Design differentiated, segment-specific service packages: target high-income male groups with safety-emphasized Corporate Tours; engage younger tourists with social media-worthy, photography-optimized experiences; serve international visitors with multilingual communication and cultural interpretation services.
2. Invest in transparent safety communication, including display of pilot credentials, independent safety certification, and detailed pre-flight briefing procedures to build customer trust among safety-sensitive demographic segments.
3. Develop 4E experience packages encompassing Entertainment, Education, Escapism, and Aesthetics dimensions, primarily tailored to the 35–55 age group with customizable options for other segments.
4. Build strategic partnerships with luxury hotels and event planning companies to establish distribution channels aligned with the preferences of high-income and middle-aged tourist segments.
5. Invest in digital marketing emphasizing social proof and user-generated content, supported by a user-friendly online booking system, to effectively reach younger tourists and international visitors.

Policy Recommendations

1. Destination management organizations should incorporate helicopter charter tourism into broader luxury tourism development strategies for Las Vegas, leveraging the sector’s strong appeal to high-spending visitor segments.
2. Aviation tourism regulators should consider establishing standardized independent safety certification frameworks that operators can use to transparently communicate safety credentials to tourism consumers.

Future Research Directions

1. Future studies should incorporate psychographic variables (travel motivation, risk perception, lifestyle, destination image) to develop more comprehensive behavioral models for premium experiential tourism.
2. Comparative research across helicopter tourism destinations (e.g., Hawaii, Dubai, New Zealand) and longitudinal designs tracking behavioral change over time would strengthen theoretical contributions to the luxury aerial tourism literature.

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