



## U. S. winter migrants' park community attributes: An importance–performance analysis



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Winter migrants' most preferred attributes of RV/mobile home parks were examined.
- Winter migrants were satisfied with friendliness and having friends in their park.
- Effects on park recommendation were used in the importance–performance analysis.
- Infrastructure issues most impact park recommendation for winter migrants.

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### ABSTRACT

North American seasonal migrants, who are usually retired, typically live in recreational vehicle/mobile home park communities in the southern U. S. during the winter months. This study examines the importance of specific park characteristics in the park selection process and uses the case of winter migrants in south Texas to demonstrate how parks may use a modified approach of importance–performance analysis and the promoter–detractor methodology to assess how well the parks perform on selected attributes. The analysis of survey responses from 1429 winter Texans categorized attributes based on the attributes' impact range and asymmetrical impact on park recommendation likelihood. Overall, seasonal migrants based their choice of location for their winter home largely on physical appearance (e.g., cleanliness) and affect (i.e., friendliness and caring management). Wireless Internet access and low rates were also of high importance. But park recommendation likelihood varies depending on the migrants' satisfaction with important attributes' performance.

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### 1. Introduction

Seasonal migrants, who are usually retired, have been the subject of a number of studies in the travel and tourism literature for some time now. For example, in 1954, Hoyt first noted that Florida trailer parks were comprised largely of winter migrants—retired and semi-retired occupants who spent six months or less there and had another home in a northern state where they were registered as legal residents. These seasonal migrants typically travel to the same destination each year and, as Hoyt found in the United States, many stay in recreational vehicle/mobile home park communities. The winter migrants frequently choose trailer park living, where

they may own or rent mobile housing, because of the economy, convenience, and the ease of creating a social life in the community of similar others. Consequently, numerous recreational vehicles (RV) and mobile home 'park' communities catering to migrant retirees have sprung up across the southern United States, facilitating the seasonal migration. For example, the web site [MHVillage.com](http://MHVillage.com) (MHVillage, 2013), an online manufactured homes marketplace website with a database of 36,000 U. S. park communities, identifies almost 3300 age restricted communities in Arizona, Florida, and Texas alone, where seasonal migrants in the United States typically spend winters.

While national or worldwide data about seasonal migration is not available, some studies have identified their numbers and their economic impact as significant (Serow, 2003). For example, 24,000 retired seasonal migrant households in China contributed \$59 million to a local economy (Ma & Chow, 2006) and an estimated 69,500 winter migrants in the Rio Grande Valley region of Texas during winter of 2012 yielded a direct spending impact of \$751 million (Simpson & Nasif, 2012).

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Other research supports the importance of RV/mobile home parks to winter migrants specifically. In 2012, 91% of 1443 winter migrants surveyed in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas lived in one of 300 area parks where 47% owned a mobile home and 39% possessed an RV (Simpson & Nasif, 2012); similarly, in 2000, an estimated 78,300 winter migrant households lived in park spaces in Arizona (Happel & Hogan, 2002). While not specific only to seasonal winter migrants, statistics from the Census Bureau American FactFinder reported that more than 3.2 million U. S. residents aged 55 and over lived in manufactured/mobile housing and, in 2011, 9.3% of Americans 55 and older owned RVs (Curtin, 2011). Even in the United Kingdom, park communities are an increasingly popular housing option for retirees (Bevan, 2010) and research from Australia (Hillman, 2013) to Morocco (Viallon, 2012) highlights seasonal travel, especially in RVs where travelers were likely to stay in various RV parks or campgrounds.

These findings suggest the importance of seasonal migrants to a community and their proclivity for park community housing, yet little research has been conducted about the park communities in which seasonal migrants typically live. More specifically, the question about what park community characteristics are important to these seasonal migrants has yet to be examined. The primary purpose of this research is to address this gap in the literature by examining park community attributes that are considered important to seasonal migrants and by evaluating those attributes perceived as important in terms of the impact of their performance on the extent to which the seasonal migrants would likely recommend their parks to others. Further, this research uses a modified version of importance–performance analysis developed by Mikulić and Prebežac (2008, 2011a, 2011b, 2012) to demonstrate how well park managers and owner-operators meet their residents' needs, to identify the influence of various park attributes on the likelihood that park residents would recommend their parks to others, and to categorize park attributes based on the attributes' recommendation likelihood-generating potential.

Finally, the results are examined in terms of park residents' likelihood of recommending the park to others. Research suggests that firms can get an effective indicator of customer loyalty and business growth potential by simply asking their customers the question, "How likely is it that you would recommend our company to a friend or colleague?" (Reichheld, 2003). The rationale is that when customers are willing to recommend a company, they are putting their reputations on the line, which is a risk that customers will take only if they are intensely loyal to the company. Moreover, researchers argue that recommendation likelihood may be an especially important information source to customers in the hospitality and tourism industry because of the intangible nature of the products (e.g., Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). As such, it is critical to examine whether those park residents who are highly likely to recommend their parks (i.e., "promoters") are significantly different from their counterparts—i.e., the "passively satisfied" and the "detractors"—with regard to the evaluation of the importance and performance of park attributes.

The results of this study provide park managers and owner-operators with information about which attributes consumers seek in a park community to better position their park against the competition both within the geographic area and outside the area. This knowledge is also useful to city tourism officials in marketing the area to seasonal migrants in terms of desirable housing characteristics. In addition, this study provides a better understanding of the relative importance of desired attributes in the process of selecting a park community and how effectively a park community meets those needs.

## 2. Literature review and context

Research on senior seasonal migrants (also known as grey nomads, snowbirds, winter tourists, later-life migrants, and seasonal tourists, among others) is a broad stream of study conducted throughout the world. Since the time of Hoyt's (1954) initial study of "trailer park" retirees, investigators have examined the economic impact of these migrants on their winter locations (e.g., Day & Barlett, 2000; Franklin & Raadschelders, 2007; Serow, 2003; Smith & House, 2007), their identity salience (e.g., Gustafson, 2002; Simpson & Siguaw, 2008), their place attachment (e.g., Holloway, 2010; McHugh & Mings, 1996; Stedman, 2006), their socio-cultural profile (e.g., Viallon, 2012), their health-related lifestyle (e.g., Higgs & Quirk, 2007; Hillman, 2013), and their demographics and health status (e.g., Sullivan & Stevens, 1982). Still others have examined the difficulty of accounting for these "invisible residents" (e.g., Happel & Hogan, 2002; Melman, 1999). Importantly, seasonal or retiree migration research has been examined worldwide in such countries as Australia as related to Australian retirees (e.g., Hillman, 2013), China as related to Chinese migrants (e.g., Li & Guo, 2011), Spain as related to Swedish migrants (Gustafson, 2002), Morocco as related to French migrants (Viallon, 2012), and Malaysia as related to international retirees (e.g., Wong & Musa, 2014).

Housing preferences of seasonal migrants, however, have received virtually no attention in the literature beyond Hoyt's (1954), Sullivan and Stevens' (1982), and McHugh and Mings' (1991) trailer park residents research. As previously noted, Hoyt (1954) identified ease of socializing as an important factor in park selection. Sullivan and Stevens (1982) found remote location, activities, good management, and inhabitants to be the top criteria for retired migrants selecting travel trailer parks. McHugh and Mings (1991) identified three attributes shared by the most successful RV parks in Arizona. These attributes included the creation of a recreational lifestyle through permanent recreational facilities and full-time activity directors; the development of a suburban appearance with professional landscaping, paved streets in grid patterns, and a focus on cleanliness and security; and the fostering of a sense of community through the formation of social clubs, holiday events, and other activities that brought like-minded individuals together. As a result of this narrow body of work, there is scant current information available to assist park managers and owner-operators in meeting the needs of retired seasonal migrants and in identifying the criteria used by retired seasonal migrants to select their winter park community.

Because retirement migration is recognized as a driver for economic growth (e.g., Day & Barlett, 2000; Franklin & Raadschelders, 2007; Serow, 2003; Simpson & Nasif, 2012; Smith & House, 2007; Walters, 2002), it is important that parks in a destination be nationally competitive, so that seasonal migrants are not lost to other locations seeking this same market segment. Understanding the importance of park attributes to migrants and the parks' performance in terms of the likelihood that the migrants would recommend the parks to others is critical to ensuring that the lucrative winter migrant market segment continues to flourish.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Sampling frame

Each winter hundreds of thousands of retired and semi-retired individuals from the middle to northern U. S. and Canada travel to warmer places such as Florida, Arizona, and Texas to reside for one to six months. Among the many winter destination choices, the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) in far South Texas has become popular

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