

ARTICLE



## Beyond the destination: A qualitative study on how experiencing leisure traveling shapes mental health among older adults

Sofia von Humboldt <sup>a</sup>, Namrah Ilyas <sup>b</sup>, and Isabel Leal <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>William James Center for Research, ISPA – Instituto Universitário, Lisbon, Portugal; <sup>b</sup>Center for Clinical Psychology, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

### ABSTRACT

Leisure traveling holds the potential to positively influence the emotional and mental health of older adults, a population increasingly recognized for its unique well-being challenges. This study aims to: a) assess the emotional experiences of leisure traveling among older adults; and b) analyze how leisure traveling influences the mental health of older adults. A total of 784 older adults from three nationalities, aged 65 to 82 years ( $M = 71.4$ ;  $SD = 4.47$ ), participated in the study. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, and content analysis was employed. For the first objective, eight themes emerged: (1) Less loneliness and isolation (88.3%); (2) Increased self-confidence (84.9%); (3) Meaningful relationships (75.2%); (4) Opportunities for physical activity (70.1%); (5) Personal growth (66.4%); (6) Improved sense of agency (61.2%); (7) Enhanced coping skills (59.5%); and (8) Increased perceived well-being (57.3%). For the second objective, four themes emerged: (1) Less depressive symptoms (78.3%), (2) Reduced stress and anxiety (77.3%), (3) Cognitive flexibility (75.3%), and (4) Improved sleep quality (63.9%). Portuguese older adults focused on less loneliness and isolation (88.3%) and reduced stress and anxiety (77.3%). English older adults emphasized meaningful relationships (75.2%) and less depressive symptoms (78.3%), while Brazilian participants highlighted opportunities for physical activity (70.1%) and cognitive flexibility (75.3%). Leisure traveling enriches older adults' lives by enhancing mental health, highlighting its vital role in promoting multifaceted well-being in later life.

### Introduction

The global population is experiencing a rapid demographic transformation. Life expectancy has increased due to advancements in healthcare, improved living conditions, and better nutrition. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), by 2050, the number of people aged 60 years and older will surpass 2 billion, accounting for over 20% of the global population (WHO, 2021). This demographic shift presents profound challenges and opportunities for societies, demanding renewed attention to the wellbeing and inclusion of older adults. Older adults are now expected to lead longer lives, but the quality of these years largely depends on health status, social inclusion, and personal fulfillment (von Humboldt & Leal, 2013; von Humboldt et al., 2019; von Humboldt, Leal, Pimenta, et al., 2013).

Aging is often accompanied by physical, cognitive, and social changes, necessitating proactive strategies to maintain quality of life and mental resilience (Trică et al., 2024; von Humboldt et al., 2022, 2025; von Humboldt, Ilyas, et al., 2024). One key approach is active engagement in leisure activities, which has been linked to better health outcomes, improved emotional well-being, and increased social

connectedness (Kuykendall et al., 2015; von Humboldt, Ribeiro-Gonçalves, Costa, et al., 2023; von Humboldt, Ribeiro-Gonçalves, Low, et al., 2023). Research indicates that participation in leisure activities is associated with a reduced risk of chronic disease, better symptom management, and greater purpose and life satisfaction (Fancourt et al., 2021; Rogers & Fancourt, 2020; von Humboldt, Costa, et al., 2024).

Among the various types of leisure activities, leisure traveling has gained increasing attention for its multifaceted health benefits. Traveling exposes individuals to new experiences, fosters social interactions, and stimulates cognitive function, making it particularly valuable for older adults (Cole et al., 2024; von Humboldt, Low, et al., 2024; Yoshida et al., 2021). With aging populations growing, there is a rising demand for senior-friendly traveling options, creating opportunities for age-inclusive policy reforms and tourism industry adaptations (Borovica et al., 2024; Yoshida et al., 2021).

Engagement in leisure activities plays a crucial role in healthy aging, helping older adults maintain cognitive flexibility, mobility, and social interactions. Studies show that leisure activities enhance memory retention, delay the onset of dementia, and promote longevity (Bone et al., 2024; Rogers & Fancourt, 2020). In addition, leisure activities provide opportunities for self-expression, cultural participation, and psychological relaxation (Borovica et al., 2024; Yoshida et al., 2021).

Active leisure activities such as sports, dancing, cultural events, and social participation have been particularly beneficial for aging populations, improving physical health, extending lifespan, and enhancing overall well-being (Bone et al., 2022; Dadswell et al., 2017; Fancourt et al., 2021). Bone et al. (2022) found that participation in leisure activities, such as sports, social, or other club activities, was most strongly linked to lower levels of depression. Additionally, engaging in hobbies, personal projects, or baking and cooking special meals was also associated with reduced depressive symptoms. Moreover, studies highlight the mental health benefits of creative engagement for older adults, suggesting that participation in artistic and imaginative activities can enhance emotional well-being, reduce stress, and contribute to overall cognitive health (Dadswell et al., 2017; Fancourt et al., 2021; Miguel et al., 2024).

Traveling is an especially powerful form of leisure that provides a sense of adventure, purpose, and personal growth. For older adults, traveling is associated with numerous psychological and physical benefits, including reducing stress, improving sleep quality, and enhancing perceived health and subjective well-being (Chen & Petrick, 2013; Petrick & Wang, 2025). Traveling offers opportunities to reconnect with family, explore new cultures, and engage in meaningful experiences, making it an effective intervention for combating social isolation and depression (Band & Rogers, 2024; Fancourt et al., 2021; von Humboldt et al., 2021). These effects are largely driven by enhanced cognitive functioning, improved self-esteem, healthier routines, and stronger familial and social ties which together promote wellbeing (Chen & Petrick, 2013; Gu et al., 2016).

A study by Cole et al. (2024) found that leisure traveling significantly enhances emotional well-being, particularly by fostering social engagement and reducing loneliness. Traveling provides individuals with the opportunity to slow down, become more mindful of their surroundings (Phillips, 2019), and regain a sense of purpose by experiencing new cultures, cuisines, and landscapes (Piramanayagam et al., 2020; Somoza Medina et al., 2022). Motivations for travel among older adults are diverse and shaped by personal history, prior experiences, and intercultural exposure. The combination of these unique backgrounds, along with the diversity of destinations and traveling styles, creates a vast spectrum of learning and personal growth opportunities that unfold throughout the traveling experience (Patterson & Balderas-Cejudo, 2023; Phillips, 2019).

Age-friendly tourism initiatives have expanded traveling opportunities for older adults by addressing cultural sensitivities, accessibility needs, traveling preferences, and demographic factors to create inclusive and immersive experiences (Liew et al., 2021; Lu & Zhu, 2024; Patterson et al., 2021). Recent efforts emphasize co-creating travel experiences that empower older adults through accessibility, participation, and cultural inclusion. Senior tourism is evolving beyond traditional 'sun, sand, and sea' or medical models, moving toward experiences that are meaningful, culturally engaging, and personally enriching (Carrera, 2025). Tourism that

blends cultural experiences, leisure activities, and social interaction plays an essential role. As expectations evolve, the industry must adapt by developing flexible, experience-driven models that align with older travelers' diverse motivations and lifestyles (Carrera, 2025; Letunovska et al., 2020).

In 2022, nearly one in four tourism nights for private purposes in the European Union was attributed to tourists aged 65 and over, highlighting the significant presence of older adults in the traveling sector. Compared to younger groups, older travelers tend to take longer, more localized trips, often within their own countries and in non-rented accommodations, such as holiday homes or family residences. This trend is particularly evident among those aged 65 to 70, who travel more extensively, likely due to the increased free time following retirement. These behavioral trends underscore how senior tourism is shaped by a blend of practicality, relational goals, and lifestyle preferences (Eurostat, 2024; UNWTO, 2021). When selecting a destination, older travelers prioritize safety, natural landscapes, historical sites, high-quality services, and convenient transportation, while activities such as sports, snow-related experiences, handicrafts, dancing, and camping are less appealing (Zielińska-Szczepkowska, 2021). Additionally, while leisure and recreational traveling remain common, older tourists are more inclined to travel for personal reasons, including visiting loved ones or seeking health-related treatments. These patterns suggest that senior tourism is shaped by a combination of practical considerations, personal connections, and evolving lifestyle preferences (Eurostat, 2024; UNWTO, 2021).

Older adults engage in leisure traveling at varying levels, categorized into four main groups (Cole et al., 2024): (1) Non-travelers are individuals who do not participate in traveling, often due to health issues, financial limitations, or personal preferences. Some prefer local leisure activities instead of long-distance traveling (Eurostat, 2024); (2) Local travelers engage in short trips within their region, such as visiting museums, cultural landmarks, parks, or restaurants; (3) Domestic travelers explore different regions within their home country, often for family visits, heritage exploration, or sightseeing; and (4) International travelers seek global experiences, venturing abroad to explore diverse cultures and landscapes (Cole et al., 2024).

Older Europeans aged 65 and above reported distinct reasons for not traveling compared to younger age groups. Health concerns were the most commonly cited factor, with 41% mentioning it as a primary reason for refraining from traveling (Eurostat, 2024). Despite its benefits, various barriers prevent older adults from fully engaging in leisure traveling. Physical limitations, including chronic illnesses such as arthritis, osteoporosis, and cardiovascular diseases, restrict mobility, making long flights, extended walking, and unfamiliar terrain difficult to navigate (Lee & Bowes, 2016).

Another important barrier to traveling among older adults is their financial situation (Eurostat, 2024; Zielińska-Szczepkowska, 2021). However, while 44% of Europeans aged 15–64 cited financial reasons for not traveling, only 28% of those aged 65 and over reported the same. Additionally, more than one-third (34%) of older adults expressed no interest in traveling (Eurostat, 2024). These findings indicate that, beyond affordability, psychological and motivational factors play an increasingly central role in travel participation. Financial constraints are particularly relevant in peripheral and low-income regions of Europe, highlighting the importance of social tourism programs aimed at making traveling more accessible for seniors (Zielińska-Szczepkowska, 2021).

Social and psychological barriers also influence participation. Many older adults experience anxiety about traveling alone, fear of unfamiliar environments, and a lack of confidence in navigating new places. Addressing these concerns requires support services, guided traveling programs, and digital literacy initiatives to help seniors feel more comfortable while traveling. Targeted interventions, such as guided travel programs, peer-based tours, and digital literacy initiatives, can mitigate these challenges and enhance participation confidence (Phillips et al., 2013).

The Successful Aging Theory (Rowe & Kahn, 1997) provides a framework for understanding the relationship between leisure traveling and healthy aging. This theory suggests that successful aging is achieved through three interconnected dimensions: (1) avoidance of disease and disability, (2) maintenance of high cognitive and physical functioning, and (3) sustained engagement with life

(Rowe & Kahn, 1997). Leisure traveling, by promoting active engagement and cognitive stimulation, directly supports these pillars, positioning it as a meaningful pathway toward successful aging.

Leisure traveling aligns with these principles by promoting physical activity, stimulating cognitive functions, and fostering social interaction. Engaging in travel-related activities, such as exploring new locations, navigating different cultural contexts, and interacting with diverse communities, stimulates both the mind and body (Band & Rogers, 2024). Social engagement through group tours, family vacations, and cultural exchanges enhances emotional well-being and reduces loneliness (Band & Rogers, 2024; Carstensen, 1992; Hartig et al., 2013). Additionally, the Activity Theory of Aging suggests that staying socially and physically active contributes to a higher quality of life. Traveling provides an ideal setting for continued engagement, allowing older adults to pursue new interests and maintain meaningful relationships (Diggs, 2008).

Leisure traveling has profound health benefits for older adults. Physically, traveling encourages movement and activity, which improves cardiovascular health and reduces the risk of obesity and hypertension (Pinckard et al., 2019; Riiser et al., 2018). Moreover, cognitively, exposure to novel environments enhances mental agility and cognitive reserve, delaying age-related cognitive decline (Peng & Chen, 2020; Qiao et al., 2022). Beyond physiological benefits, traveling promotes psychological growth, reducing stress, building coping mechanisms, enhancing self-esteem, and fostering emotional adaptability and resilience. Breaking routine creates a sense of excitement, purpose, and personal fulfillment, which in turn lowers cortisol levels and improves overall well-being (Bentley, 2024; Petrick & Wang, 2025; Ryff, 2014). Hence, leisure traveling serves as both a preventive and restorative practice for aging populations, reinforcing the holistic model of successful aging (Yoon et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2023).

Although prior research has established the physical and emotional benefits of leisure traveling, limited attention has been given to the subjective psychological experiences of older adults during leisure-based travel itself. There remains a need to understand how leisure travel shapes emotional resilience, self-identity, and wellbeing through lived, moment-to-moment experiences. Furthermore, most studies emphasize Western quantitative trends, with fewer exploring qualitative cross-cultural contexts such as those examined here. Addressing these nuanced psychological and experiential aspects provides new insight into how travel operates as a pathway to wellbeing in later life.

Accordingly, this study explores how leisure traveling contributes to the mental health and emotional wellbeing of older adults through a qualitative, experience-centered lens. By examining how travel fosters connection, reflection, and meaning-making, it offers a more holistic understanding of wellbeing in later life. The findings aim to inform gerontological theory and practical applications, supporting policymakers, tourism providers, and healthcare professionals in designing inclusive, psychologically enriching travel opportunities for aging populations. Specifically, the study: (a) assesses older adults' emotional and experiential dimensions of travel, and (b) analyzes how these experiences influence mental health and subjective wellbeing. These objectives explain the study's contribution to wellbeing and gerontology research by advancing understanding of how leisure travel facilitates psychological flourishing in later adulthood.

## Methods

### *Recruitment and sampling*

A total of 784 participants living in the community were recruited and provided informed consent through a dual strategy combining snowball and convenience sampling. Convenience sampling focused on individuals who were readily accessible and met the inclusion criteria, while snowball sampling relied on referrals from initial participants (Sarker & Al-Muaalemi, 2022). Community-dwelling adults were chosen because they experience a combination of independence and daily life restrictions, making them relevant for exploring the emotional experiences of leisure travel and its influence on mental health in real-life settings.

**Table 1.** Sample of sociodemographic and health characteristics.

Characteristics	Portuguese 266 (33.9)	English 260 (33.2)	Brazilian 258 (32.9)	Total 784 (100.0)
Age, Average $\pm$ SD	71.4 $\pm$ 4.47			
Gender, <i>n</i> (%)				
Female	141 (53.0)	134 (51.5)	138 (53.5)	413 (52.7)
Male	125 (47.0)	126 (48.5)	120 (46.5)	371 (47.3)
Education, <i>n</i> (%)				
Primary school	88 (33.1)	74 (28.5)	71 (27.5)	233 (29.7)
Middle school	102 (38.3)	121 (46.5)	102 (39.5)	325 (41.5)
$\geq$ High school	76 (28.6)	65 (25.0)	85 (32.9)	226 (28.8)
Marital Status, <i>n</i> (%)				
Married or in a relationship	172 (64.7)	181 (69.6)	174 (67.4)	527 (67.2)
Not married nor in a relationship	94 (35.3)	79 (30.4)	84 (32.6)	257 (32.8)
Household, <i>n</i> (%)				
Live with someone	189 (71.1)	192 (73.8)	185 (71.7)	566 (72.2)
Live alone	77 (28.9)	68 (26.2)	73 (28.3)	218 (27.8)
Family Annual Income, <i>n</i> (%)				
$\leq$ 25,000 €	164 (61.7)	168 (64.6)	174 (67.4)	506 (64.5)
>25,000 €	102 (38.3)	92 (35.4)	84 (32.6)	278 (35.5)
Perceived health, <i>n</i> (%)				
Good	171 (64.3)	172 (66.2)	177 (68.6)	520 (66.3)
Poor	95 (35.7)	88 (33.8)	81 (31.4)	264 (33.7)

The study adopted a comprehensive definition of leisure traveling as non-obligatory travel primarily undertaken for relaxation, recreation, or personal enjoyment, including activities such as vacations, cultural trips, health-related treatments, or visiting loved ones, provided the purpose was not work-related. This definition guided both participant inclusion and the structure of the interview questions, following the conceptualization of leisure travel found in Zhang (2023).

The study applied clear inclusion criteria to ensure participant suitability. Participants had to: (1) be at least 65 years old; (2) have at least one prior leisure travel experience within the past 6 months, with a minimum duration of 1 week, to either domestic or international destinations, with no minimum estimated cost; (3) demonstrate the capacity to provide informed consent; (4) have no history of cognitive impairment, psychiatric, or neurological conditions, or substance abuse; and (5) possess familiarity with modern technologies, such as smartphones, tablets, computers, and apps. These criteria ensured the selection of participants who met the study's requirements, supporting reliable data collection while minimizing bias and maintaining sample homogeneity.

The sample included participants from three nationalities: Portuguese (33.9%), English (33.2%), and Brazilian (32.9%). Participants were aged from 65 to 82 years ( $M = 71.4$ ;  $SD = 4.47$ ), all of whom were community-dwelling adults who voluntarily completed the survey. Table 1 summarizes the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample, highlighting diversity in age, education, and marital status.

To enhance diversity, recruitment efforts used a variety of channels, including senior universities, community centers, social media, mailing lists, and public message boards in urban areas. Communication methods, such as phone calls, e-mails, and in-person interactions, were tailored to participants' preferences, creating a flexible and inclusive recruitment process that encouraged widespread participation.

This study adhered to a structured protocol with carefully defined eligibility criteria to ensure participant suitability. The five main criteria were: (1) participants had to be at least 65 years old, (2) have prior experience with leisure traveling, (3) demonstrate the capacity to make an informed decision about participation, (4) have no history of cognitive impairment, psychiatric, or neurological conditions, or substance abuse, and (5) possess familiarity with modern technologies, such as smartphones, tablets, computers, and apps.

### **Data collection**

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews to gather detailed insights from participants. Before the interviews, participants were briefed on the study's objectives, assured of their anonymity, and informed that their data would be used solely for research purposes. To accommodate participants' needs, interviews were conducted via telephone or online platforms such as Skype, SurveyMonkey, Zoom, and WhatsApp, following their informed consent.

Interviews were conducted in participants' respective mother tongues (Portuguese and English) to ensure authenticity in responses. To guarantee accurate data capture, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in the original language. For analysis, Portuguese transcripts were professionally translated into English following a rigorous validation process that included back-translation and independent review to preserve subtle emotional and mental health nuances. To ensure methodological rigor given the large sample size ( $N = 784$ ), three psychologists fluent in both languages independently reviewed and coded the data, enhancing reliability and cultural sensitivity during content analysis.

An interview guide, developed by the authors, included a combination of semi-structured questions designed to elicit comprehensive, yet focused responses, maintaining consistency while allowing flexibility to explore participants' unique perspectives. Key questions included: 'How do you feel about your emotional experiences related to leisure traveling?' and 'In your opinion, how does leisure traveling influence your mental health?' Participants were also offered support via phone or online communication to address any questions or concerns.

Interviews were conducted individually and lasted between 20 and 35 min, reflecting a balanced approach that provided sufficient depth for meaningful insights while considering participant comfort and engagement, particularly with an older adult sample. Data collection took place from October 1 to December 30, 2024. The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee at ISPA - Instituto Universitário. Additionally, all procedures adhered to the ethical principles established in the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its subsequent amendments, as well as equivalent ethical standards.

### **Data analysis**

The study employed a qualitative design, using content analysis as the primary method to systematically examine narratives collected through in-depth telephone and online interviews. Guided by the framework established by Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017), content analysis provided a structured approach to analyzing qualitative data, facilitating a thorough exploration of themes and the deeper meanings embedded in participants' accounts. This approach prioritized capturing rich, detailed narratives, offering a comprehensive view of participants' lived experiences. To ensure methodological rigor and transparency, the study adhered to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist outlined by Tong et al. (2007).

This approach enabled a comprehensive examination and interpretation of the data by systematically identifying emergent themes. A deductive framework guided the analysis, with themes derived from the study's research questions. To support this process, a codebook was developed to organize the data into meaningful categories, which were analyzed using category matrices. Each data segment was carefully coded to align with the pre-established themes.

Although no specialized software (e.g., NVivo or Atlas.ti) was used in the data analysis, the large volume of qualitative material was manually managed through a rigorous, team-based coding process. Transcripts were organized, coded, and cross-checked using structured spreadsheets, enabling the tracking of themes and participant narratives while preserving contextual integrity, in accordance with the Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017) framework. Elements of axial coding, drawn from the Grounded Theory approach, were integrated into the analysis. This allowed for the identification of relationships between emotional experiences, contextual or personal factors, and participants' mental health. Additionally, the incorporation of axial coding enabled a more

dynamic understanding of the relationships between context, actions, and outcomes (Saldana, 2025).

The categorization process emphasized precision, ensuring all categories were distinct, cohesive, and relevant. To enhance reliability and validity, three psychologists independently reviewed and approved the classifications. This review ensured the categories adhered to key qualitative principles, including homogeneity (grouping data with shared traits), relevance (aligning with study objectives), and trustworthiness and objectivity (ensuring unbiased and reliable classifications).

Frequency counts were incorporated to capture the prevalence of each theme across participants, offering insights into the prominence of specific topics within the dataset. Methodological consistency and rigor were upheld throughout the analysis. The findings were derived through a systematic process involving two key stages. First, a descriptive quantitative analysis computed means, medians, percentages, and frequencies for sociodemographic data. Second, a qualitative analysis applied theoretical frameworks to extract meaningful insights from the empirical data. This dual approach was further enhanced through the inclusion of axial coding principles, which supported the mapping of categories along causal conditions, intervening factors, strategies of action, and consequences (Saldana, 2025). To ensure reliability, three researchers independently coded the interviews, achieving a high inter-rater reliability score ( $k = 0.85$ ), reflecting substantial agreement in their interpretations. Statistical analyses adhered to a significance level of  $p \leq .05$ , reducing the likelihood of random variation. The validity of the qualitative analysis was further strengthened by employing a two-coder system, a method validated in prior research (Neuendorf, 2002). This dual-coding process, illustrated in Figure 1, ensured consistent and rigorous theme classification, contributing to the overall robustness of the study.

## Results

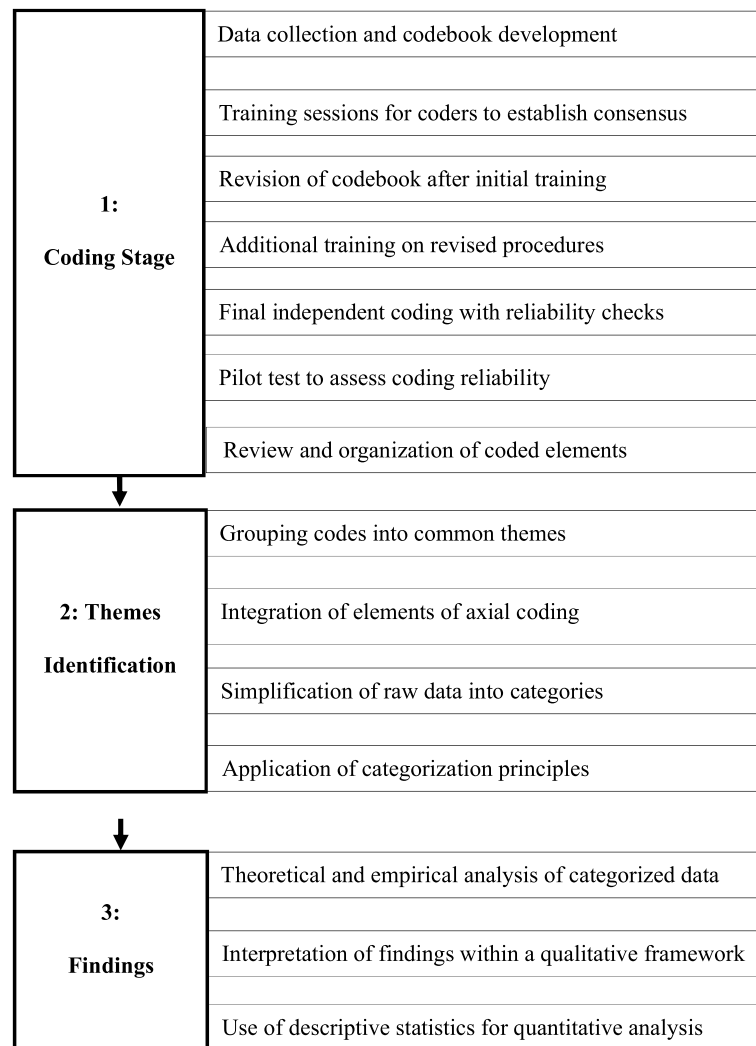
The first objective, aimed to assess the emotional experiences of leisure traveling among older adults. Eight key themes emerged from the content analysis. Participants highlighted less loneliness and isolation (88.3%), increased self-confidence (84.9%), and meaningful relationships (75.2%). Opportunities for physical activity (70.1%) was another significant theme, along with personal growth (66.4%), and an improved sense of agency (61.2%). Enhanced coping skills (59.5%) and an overall increase in perceived well-being (57.3%) were the last themes reported by these participants. All participant names mentioned are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality and comply with ethical standards.

### **Theme 1: less loneliness and isolation**

Less loneliness and isolation was reported by 88.3% of the participants. Portuguese participants particularly underscored this theme ( $nPort = 89.2\%$ ;  $nEngl = 86.3\%$ ;  $nBraz = 86.1\%$ ). This theme highlighted how traveling offered opportunities for social interaction, reducing feelings of solitude, and fostering a sense of connection with others.

An English participant, Stephany, explained how a group tour changed her perspective: ‘After my husband passed away, I felt very alone. Last year, I joined a group trip, and I met so many wonderful people. We shared meals, explored cities together, and even kept in touch afterward. It reminded me that I do not need to be alone and that I can be interesting for others’ (Stephany, female, 70 years-old).

Likewise, Liam, a Portuguese participant, shared: ‘Traveling with my family was like a balm for my heart. We spent evenings talking and laughing, which I had not done in a long time’ (Liam, male, 75 years-old). This theme underscores the role of leisure traveling in lessening social isolation, and providing participants with meaningful interactions that rekindled their sense of belonging and connectedness.



**Figure 1.** Comprehensive process for content analysis.

### **Theme 2: increased self-confidence**

The second most cited theme, noted by 84.9% of participants, was increased self-confidence. This theme was particularly emphasized by Portuguese participants ( $n_{Port} = 85.1\%$ ;  $n_{Braz} = 83.2\%$ ;  $n_{Engl} = 83.1\%$ ). It refers to the way leisure traveling helped older adults feel more assured about themselves, their abilities, and their sense of independence, fostering a renewed sense of empowerment.

Traveling can boost confidence as Maria, a Portuguese older adult, shared: ‘I never thought I could travel on my own, but when I went on a trip last summer, I navigated the city by myself. It made me realize that I can do more than I thought. I felt so proud of myself.’ (Maria, female, 68 years-old).

Similarly, Carlos, from Brazil, expressed: ‘When I went on my last trip, I had to arrange everything myself – book the hotel, figure out the transport, plan the activities. I had never done that before, and at first, I was worried. But once I did it, I felt more confident in my decision-making and in myself’ (Carlos, male, 73 years-old). This theme illustrated how traveling allowed older adults to break through personal barriers, leading them to embrace new challenges and grow in their self-confidence.

### **Theme 3: meaningful relationships**

The theme 'Meaningful relationships' was reported by 75.2% of participants. English participants mostly highlighted this theme as relevant ( $nEngl = 76.2\%$ ;  $nPort = 75.1\%$ ;  $nBraz = 73.9\%$ ). It reflected how leisure traveling promoted deeper connections, whether through bonding with travel companions or forming new friendships along the way.

Emily shared how a trip strengthened her bond with her cousin: 'We went on a trip together last spring. It was just the two of us for a week, and we talked more than we had in years. I learned things about her life I never knew, and it brought us closer in a way I did not expect' (Emily, female, 69 years-old).

Similarly, James described forming new friendships during a group cruise: 'I met a couple on the cruise I did a few years ago who shared similar interests. We spent days exploring the area together and evenings chatting over dinner. Now, we exchange emails and we are planning to visit each other. It is amazing how traveling can create lifelong friendships' (James, male, 71 years-old). This theme illustrates the profound impact of traveling in strengthening existing relationships and building new ones, enriching participants' social lives and contributing to their overall sense of fulfillment.

### **Theme 4: opportunities for physical activity**

The fourth most mentioned theme by 70.1% of participants was opportunities for physical activity. Brazilian participants mostly referred this theme ( $nBraz = 71.1\%$ ;  $nPort = 69.9\%$ ;  $nEngl = 69.3\%$ ). This theme referred to how leisure traveling provided older adults with chances to engage in physical activity, whether through walking, hiking, cycling, or other forms of exercise that they would not typically experience in their daily routines.

Ana, from Brazil, explained how traveling helped her to be more active: 'When I traveled to the mountains last year, I was able to hike every day, something I could never do at home because of the urban environment. I felt so much more energized and alive, it made me realize how much I miss doing that type of exercise' (Ana, female, 66 years-old).

Likewise, John, from England, mentioned: 'During my trip to the coast, I walked along the beach every morning. It was not just a walk, but an adventure. The fresh air, the sand under my feet – it felt like my body was rejuvenating, and I was so proud of myself for keeping up every day' (John, male, 69 years-old). This theme reflects the significance of traveling for promoting physical activity, in which participants experienced a sense of accomplishment and well-being, through engaging in exercise during their leisure trips.

### **Theme 5: personal growth**

Personal growth was the fifth most reported theme, and it was identified by 66.4% of participants. Brazilian participants were particularly vocal about how leisure traveling contributed to their self-development and broader perspectives ( $nBraz = 67.2\%$ ;  $nPort = 65.4\%$ ;  $nEngl = 65.3\%$ ). This theme highlighted how traveling experiences pushed individuals out of their comfort zones, helping them discover new strengths and develop a deeper understanding of themselves and the world.

Luiz, a Brazilian participant, recounted how traveling to a foreign country taught him about resilience: 'When I visited Japan, I did not speak the language and felt completely out of my element. I had to navigate everything on my own, from ordering food to using public transport. By the end of the trip, I felt so proud of myself for managing everything. It showed me I am stronger and more capable than I thought' (Luiz, male, 68 years-old).

Similarly, Marina, shared how traveling to developing countries inspired her: 'Last year I was in Nepal and felt overwhelmed by their lives. It made me reflect on my own life and what I want to leave behind. That trip motivated me to start volunteering back home.' (Marina, female, 73 years-old). This

theme underscored how traveling can serve as a transformative experience, encouraging participants to grow emotionally, mentally, and socially, and promoting a sense of accomplishment and purpose.

### **Theme 6: improved sense of agency**

The sixth theme, highlighted by 61.2% of participants, was an improved sense of agency. English participants particularly emphasized this theme, describing how leisure traveling empowered them to make decisions and regain a sense of control over their lives ( $n_{Engl} = 61.8\%$ ;  $n_{Port} = 61.0\%$ ;  $n_{Braz} = 59.7\%$ ). Moreover, this theme reflects how the independence associated with traveling allowed participants to take charge of their experiences, reinforcing feelings of autonomy and self-determination.

Margaret reported how a hiking trip rekindled her self-confidence: 'I joined a group for hiking, but I chose to take a different route 1 day. I navigated the trails, dealt with unexpected weather, and returned to the group safely. It reminded me that I still have the skills to take care of myself, even in unfamiliar settings' (Margaret, female, 70 years-old).

Similarly, Robert, shared how taking a spontaneous road trip restored his sense of freedom: 'After I retired, I felt stuck in a routine. One day, I just packed my car and drove to my hometown: a beautiful place I have not been for such a long time. I decided where to stop and what to do without anyone else's input. It was exhilarating to make choices just for myself' (Robert, male, 72 years-old). This theme illustrated how leisure traveling can empower older adults, fostering a renewed sense of agency and independence, which enhances their overall quality of life.

### **Theme 7: enhanced coping skills**

Enhanced coping skills were the next theme, mentioned by 59.5% of participants. English participants particularly underscored this theme, describing how leisure traveling helped them building resilience and managing stress more effectively ( $n_{Engl} = 59.8\%$ ;  $n_{Braz} = 58.3\%$ ;  $n_{Port} = 58.2\%$ ). This theme captured how engaging with new environments and overcoming challenges during traveling equipped participants with tools to navigate difficulties in their everyday lives.

Elizabeth explained how traveling abroad helped her coping with grief: 'After my husband passed away, I felt lost. My daughter suggested I took a trip, so I did. The change of scenery, learning to adapt to a different culture, and meeting new people helped me realize I could handle life again, one step at a time' (Elizabeth, female, 69 years-old).

Likewise, David shared how a hiking trip gave him perspective: 'In my last trip I went cycling and it was so tough, physically and mentally. There were moments I wanted to give up, but I pushed through. That experience taught me to approach problems back home with the same determination' (David, male, 74 years-old). This theme highlights how leisure traveling provided a unique platform for older adults to face and overcome challenges, equipping them with strategies to handle life's adversities more effectively.

### **Theme 8: increased perceived well-being**

The last theme, noted by 57.3% of participants, was increased perceived well-being. Brazilian participants particularly emphasized this theme, describing how leisure traveling contributed to their overall sense of happiness and life satisfaction ( $n_{Braz} = 58.3\%$ ;  $n_{Port} = 57.2\%$ ;  $n_{Engl} = 57.1\%$ ). This theme reflected the profound positive emotional and mental benefits participants experienced through exploring new destinations, engaging in fulfilling activities, and momentarily stepping away from routine stressors.

Sara shared how a trip transformed her outlook: 'I had been feeling very down after retiring. But spending a week by the sea, walking on the beach every morning, watching the sunset, and laughing with my friends, reminded me how beautiful life can be. It gave me a sense of joy I had not felt in years' (Sara, female, 70 years-old).

Similarly, reflected on how traveling improved his emotional state: 'I had been struggling with anxiety for a while, but during a last trip, I realized how calm and happy I felt just sitting in a plaza, enjoying a mint tea. It was like the weight I carried lifted for a moment, and I brought some of that peace back home' (Peter, male, 68 years-old). This theme underscored how leisure traveling can serve as a catalyst for emotional renewal, fostering a sense of well-being that participants often carried with them long after returning home.

For the second objective, which aimed to analyze how leisure traveling influences the mental health of older adults, several positive impacts were identified. Participants reported less depressive symptoms (78.3%), reduced stress and anxiety (77.3%), improvement in cognitive flexibility (75.3%), and improved sleep (63.9%).

### **Theme 1: less depressive symptoms**

The first most verbalized theme was less depressive symptoms by 78.3% of the participants. English participants particularly highlighted this theme, emphasizing how leisure traveling helped alleviate feelings of sadness and despondency ( $n_{Engl} = 78.4\%$ ;  $n_{Braz} = 77.8\%$ ;  $n_{Port} = 77.1\%$ ). This theme reflects how traveling created opportunities for distraction, new experiences, and meaningful interactions, which collectively contributed to a reduction in depressive symptoms.

Rebecca, from England, shared how a trip to Italy helped her recover from a difficult period: 'I lost my husband a year ago and felt like I would never smile again. But during a trip with my friends, I found myself laughing at dinner, marveling at the beauty of the countryside, and feeling connected to the world again. It was as if a part of me that had been asleep woke up' (Rebecca, female, 69 years-old).

Similarly, Andrew, described the mental health benefits he experienced: 'I had been battling low moods for months. My doctor suggested I try something new, so I joined a group tour. Seeing new places and immersing myself in different surroundings gave me a fresh perspective, which lifted my spirits and eased my feelings of depression' (Andrew, male, 72 years-old). This theme highlights how traveling can serve as a beneficial intervention, offering participants moments of joy and solace that helped mitigate depressive feelings and promote emotional healing.

### **Theme 2: reduced stress and anxiety**

The second theme, observed by 77.3% of participants, was reduced stress and anxiety. Portuguese participants, in particular, emphasized this theme, describing how leisure traveling provided a much-needed break from daily stressors, leading to a reduction in anxiety levels ( $n_{Port} = 78.1\%$ ;  $n_{Engl} = 77.9\%$ ;  $n_{Braz} = 76.3\%$ ). This theme highlights how traveling allowed individuals to disconnect from their usual pressures, offering a refreshing change in environment that facilitated mental relaxation and peace of mind.

Carlos shared his experience during a trip: 'I was feeling constantly anxious, my mind never stopped. But once I arrived in a new place, surrounded by the sea and nature, I felt the weight lift. Hiking through the volcanic trails and breathing the fresh air gave me a sense of calm I had not experienced in a long time' (Carlos, male, 70 years-old).

Similarly, Samatha reflected on how traveling eased her worries: 'I have been so stressed lately. But when I traveled, I felt an instant change. The lush green landscapes, the peaceful atmosphere, and even just strolling through the charming streets made me feel so relaxed. It was like I could finally breathe and let go of the tension I had been carrying' (Samatha, female, 68 years-old).

This theme underscores the mental health benefits of leisure travel, illustrating how new environments can promote relaxation, reduce anxiety, and help individuals regain emotional equilibrium.

### **Theme 3: cognitive flexibility**

Cognitive flexibility was the third theme, identified by 75.3% of participants. Brazilian participants notably emphasized how leisure traveling contributed to enhancing their ability to adapt to new situations and environments ( $n_{Braz} = 75.9\%$ ;  $n_{Port} = 74.1\%$ ;  $n_{Engl} = 74.0\%$ ). This theme highlights how traveling experiences, by presenting new challenges and unfamiliar settings, helped participants develop greater mental agility, making it easier for them to adjust to life's complexities.

Anthony shared how his trip helped him embrace uncertainty: 'I was always someone who preferred plans and structure, but traveling pushed me out of my comfort zone. The weather was unpredictable, and the schedules were often delayed, but I learned to roll with it. I realized how much I could adapt, and that felt incredibly freeing' (Carlos, male, 71 years-old).

Likewise, Julia, from Portugal, recounted how her trip brought about a shift in her thinking: 'Before, I struggled with change, but when I traveled, I had to adapt to a lot of unexpected situations. The foreign language and the sudden weather changes challenged me to go with the flow. It really opened my mind to the idea that flexibility is key, and I felt much more at ease handling the unpredictable' (Julia, female, 69 years-old). This theme reflects how travel, through exposure to novel and unexpected experiences, fosters cognitive flexibility, enabling individuals to adapt more easily to changing circumstances and challenges in daily life.

### **Theme 4: improved sleep**

The final theme was improved sleep, identified by 63.9% of participants. Portuguese participants, in particular, highlighted the positive impact that leisure traveling had on their sleep quality ( $n_{Port} = 64.1\%$ ;  $n_{Engl} = 63.9\%$ ;  $n_{Braz} = 63.2\%$ ). This theme underscores how a change in environment, particularly when combined with a slower pace of life during travel, contributed to better rest and reduced sleep disturbances.

Paul, an older participant from Portugal, reflected on how his visit enhanced his sleep: 'I have had trouble sleeping for years, but in my last trip everything changed. The peacefulness of the cruise ship, the gentle sound of the waves, and the fresh air seemed to reset my body. I could sleep through the night without waking up every hour. It was incredible' (Paul, male, 72 years-old).

Similarly, Matilda, from England, shared her experience of better sleep while also traveling on a cruise: 'My sleep had been erratic for a while, but during my trip on a cruise, I noticed an improvement right away. The steady rhythm of the sea, combined with the relaxing evenings on board, helped me unwind. I felt much less stressed, and I had wake up refreshed every morning, something I had not experienced in years' (Matilda, female, 70 years-old). This theme illustrates how the calming and restorative effects of traveling, through exposure to more tranquil environments and a break from daily stress, can significantly enhance sleep quality and overall well-being.

## **Discussion**

### **Emotional experiences of leisure traveling**

The objective of the first part of this study was to assess the emotional experiences of leisure traveling among older adults. The results revealed a variety of themes, reflecting the diverse emotional impacts that leisure traveling has on this population, with notable cultural differences across the three nationalities studied.

Portuguese participants strongly highlighted less loneliness and isolation and increased self-confidence. The emphasis on less loneliness and isolation is rooted in close-knit communities, where older adults often rely on family and social networks, and traveling can serve as a means of combating feelings of isolation (Chen et al., 2019; Frade & Coelho, 2015). Similarly, this may also reflect the Portuguese cultural value placed on social bonds (Frade & Coelho, 2015), where leisure traveling can provide opportunities to build self-esteem and foster connections. The emphasis on

increased self-confidence likely aligns with the Portuguese tendency to value resilience and overcoming challenges, which may be particularly empowering for older adults during traveling (Frade & Coelho, 2015).

English participants highlighted meaningful relationships, a greater sense of agency, and enhanced coping skills, reflecting the individualistic nature of this society. For English participants, traveling may be seen as an opportunity to forge new connections, bolster independence, and build personal resilience (Betti & Tussyadiah, 2024). The strong focus on a greater sense of agency indicates a desire to maintain control and autonomy, even as individuals age. Additionally, the emphasis on enhanced coping skills reflects the English value placed on personal resilience and adaptability, suggesting that leisure traveling is viewed as a way to reinforce these skills through new experiences (Mulcahy et al., 2024).

Brazilian participants, in contrast, primarily emphasized opportunities for physical activity and personal growth, reflecting Brazil's vibrant, community-oriented culture that values self-exploration, physical vitality, and active lifestyles (Benedetti et al., 2011). Moreover, the Brazilian focus on increased perceived well-being also underscores the importance of enjoyment and shared experiences, as leisure traveling is often seen as an opportunity to enhance overall happiness and health (Zins & Ponocny, 2022).

Leisure traveling was associated with a reduction in feelings of loneliness and isolation (88.3%), with participants noting that the social aspects of traveling provided opportunities for connection. Traveling, by its nature, often involves interacting with new people, whether through shared experiences with fellow travelers, interactions with locals, or participating in group activities. For many older adults, especially those living alone or with limited social networks, these opportunities for social engagement can be crucial in combating loneliness and fostering a sense of belonging (Qiao et al., 2022). This is in line with recent research suggesting that social engagement is a significant factor in maintaining mental health and well-being in later life (Monteiro et al., 2024).

Many also expressed an increase in self-confidence during and after their travels (84.9%), attributing the experience to new accomplishments and overcoming challenges. Traveling provides opportunities for older adults to prove their capabilities in unfamiliar settings, such as navigating new environments, interacting with diverse people, and overcoming logistical challenges (Qiao et al., 2022). These accomplishments appear to reinforce a positive self-image, fostering a belief in their competence and resilience. Such findings align with studies demonstrating that engaging in novel and challenging activities later in life can bolster self-esteem and contribute to a more positive self-concept (Yan et al., 2024).

Additionally, many older adults reported forming meaningful relationships during their travels (75.2%), which they felt enhanced their emotional well-being. The shared experiences of traveling, whether with family, friends, or fellow travelers, cultivated a sense of belonging and mutual support, reinforcing the importance of quality relationships in overall well-being. Friendships, as voluntary connections between autonomous individuals, offer valuable insights into how bonding and intimacy develop in tourism settings (Gonnord et al., 2023; Matteucci et al., 2022). Additionally, intergenerational interactions emerged as a key aspect of these traveling experiences. Research on intergenerational bonding programs highlights their potential to enhance older adults' well-being by fostering stronger relationships and mutual understanding across generations (Yeh et al., 2022). These programs have been linked to a higher quality of life, reduced social isolation, and a renewed sense of self-worth among older adults (Wong et al., 2018; Yeh et al., 2022).

A significant proportion of participants also highlighted the opportunities for physical activity as a key benefit (70.1%), with a notable percentage reporting that traveling allowed them to engage in exercise and stay physically active. For many older adults, physical activity can be a challenge due to age-related limitations and chronic health conditions. Leisure travel, however, appears to provide a motivating context in which physical activity becomes more accessible and enjoyable (Meredith et al., 2023; Portegijs et al., 2020). Whether through hiking, cycling, walking tours, or water-based activities, traveling can offer both the time and the environment conducive to movement. This aligns

with evidence suggesting that physical activity while traveling can improve cardiovascular health, joint mobility, and overall well-being in older populations (Sun et al., 2023).

Personal growth was another theme that emerged (66.4%), with participants describing how traveling allowed them to learn about themselves and develop new perspectives. Older adults embark on trips for various reasons, including cultural enrichment, immersion in nature, adventure, relaxation, well-being, socialization, and a boost in self-esteem (Patuelli & Nijkamp, 2016). Engaging in new environments and novel experiences encourages cognitive stimulation and adaptability, fostering a deeper understanding of oneself and the world. This aligns with the principles of active aging, which emphasize the continuous development and preservation of skills and abilities that contribute to overall well-being (Qiao et al., 2022).

A strong sense of agency was identified by those who felt empowered by their traveling experiences (61.2%), enabling them to take control over aspects of their lives. For many older adults, planning and making decisions about their trips reinforced their independence and self-efficacy. However, ageism can sometimes manifest in patronizing attitudes or assumptions about their capabilities, potentially undermining their confidence. Yet, when given the opportunity to navigate traveling on their own terms, older adults often challenge these stereotypes, demonstrating resilience and adaptability (Yang, 2025). The ability to make independent choices, such as selecting destinations, arranging accommodations, and organizing itineraries, enhances a traveler's sense of autonomy and fulfillment (Li et al., 2024; von Humboldt, Silva, et al., 2024).

Enhanced coping skills were another common outcome (59.5%), as traveling seemed to equip participants with better emotional resilience. Exposure to new environments, unexpected challenges, and diverse social interactions encouraged adaptability and problem-solving. Engaging with natural landscapes and different cultures not only provided moments of reflection and relaxation but also fostered a sense of competence, as travelers navigated unfamiliar settings and successfully managed logistical aspects of their trips (Li et al., 2024). Additionally, the unpredictability of travel, whether through last-minute bookings, solo journeys, minimal planning, or the need to adapt to disruptions and foreign languages, further cultivated a tolerance for uncertainty, enhancing travelers' confidence in their ability to manage change and navigate new experiences with greater ease (Li et al., 2024).

Finally, a considerable number of participants reported an overall increase in their perceived well-being (57.3%), with traveling contributing to a positive shift in their emotional and mental health. Physical activities such as walking and jogging, commonly incorporated into traveling experiences, have been shown to promote mental health among older adults (Kelly et al., 2018). Beyond the immediate benefits of physical movement, exposure to new environments and a break from routine provide psychological relief, reducing stress and enhancing overall mood. Given that physical exercise strongly influences mental health and can help alleviate psychological distress (Hou et al., 2024).

### ***Leisure traveling influence on mental health***

The second objective of this study was to analyze how leisure traveling influences the mental health of older adults. The findings revealed several positive impacts, with participants reporting notable improvements in their mental well-being following leisure traveling, and cultural differences across the three nationalities were also evident.

English participants predominantly highlighted fewer depressive symptoms, suggesting that leisure traveling may serve as an important means of opposing feelings of sadness or hopelessness, possibly providing them with new perspectives and positive experiences that counteract depressive states. This may be related to a relatively individualistic culture (Lamb et al., 2020). The opportunity to escape from routine life and experience new environments can provide a sense of relief and hope for those struggling with depression (van Wee & Mokhtarian, 2023).

On the other hand, Portuguese participants emphasized reduced stress and anxiety and improved sleep. In Portuguese society, where close family ties and social connectedness are highly valued, the reduced stress and anxiety through leisure traveling may reflect the pressures and responsibilities older

adults feel in their daily lives. Traveling offers them a break from these demands, allowing them to restore their mental health through relaxation and exposure to less stressful environments (Jimenez et al., 2021). Additionally, the focus on improved sleep suggests that for Portuguese participants, traveling offers a retreat from the daily stresses that might contribute to sleep disturbances, allowing them to reconnect with their bodies, and experience a more restful state (Jimenez et al., 2021).

Brazilian participants highlighted cognitive flexibility, which is perhaps the most distinctive theme among the three nationalities. In Brazilian culture, where the importance of adaptability and resilience is often emphasized, leisure traveling may be seen as an opportunity to challenge one's cognitive boundaries and embrace new experiences (Zank et al., 2019). Cognitive flexibility could be associated with the ability to adjust to unfamiliar situations, and older Brazilian adults may view traveling as a way to engage in novel experiences that help them remain mentally agile (Rudnik et al., 2019).

A key theme that emerged was the reduction in depressive symptoms (78.3%), with many participants indicating that traveling helped them alleviate feelings of sadness and contributed to a more positive outlook on life. Engaging in leisure outdoor activities has been shown to be particularly effective in reducing depressive feelings, as these activities offer opportunities for social interaction and mental stimulation, which help counteract the isolating effects of loneliness (Harada et al., 2017). In addition, activities such as traveling, engaging in sports, visiting museums and exhibitions, as well as dining out and attending parties, have been found to be especially effective in alleviating depressive symptoms (Cole et al., 2024; Kim & Jang, 2017).

Additionally, leisure traveling was linked to reduced stress and anxiety (77.3%), with participants noting that the experience allowed them to temporarily escape from daily pressures and relax in new environments. Leisure and free time are recognized as key forms of recovery, helping individuals break away from the routine of daily life and improve their emotional well-being (Blank et al., 2018). Moreover, active traveling in familiar settings tends to involve fewer anxiety-inducing elements, allowing for a more controlled experience (Ratering et al., 2024).

Cognitive flexibility was another significant theme for the participants in total (75.3%), with several participants describing how traveling helped them think more adaptively, particularly when navigating unfamiliar situations or interacting with new people. Leisure traveling, whether a short excursion or an extended journey, engages travelers on various levels, including in cognitive, physical, and social ways, requiring them to adapt to new situations and environments (Cole et al., 2024). Particularly during long-distance travel, where unfamiliar destinations and new experiences demand higher mental and physical effort, travelers are pushed to develop greater cognitive flexibility as they navigate these challenges (Cole et al., 2024; Mau et al., 2021).

Last, improved sleep was reported by many (63.9%), with participants mentioning that the change in environment and the relaxation associated with traveling contributed to better rest and enhanced overall sleep quality. Research has shown that altering one's environment can have a profound impact on sleep patterns, as different settings may provide a break from the stressors of daily life and promote better rest (Mao et al., 2018). For example, staying in hotels with specific attributes, such as comfortable bedding, quiet surroundings, and a peaceful atmosphere, has been found to positively influence tourists' sleep quality, making the traveling experience even more restorative (Hon & Fung, 2019).

While this cross-cultural qualitative study provides valuable insights into the impact of leisure traveling on the mental health and well-being of older adults, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, despite capturing diverse perspectives across different nationalities, the qualitative nature of the research limits the generalizability of findings. Future studies using longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how traveling influences well-being over time and across different cultural contexts.

Second, the study relies on self-reported experiences, which may be subject to recall bias or social desirability effects. Participants may have emphasized the positive aspects of their traveling experiences while underreporting challenges such as traveling fatigue, financial constraints, or accessibility barriers. Additionally, cultural differences in how older adults perceive and articulate their emotional and psychological experiences may have influenced the themes identified. Comparative research with

a larger sample and more structured assessments could help validate these findings and deepen cross-cultural insights.

Moreover, the emphasis on physical activity during traveling raises questions about sustainability and long-term health benefits. While participants described feeling more physically active while traveling, it remains unclear whether these behaviors translate into lasting lifestyle changes once they return home. Future studies could explore how traveling experiences can be leveraged to encourage sustained engagement in physical activity, such as through follow-up programs or integrating travel-inspired routines into daily life. Understanding whether short-term increases in activity lead to long-term health improvements could have meaningful implications for public health and aging policies.

Finally, the study did not fully account for variations in health status, mobility limitations, or financial resources, all of which can significantly shape traveling experiences and the psychological benefits derived from them. Future research should consider how these factors influence access to and engagement in travel, ensuring that recommendations for age-friendly tourism policies are inclusive and adaptable to the needs of a diverse population of older adults.

This cross-cultural qualitative study shows important implications for multiple fields, including public health, tourism, and aging policy. By highlighting the mental health benefits of leisure traveling for older adults, this research underscores the need for age-inclusive traveling initiatives that promote well-being and social engagement among older adults. Governments and policymakers should consider integrating traveling into active aging strategies, recognizing its potential to enhance life satisfaction, reduce loneliness, and foster cognitive resilience in later life.

From a public health perspective, the study suggests that traveling experiences can serve as a catalyst for improved mental health, stress reduction, and even increased physical activity. Given the growing emphasis on non-pharmacological interventions for mental well-being, leisure traveling could be explored as a complementary approach to existing psychological and social support programs for older adults. Health professionals might also consider recommending structured traveling programs or social tourism initiatives tailored to individuals at risk of social isolation or depressive symptoms.

The tourism industry can play a pivotal role in making traveling more accessible and beneficial for older adults. These findings suggest that opportunities for social interaction, physical activity, and personal growth contribute to positive emotional experiences. Future research should explore ways to make traveling more inclusive, particularly for individuals with financial constraints or mobility challenges, ensuring that its benefits are equitably distributed across diverse aging populations.

These findings also showed important cultural differences. Portuguese participants' emphasis on opposing loneliness and isolation reflects a society deeply rooted in social ties. English participants' focus on meaningful relationships and sense of agency, reflects the importance placed on individualism and self-sufficiency. For Brazilian participants, the focus on physical activity aligns with their cultural emphasis on enjoyment and maintaining vitality.

These cultural distinctions further illustrate how leisure traveling can be related to mental health for older adults from different nationalities. For English participants, fewer depressive symptoms align with the growing recognition of depression as a major mental health concern among older adults. For Portuguese participants, reduced stress and anxiety and improved sleep points to the social connectedness and the restorative effects of traveling. Meanwhile, Brazilian participants' emphasis on cognitive flexibility may reflect a cultural emphasis on adaptability and resilience, with leisure traveling contributing to good mental health.

In sum, the findings of this study suggest that leisure traveling may serve not only as a leisure activity but also as a means of addressing deep-seated cultural values and personal aspirations, such as connection, independence, and resilience. Understanding these nuances is essential for developing tailored interventions and policies that can better support the diverse needs of older adults across different cultural contexts. In this sense, this study showed that programs and interventions focused on leisure traveling in old age can have a robust role when contributing to less loneliness and isolation,

increased self-confidence, meaningful relationships, opportunities for physical activity, personal growth, improved sense of agency, enhanced coping skills, and increased perceived well-being. Pointedly, leisure traveling can benefit older adults' mental health by contributing to less depressive symptoms, stress and anxiety, increased cognitive flexibility, and improved sleep quality. This study highlights the potential for leisure traveling to be integrated into broader discussions of what aging well really means for older adults. As global populations continue to age, rethinking the role of traveling in older adults' lives can help shift narratives from decline and dependency to sense of agency, fulfillment, and well-being.

### Authors' contributions

SVH: study concept and design, analysis and interpretation of data, recruitment of subjects, preparation of manuscript; NI: study concept and design, preparation of the manuscript; IL: study concept and design, interpretation of data. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Funding

This research was funded by the FCT—Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, I.P., under Grant [number SFRH/BPD/116114/2016].

### ORCID

Sofia von Humboldt  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9664-6735>  
Namrah Ilyas  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1801-7399>  
Isabel Leal  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1672-7912>

### Data availability statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

### Institutional review board statement

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of ISPA – Instituto Universitário (Protocol code: SFRH/BPD/116114/2016; Date of approval: 11/7/2016).

### Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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