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Deciphering 'Islamic hospitality': Developments, challenges and opportunities

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Islamic hospitality has evolved with formal characteristics and institutional properties.
- Islamic hotels and Shari'a-compliant products and services have significant scope for further development.
- Halal food consumption is a central feature of Islamic hospitality, despite a climate of 'halal hysteria' in the West.
- Latent demand for Islamic hospitality exists in Muslim and Non-Muslim markets in the West.
- Stakeholders must assure Muslim consumers of the legitimacy of halal-friendly products and services.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the principles and practices of Islamic hospitality, outlining the diverse ways in which Islam intersects with 'hospitality' and the 'hospitality industry'. The intangible elements of Islamic hospitality are initially discussed, particularly the importance of the host–guest relationship and differing cultural interpretations. The discussion then evaluates the tangible aspects of Islamic hospitality through identifying trends, developments and challenges within the hotel sector, the food production and service sector, and the festivals and events sector. The work adopts a global perspective, examining Islamic hospitality with reference to both OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) countries and non-OIC countries. The paper also considers new sector opportunities and acknowledges the social difficulties associated with the development of Islamic hospitality within the Western world, notably Islamophobia. Finally, the paper indicates ways forward for future research.

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1. Introduction

In the summer of 2011, a prestigious UK hospitality and tourism management school hosted an international conference focusing on the social scientific study of tourism. Although the event was successful, the scheduling of a 'hog roast' dinner for conference delegates, including Muslim participants, seemingly illustrates the prevailing lack of sensitivity concerning the delivery of international forms of hospitality. Such situations could discourage individuals from feeling welcome and being part of the collective experience. The crucial function of the mealtime in signifying social order and expressing friendship, has indeed been identified by Mary Douglas (1972) in her seminal work: 'Deciphering a Meal'. Crucially, those inhospitable experiences that affront one's religious values expose the cosmopolitan complexities embodied within the host–guest relationship.

It is pertinent to acknowledge the social relevance of the Islamization of public space, particularly in the context of the contemporary world of mobility. Informatively, van Nieuwkerk (2008, p. 174) draws reference to the popularity of Islamic art, cinema, music and tourism to exemplify the growing importance of the "Muslim cultural sphere". Therefore, this assessment implies skepticism towards reductionist analyses for largely focusing on understanding the secularization of the public sphere, and for assuming that these spaces are fully influenced by notions and practices of religious neutrality and material rationality (see for instance, Habermas, 1992).

In understanding ways in which places and products are becoming predisposed to Islamic influence, it is imperative to acknowledge the demographic position of the Muslim population. According to the Pew Research Centre, the Muslim population totaled around 1.6 billion in 2010 and was predicted to rise to 2.2 billion by 2030, i.e., from 23.4% to 26.4% of the global population.

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During this period, Europe's Muslim population is expected to increase from 6% to 8% (Economist, 2011). Accordingly, 60% of Muslims originate from Asia and one fifth from the Middle East and North Africa. Also, 400–600 million Muslims live as minorities in other regions: 38.1 million in Europe, 8 million in the US and 1 million in Canada, for instance (Asif, 2011a). According to the Office for National Statistics, the Muslim population in the UK increased from 1.55 million in 2001 to 2.7 million in 2011 (Booth, 2012).

Muslim consumers are one of the fastest growing market segments. Market research conducted in early 2010, concluded that one important target group for businesses and global marketers is the 'under 30s' segment, representing 42% of the Muslim population (Khan & Janmohamed, 2011). The global revenue from Muslim tourists for 2011 was estimated at US$126bn, constituting 12.3% of the total global outbound tourism revenue, which is almost twice that of China's global revenue and forecasted to rise by 4.79% annually for the following eight years. It was also estimated that tourists from the Middle East and North Africa account for around 60% of total global Muslim outbound expenditure for 2011. For the same year, Saudi Arabia is considered the largest outbound tourism source country, with an estimated tourist expenditure of $US 23.8 billion, followed by Iran, UAE, Indonesia and Kuwait (Dinar Standard and Crescentrating LLC., 2012).

The Islamic community is traditionally guided by Shari'a law, which is derived primarily from the Qur'an. Other important sources of Islamic law include the statements of Prophet Mohammed, which are included in the al-Sunnah or customs emphasizing the prophetic tradition of Islam, and the sanctions of jurists representing the Muslim community. Sanad, Kassem, and Scott (2010, p. 20) note that, "… Shari'a is a mercy and is intended for the interests of people in both life and the hereafter. It is neither harsh nor strangling". Shari'a thus establishes a social structure for Muslim communities and acts as a moral guideline for daily life. It places emphasis on human conduct and instructs behavior associated with many aspects of the social environment: food, drink, dress, entertainment, hygiene, etiquette and communication. Clear regulations enshrined within Shari'a law concern what is 'permissible' or 'lawful' (translated as 'halal' in Arabic) and what is 'forbidden' or 'unlawful' (translated as 'haram'). Importantly, this paper will demonstrate how hospitality can be interpreted through Islam, whether in terms of its tangible or intangible elements, thereby shedding light on both the philosophical elements and corporeal functions of hospitality.

Tourism's relationship with Islam has generated significant academic interest (Al-Hamarneh, & Steiner, 2004; Aziz, 2001; Battour, Ismail, & Battor, 2010a, 2010b; Din, 1989; Sanad et al., 2010; Timothy & Iverson, 2006; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010). However, understanding the relationship between hospitality and Islam has attracted far less attention, despite the existence of several enquiries dealing with specific elements of that relationship: the attributes of Shari'a-compliant hotels and their commercial interest (Henderson, 2010), halal food and its influence on the tourism industry and destination choice (Bon & Hussain, 2010), and Islamic hospitality as a regional strategy for indigenous tourism development in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Stephenson, Russell & Edgar, 2010). Given that the tourism and hospitality industries are co-dependent, and that hospitality is often a fundamental component of the tourism experience, there is a need to appreciate how Islamic principles and practices are manifest within the context of hospitality and its development.

Although hospitality is popularly associated with the commercial provision of accommodation, food and beverage, one crucial dimension concerns aspects of conviviality and hospitability. Indeed, social scientists recognize the social dynamics of hospitality (Derrida, 2000a, 2000b; Friese, 2004). Therefore, this paper initially examines ways in which aspects of conviviality intersect with Islamic principles. The work then indicates how Islam is represented and formalized within the commercial provision of hospitality, particularly within the hotel, food and event sectors, acknowledging also the challenges and potential developments that the Islamic hospitality sector faces. The discussion finally comments on the wider societal concerns that threaten the constructive advancement of an Islamic hospitality industry.

2. Intangible elements of Islamic hospitality

2.1. Traditional interpretations

In terms of its intangible dimensions, Islamic hospitality traditionally concerns aspects of congeniality and reverence. O'Gorman (2007) acknowledges the historic role that caravanserais served in the Muslim world, providing free short-term hospitality for in-transit travelers and pilgrims. The travel narratives of the Muslim explorer, Ibn Battuta (2004, p. 4), who traveled throughout parts of Asia, North and West Africa, and Eastern and Southern Europe from 1325 to 1354, testify to the way in which hospitality was enacted in the Muslim world. Travelers were "hospitably welcomed" and "entertained" at hospices and rest houses, which were sustained by "generations of benefactors". Despite the dangers associated with the lawlessness of travel, caravans fostered "kindliness" and "generosity" that underpinned "mutual relations" between fellow Muslims. According to Vukonić (2010, p. 40–41):

> The attitude of Islam toward hospitality arises from the *Hajj*, which is one of the basic obligations for an Islamic follower. One of the ways for a Muslim to reach *Jannah* (paradise) is "by showing hospitality (to a traveler or a guest)" (Selection of the Prophet's *Hadith, hadith* 146). Hadith 146 explicitly states: "There is no wellbeing in a family which does not welcome and treat guests well". It is understandable that special care should be provided to people on the *Hajj*, but Islam is categorical here: "Hospitality extends for three days. What is beyond that is charity" (Selection of the Prophet's Hadith, hadith 1000).
>
> author's original emphasis

Hospitality does not significantly surpass social boundaries. Derrida's (2000a; 2000b) work on the sociological meaning of hospitality identifies a conceptual distinction between 'absolute' and 'conditional' forms of hospitality. He suggests that hospitality is normally conditional as the mere existence of a 'host-guest' relationship in some way implies impermanence, instruction, modus operandi and obligation. Importantly, the laws and teachings of Islam serve to instruct and condition how such people should be approached and received, and how adherents of Islam should mediate various places and situational contexts.

Contemporary forms of Islamic hospitality are inextricably associated with the obligatory nature of travel, including pilgrimage (e.g., Hajj and Umrah). Other religiously motivated journeys are known as 'Ziyara', associated with visiting auspicious places and sites of religiosity (shrines and mosques), and traveling to places to meet religious scholars or participate in religious events and festivals. There are also spiritual journeys associated with 'Rihla', involving quests for knowledge, business, health and research (Haq & Wong, 2010). Here, perceptions of hospitality are traditionally embedded within the relationship between travel and education, where there is an important emphasis on the accumulation of wisdom through travel. This perspective stands in marked contrast to more modernistic forms of tourism motivation, especially the desire for pseudo experiences (Boorstin, 1977), ego-enhancement (Dann, 1977) and hedonism (Turner & Ash, 1975). Accordingly, commercially contrived

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