Lessons From Hospitality: Towards A Hybrid Model Of Senior Living Communities

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Recommended Citation

LESSONS FROM HOSPITALITY— TOWARDS A HYBRID MODEL OF SENIOR LIVING COMMUNITIES

Old age gets most of us, and how we spend it should be meaningful. The hospitality sector could play a vital role in this regard. Senior living communities are big business in the U.S., but they face demands from residents, and the family and friends who visit them, for more than the traditional focus on healthcare. UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management researchers, Dr. YunYing Zhong, Dr. Tingting Zhang, and their co-author understand the connection between the senior living community and hospitality sectors; their research is giving impetus to a hybrid model that could benefit both.

Aging is inescapable, and old age awaits most of us. How we spend our so-called 'golden years' is important, not only to ourselves but our friends and family. In some countries, older people remain with their family until they pass on, but in other, mainly developed countries, an entire sector exists to care for them. Central to this sector are senior living communities—residential facilities designed to cater to the needs of older adults, particularly those who may require assistance with daily activities, healthcare, and social engagement.

In the United States, such senior living communities are big business. However, the business is changing, mainly driven by the demands of those with a resigned eye that their life's journey is heading towards such a facility and the friends and family who will, hopefully, visit them. In brief, they expect more. But what, exactly? The senior living community sector is increasingly looking to hospitality, and two researchers from UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management have provided clear guidance by tapping into the sentiment of those who care the most.

For Dr. YunYing Zhong, Dr. Tingting Zhang, and their co-author, the connection between the senior living community and hospitality sectors needs re-examining. For years, the two sectors have been viewed differently, and at

Does hospitality matter in senior living?

FOR THE ROSEN COLLEGE RESEARCHERS, THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE SENIOR LIVING COMMUNITY AND HOSPITALITY SECTORS NEEDS RE-EXAMINING.

first glance, that makes sense—hospitality speaks of 'guests' who are usually transient or returning at best, while the senior living community sector has 'residents' who are usually permanent. There are other differences: senior living communities have a narrow target audience—older adults—and offer specific, associated services, including healthcare, daily assistance, and long-term residential care. Meals, for example, are more likely to be guided by nutritionists rather than master chefs. Because of their healthcare priorities, senior living communities are governed by stricter regulations and employ specialists in healthcare management and social work. Furthermore, financial commitments to senior living communities are substantial and long-term.

Still, Zhong, Zhang and their co-author see the strong associations between hospitality and senior living communities. For example, senior living communities share many operational similarities with hotels, including food and beverage services, recreation and event planning, entertainment, and housekeeping. Therefore, managing senior living communities demands staff with similar skills to those needed in the hotel sector, including interpersonal skills with staff and residents, organizational ability, and business acuity. Notably, there's much that hospitality can contribute to senior living communities to bolster their offering. This isn't an offer; it's driven by demand. The research team are well aware of this and designed a simple but ingenious study to shine a light on that demand and guide the shift towards a hybrid model of senior living communities that embraces more hospitality.

THE VOICE OF THOSE WHO CARE
Before social media, residents of senior living communities lived primarily hidden from society, visible only to the occasional regulating inspector and the transient eye of visitors popping in. Demands for improvements were, therefore, largely unheard. Social media changed that by giving a very public voice to residents and their friends and families.

Facebook is arguably the most popular social media platform for senior living community residents and baby boomers with parents in senior living communities and the knowledge they're not too far away

themselves. Senior living community facilities invariably have their own Facebook pages and encourage comments and reviews. And because Facebook also allows various scoring frameworks, such as stars and thumbs-ups, for researchers, this translates into something precious: data.

The researchers combined their respective expertise in senior living management and technology innovations in hospitality and designed a study using RapidMiner Studio 9.3 software—a data mining, text mining, and machine learning tool—to collect and analyze reviews on the official Facebook pages of 125 senior living communities in the U.S. The communities were not randomly selected; they represented the leading companies in the U.S. regarding the number of senior living communities owned or managed, resources, and innovation practices.

They were particularly interested in what residents and their friends and family were saying and their level of satisfaction with their facilities. To measure this, they performed a sentiment analysis—a computational technique to categorize the polarity of each Facebook review, i.e., whether a review was positive or negative based on the star rating. Specifically, a 3+-star rating was considered a proxy for satisfaction, while a one or 2-star rating indicated dissatisfaction. Text mining of the review content—comments such as '*It is a wonderful place to be in SO many ways!*' or '*They are unorganized, condescending and act more like salespeople than caregivers*'—added value to the polarity data. The richness of the review text allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the factors affecting the satisfaction and dissatisfaction levels of

There are strong associations between hospitality and senior living communities.

those with connections to a senior living community and whether they'd recommend it to others. What the researchers learned has given impetus to the need for a shift in the priorities of senior living communities.

EXPECTING MORE
The study identified five key factors that influence satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and recommendation behavior: the quality and efficiency of services provided by the facility, its physical layout, the social interactions and community feel within it, the cost of being there, and the amenities that enhance the experience. These are all factors that, to a large degree, resonate with the hospitality sector and drive the necessary innovations for commercial success. They are in the curricula of hospitality training colleges such as the Rosen College of Hospitality Management. Furthermore, hotels and other hospital brands are experienced in adjusting to the ever-changing needs of those they serve.

What stands out in the study is that while the traditional priority of senior living community facilities is the healthcare of its residents, those residents and their families and friends expect more. For example, when residents and their family and friends discuss healthcare services on Facebook, their level of satisfaction focuses more on how medical staff behave rather than their clinical skills and expertise. They want a 'hospitality-rich resident experience' beyond just medical care.

Notably, the study found that the 'hospitality' definition is not tied to a single element—it is a combination of multiple integrated elements and practices that may be second nature to the hospitality sector but are increasingly relevant for those managing such facilities. It has highlighted the need for the senior living community sector's evolution from a healthcare-focused model to a hybrid one incorporating healthcare and hospitality to provide residents with a more holistic and enriched experience.

Of course, such a model also has benefits for the hospitality sector.

OPPORTUNITIES IN A HYBRID MODEL
Large senior living companies such as those represented in this study have become attuned to the shift in demands of residents and their families. They are increasingly providing a range of services, including hospitality amenities, to differentiate themselves. Their challenge is finding those with the right skills. This is why senior living operators should engage more with hospitality academic programs and why the senior living industry presents an expanded job replacement opportunity for hospitality graduates. Hospitality students, for example, are trained in customer service, which is, as this study shows, increasingly important in senior living communities, as are the operational aspects of hospitality, such as food and beverage services, housekeeping, and event planning. Hospitality students can apply these skills to enhance the resident experience.

According to the researchers, gerontology and healthcare literature rarely explicitly addresses the role of hospitality in senior living. Most of the research in these fields examines senior living from the lenses of care quality, such as hospitalization rate and resident welfare. Hospitality is something of an add-on—necessary, but not necessarily a focus demanding research.

Zhong, Zhang and their co-author have shown otherwise. They point out that given the many similarities between senior living and hotel industries, they can share the same hospitality formula for success. Such thinking opens the door for innovative collaborations between academic institutions and senior living communities. At the end of the day, such sharing and innovation are critical—the inescapability of old age means that it gets most of us in the end, and we deserve to enjoy it.

OF COURSE, SUCH A MODEL ALSO HAS BENEFITS FOR THE HOSPITALITY SECTOR.

The study aimed to examine the role of hospitality in the senior living setting from the consumer s perspectives.

RESEARCHERS
IN FOCUS

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aimed to examine the role of hospitality in the senior living setting from the consumers' perspectives, focusing on residents and their family and friends.

REFERENCES

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PERSONAL RESPONSE

What would a hybrid model for the senior living community sector look like?

The hybrid model of senior living communities is not new. In the past, there may be 90% of healthcare and 10% of hospitality considerations, whereas the new hybrid model may encompass 2/3 hospitality and 1/3 of healthcare. Certainly, the percentages are not necessarily as precise as mentioned above, the point made here is that hospitality is increasingly important for senior living communities to attract the new generation of retirees. The hospitality-focused model does not only emphasize on the 'resort-like' living, which highlights appealing architectural design, upgrades of hospitality services and amenities, and expansion of life enrichment activities. More importantly, the model emphasizes the consumer-centric philosophy which is commonly seen in the hospitality industry. Historically, the senior living industry has leaned towards a paternalistic model in which residents are passive consumers. They are often told when to eat or what to do. However, today's retirees want to be active co-creators and collaborators within senior living communities. They demand to be listened to in every aspect of community design and operations. They want to relate to the local community, rather than living in an isolated age-segregated community.

Your study represents one of the few studies that look to broaden the applicability of hospitality to other service sectors and promote interdisciplinary research between senior living and hospitality. How would you like your research to impact on the hospitality industry?

I would like to see our research have impacts on both hospitality education and hospitality industry. First, our research results validate the strong connection between hospitality and senior living. It is our hope that this serves as an initial effort to stimulate more interdisciplinary research activities among hospitality, aging studies, and healthcare. Also, the research results show that hospitality education programs may consider senior living as an opportunity area for curriculum development and graduate replacement. For the hospitality industry, our research results shed light on the hospitality components that senior living residents and their family and friends value. Currently, hospitality companies such as Walt Disney Company or Margaritaville are developing residential communities that aim to appeal to baby boomers and their families. Our research results can provide validation and new insights for such development initiatives in the hospitality industry.

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Dr. Zhong is a member of the Disability Aging & Technology Cluster and an Assistant Professor at UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management. Her research focuses on relationship marketing and workforce training in hospitality and tourism and bridging hospitality to senior living and healthcare industries.

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Dr. Tingting (Christina) Zhang

Dr. Zhang's research addresses human trafficking within hospitality. Her work has resulted in influential publications and significant grant funding. Her notable research impact boasts an i10-index of 45, h-index of 30, and over 5,000 citations.

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