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How do Egyptian hotel management students feel about studying alcohol service?



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ABSTRACT

Drinking and handling of alcohol are prohibited by Islam, therefore, hotel management students in Egypt, mostly Muslims, are faced with a controversial issue. Students in three Egyptian schools of tourism and hotels were surveyed to investigate their perceptions of studying alcoholic beverages service, focusing on issues of gender, religious affiliation, religiosity, and drinking history. The findings indicate that service classes were supported by the majority while service laboratories, involving handling of alcohol, were opposed. Moreover, students' preferences in training opportunities were associated with their perceptions of the service laboratory. Religion and culture largely form the students' perceptions of alcohol.

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1. Introduction

Moore (1995) observes that consuming alcohol is a salient element of tourism. The provision of alcoholic beverages service is important to ensure customer satisfaction and for operation profitability (Dahmr & Kahl, 2009). Walker (2011) mentions that selling alcoholic beverages is more profitable than selling food items. An estimated 25–30% of restaurant sales come from beverage sales (Walker, 2011). The ratio of profit yielded by beverages is between two and five times higher than that for food (Miller, Dopson, & Hayes, 2005). This amount can increase in different types of operations, where beverage sales account for approximately two-thirds of a club's income. After all, this is their main product (Skinner, Moss, & Parfitt, 2005).

The Arab Republic of Egypt is situated in the heart of the Middle East and North Africa region. As of July 2013, Egypt's population is estimated at 85,294,388. The majority of the population are Muslims (mostly Sunni) (90%), while 10% are Christians (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013). Egyptian Christians are affiliated with three main churches: Coptic Orthodox, Anglican (Protestant), and Catholic (Ibrahim, Tadros, El-Fiki, & Soliman, 1996). However, Coptic Orthodox dominates with 9%, whereas the other denominations account for only 1% (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013).

The Egyptian economy depends on the tourism sector, among others. Tourism is considered as a vehicle of economic development for Egypt. According to the State Information Service of Egypt (n.d.), tourism and its related services account for 11.3% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), while the sector generates 19.30% of foreign exchange. Egypt received 11.5 million tourists in 2012. Most tourists are European, Arab, and American, in order of magnitude (Central Agency for Public Mobilization & Statistics, n.d.). However, the volatility of the political situation in Egypt has negatively affected its tourism and hospitality industry since 2011 (Mohammad, Jones, Dawood, & Sayed, 2012). Hotel occupancy is a relevant indicator of

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the consequent turbulence in the Egyptian tourism sector which saw a drastic drop in the average occupancy rate for hotels in Cairo: in 2011, the rate was 39.9%, while in 2010 it was 73.8% (Mohammad et al., 2012). Egypt offers tourists many opportunities for activities and experiences, appealing to varied tastes and motivations. The cities of Cairo and Giza are well known for heritage tourism. Alexandria, Hurghada, and Sharm el-Sheikh are famous for beach and water sports, and the oases of the Western desert are niche destinations for eco-tourists. Luxor and Aswan, world renowned, are more like an open museum of Egypt monuments dating back to antiquity (State Information Service, n.d.).

According to the Egyptian Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics in 2011, there were 1321 accommodation establishments, e.g., hotels, tourist villages, floating hotels comprising 140,000 rooms (n.d.). A basic function of such operations is to provide food and beverage service to customers, which includes alcoholic beverages. Drinking alcohol is permissible in Egypt, but consumption and provision are regulated by law. It proscribes alcohol consumption in public areas and designates places where it is allowed, for example, tourist hotels, restaurants, etc. In addition, it delineates punishment for violators (Egyptian Ministry of Tourism, n.d.). The law also forbids serving alcohol to Egyptians on certain Islamic religious occasions—for example, the Holy month of Ramadan and Prophet Mohamed's birthday (Kortam, 2012). Alcohol remains a sensitive matter in Egyptian society, a country with a majority Muslim population. In this climate, given appropriate context, heated debates arise. Much of the time these tense debates relate to Egypt's complex political ecology. Recently, Islam-based political parties (headed by the Muslim Brotherhood) managed to come to power. They subsequently suggested restrictions on the sale of alcohol. This caused worries as to the effect on tourism (Smith, 2013).

However, debate around alcohol is raised not only in Egypt; other countries in the Middle East and North Africa have similar disagreements. They also have their regulations with respect to alcohol. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), non-Muslim residents and tourists alike are required to have a liquor license in order to buy and consume alcohol (Sherif, 2011). By law, Muslims in UAE cannot drink alcohol (Sherif, 2011). In nearby Bahrain, selling alcohol was restricted to five-star hotels (Battour, Ismail, & Battor, 2010). Restaurants close to schools, mosques, or residential zones are not to sell alcohol in Bahrain (Battour et al., 2010). Some members of Parliament in Bahrain proposed banning Muslims from drinking alcohol in public. As the suggested ban covers hotels, restaurants, and clubs, hotel guests may drink only in their rooms (Sambidge, 2009). However, this proposition did not materialize (Tougher penalties for gambling approved, 2013). That said, it worth mentioning that there is a growing trend of "Halal Tourism/Islamic Hospitality"—recognizing and adhering to Islamic laws—in other words, alcohol is absolutely not served. This principally addresses Muslim travelers, but it may draw non-Muslims as well, who are interested in a "cultural experience" in societies where alcohol is not consumed (Battour et al., 2010).

Food and beverage service is a major part of the hotel management program (HM) in learning institutions in Egypt. Different courses deal with this area, for instance, food and beverage service, beverage management, restaurant management. Studying alcohol could be part of any of these or an individual course, e.g., alcoholic beverages management. Methods of instruction involve normal classes where educators explain, for example, the different types of beverages and production methods. Because emphasis is placed on practical experiences, many institutions incorporate food and beverage service laboratories, a practice-oriented education where students can perform restaurant work, such as setting up a dining room and preparing and serving drinks.

Moreover, as a requirement for graduation, students must undertake summer training in hospitality establishments. Students are expected to spend time in kitchens and restaurants, where handling alcohol could be involved. Such an experience could be the first time many Egyptian students come close to alcohol. Because alcohol drinking is prohibited by Islam, Muslim students might encounter a clash between study demands and religious duties. Little is known about how Egyptian HM students, mostly Muslims, perceive studying alcohol service, particularly how religion plays a role in this.

2. Literature review

2.1. Alcohol in the class: A controversial subject

Prior research on hospitality students and alcohol focused on their consumption, e.g., Borchgrevink, Sciarini, and Borchgrevink (2010) and Larsen and Jørgensen (2003). Nevertheless, neither studying nor handling was of interest to scholars. Virtually no research has attempted to see how students feel about studying alcohol service. Culture shapes how people perceive alcohol (Kjærheim, Mykletun, Aasland, Haldorsen, & Andersen, 1995; Mandelbaum, 1965; Warren, 2009), and in some parts of the world, alcohol is not an issue. For example, it is part of the "national culture" of France (Michalak & Trocki, 2006). In a different cultural context, alcohol could become a sensitive matter, as this paper will explore.

Classes are not just walls that accommodate students, lecturers, and papers. A class is a theater to much more interaction and dynamism. One manifestation of this are the thorny topics that curricula can contain, educators will teach, and students learn and be expected to apply. Many disciplines have their own issues, such as abortion in medical education (Espey, Ogburn, Chavez, Qualls, & Leyba, 2005), where religion might contribute to formulating students' attitudes (Heimer, 1976). Similarly, Boujaoude, Wiles, Asghar, and Alters (2011) provide an example in which students' attitudes toward the theory of evolution were influenced by their religious convictions. In hospitality education, alcohol, as contended herein, is a controversial study subject for Muslims. Hospitality—for consumers and providers—might seem like a mine field from an Islamic angle, where one's faith may be on the edge because hospitality incorporates activities that Islam deems unlawful, for instance, alcohol consumption and gambling (Battour et al., 2010). Cook (2006) calls for an ethical perspective when alcohol is discussed where "the matters of production, distribution, and consumption of alcohol... present a variety of

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