Assessing the Impact of Religious Issues on Omanis Employment in the Hotel Sector

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ARTICLE INFO

Abstract

The Sultanate of Oman lies on the South-eastern tip of the Arabian Peninsula. It is bordered by the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea and has borders with the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Arabic is the official language, Islam is the official religion. Tourism development has been given special attention by the Sultanate of Oman's government aspiring to that the industry would assist in executing the Omanisation Policy, create direct job opportunities to boost the economy. This study aims to assess the impact of religious issues on Omanis employment in the hotel sector. The religious issues have serious impacts on Omanis employment in the hotel sector. Some employees are concerned about the source of income because the hotel business may entail serving alcohol, i.e. their source of income would be questionable religion wise. For females, the designated job uniform and the interaction with males are also major concerns. It is concluded that, at the highest levels, the Omanisation Policy is promoted, yet there exists a friction between religious conventions and perceptions of what the industry stands for.

Introduction

The Sultanate of Oman entered the international tourism system in the late 1980s. Since then, Oman has gradually developed the necessary infrastructure to facilitate tourism as well as to promote itself as a top tier tourism destination (Feighery, 2012). The economic benefits generated by tourism have encouraged the government to consider tourism as a sector of strategic importance. The sector's ability to create employment complements the government's commitment to the Omanization policy. It aims not only to ensure jobs for each citizen but also to reduce dependence on expatriates in search of self-reliance in human resources. The hotel sector represents a cornerstone of the tourism industry in Oman. In line with the overall growth of tourism and the visitor accommodation sector in the Gulf, the Omani government has been keen to expand this sector as a means of economic diversification. The statistical indicators issued by the Omani Ministry of Tourism (2016) show that:

- The number of licensed hotels rose from 297 in 2014 to 318 hotels in 2015, an increase of 7.1 per cent.
- The number of rooms and hotel apartments rose from 15.424 in 2014 to 16.691 rooms/apartments, an increase of 8.2 per cent.
- The number of beds rose from 23,997 in 2014 to 25,966 beds in 2015.
- The number of 5-star hotels reached 11 in 2015, an increase of one hotel, in comparison to 2014. The number of hotel rooms for the same category reached 2450, an increase of 6.7 per cent in comparison to 2014.
- The number of 4-star hotels increased by two hotels to reach 23 hotels in 2015. The number of hotel rooms and apartments for the same category totaled 3,300, an increase of 9.7 per cent.
- The number of 3-star hotels reached 20 hotels, while hotel rooms and apartments for the same category reached 1689 in 2015.

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- The 2-star licensed hotels amounted to 47, with an increase of 27 per cent in comparison to 2014. The number of hotel rooms and apartments for the same category rose 35.9 per cent. The total number of rooms and apartments totaled 2881 in 2015.

The total number of employees working in the accommodation services reached 10,763 in 2014, as against 9,893 in 2013. Of the total number of employees working in accommodation services 31.4% or 3,381 were Omni's compared to 68.6% or 7,382 who were non-Omani (National Centre of Statistics & Information (NCSI), 2015).

Omanisation of the tourism sector faces a number of key challenges; Atef and Al-Balushi, 2017):
1. Currently, the workforce in the tourism and hotel industry is mostly dominated by low-wage earners from Asian countries. However, the contribution from Arab nationalities has recently grown;
2. The perception of the tourism sector may also be problematic from a cultural context and background;
3. Issues about the appropriateness of working in the hotel industry from the Islamic perspective offer further dilemmas.

With respect to the Omanization plan, the Omani tourism and hospitality sector had made some progress but did not achieved the desired levels of Omanization, See Table 1 for tourism and hospitality Omanization targets (2006-2010) (Al-Balushi, 2018).

Table 1: Tourism and hospitality Omanization targets

Sector	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	
	Target (%)	Target (%)	Target (%)	Target (%)	Target (%)	Achieved (%)
Airlines	81	84	86	88	90	60
Tourist Restaurants	55	65	75	85	90	36
Travel Agencies	55	65	75	85	95	50
Hotels (3-5 star)	65	70	75	80	85	48
Car Rental Companies	65	75	80	85	90	53

Source: Al-Balushi, 2018

Literature Review

The hospitality industry globally has been confronted with the issue of retaining and attracting high quality employees (Qui and Lam, 2004). The industry is often viewed as a negative employment option; there is a tendency to consider it as a temporary solution till a real permanent job is available (Brien, 2004, Atef and Al-Balushi, 2015). The negative perceptions many service employees have of their jobs hinder the success of the hospitality industry, many service employees often feel their work is insulting, demeaning, and humiliating as they cater to the needs and wants of customers. If employees do not take pride in their jobs, they are more likely to leave the industry, and a greater concern occurs when the employees with negative attitudes towards their jobs do not leave the industry and provide poor service (Atef and Al-Balushi, 2017). Turnover rates in the hospitality industry range from 32% to 300%, employees leave for many reasons including low job satisfaction, poor working conditions, and a lack of work motivation (Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000). Long and anti-social working hours, the physically demanding nature of the job (Kim *et al.,* 2009), shift work that leaves little time for non-work commitments, and low and unpredictable wages owing to the seasonality factor are frequently cited reasons for job dissatisfaction and the high turnover rates (Bothma and Thomas, 2001). Although the industry has its glamourous image in terms of work in airlines and tour guiding, the image of the tourism sector is negatively affected by the routine uncomfortable work in hotels and restaurants (Pender and Sharpley, 2005). Two different TV programs in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC) showed the image of the hospitality industry as perceived from the oriental society perceptive:

- *Hayer-Tayer* is a comedy TV series produced by Abu Dhabi TV, which talks about different issues in society and the image of the hospitality industry was one of the issues represented. It showed negative images of the industry. Two different points were tackled. The first concerned females working in hotels despite the objection of their families. The second was the link between national employees working in organizations managed by expatriates and the missing path of learning and promotion (Hayer-Tayer, 2006).
- *Romana* is a Kuwaiti comedy TV series. The hotel business was one of the issues represented. It showed a very sarcastic image of hotel employees, managers, and owners. In addition, it showed that most of the hotel staff are expats, thus reflect; an image the society holds about such jobs of being only suitable for foreigners and not for nationals (Romana, 2017).

The Islamic community is traditionally guided by Shari'a law, which is derived primarily from the Holy Qur'an and the statements of Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him), which are included in the "Sunnah" or customs emphasizing the prophetic tradition of Islam (Stephenson, 2014). Shari'a establishes a social structure for Muslim communities and acts as a moral guideline for daily life. It places emphasis on human 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" in Arabic) (Sanad *et al.,* 2010; Stephenson, 2014).

Bannerman (1988) pointed out that although all Muslim nations have a great deal in common; there are differences in economic, business, and social aspects of life among people. The implementation of Islamic codes also varies from society to another. For example, in a country like Saudi Arabia where the Shari'a law is strictly adhered to, all shops must close during the prayer time, and women must cover their faces in front of unknown males. On the contrary, Turkey has turned to secular laws for the administration of its economic and social affairs (Ibrahim *et al.,* 2007).

In most Muslim countries, an obvious separation between men and women can be noticed in prayers at Mosques, wedding ceremonies, schools, and other life aspects. In Malaysia for example, in supermarkets, separate checkout queues have been instituted for men and women. Iran is also another example where women must follow a strict Islamic dress code at work and elsewhere (Tayeb, 1997).

Islam as a religion encourages its followers to be hospitable and generous with others, as the Qur'an emphasizes the absolute importance of being a "Good Host". One of the ways for a Muslim to reach "Jannah" (Paradise) is by showing hospitality to travelers or guests (Vukonic, 2010). The Messenger of Allah Prophet Mohamed (Peace Be upon Him) further guides Muslims by saying:

"Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should be hospitable with his or her guests"
*(*Bukhari, Muslim)

"A generous man is near God, near Paradise, near men, and far from Hell. But a miser is far from God, far from Paradise, far from men, and near Hell. Indeed, an ignorant man who is generous is dearer to God than a worshipper who is miserly" (Al-Tirmidhi)
"None of you truly believes (in Islam) until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself"
(Bukhari, Muslim)

From the Islamic perspective, working in the hotel industry is considered a lawful job if it is undertaken within the Islamic context, and far from unlawful (Haram) activities. The problem lies in the fact that most hotels, even in some Muslim countries, are involved in some un-Islamic practices. Most hotels have restaurants that serve pork and alcohol, casinos and discos which according to Islam are unlawful (Haram) (Al-Mubarak, 2008). Therefore, Muslim employees have concerns about working in hotels. In Islam, whatever income is deemed to be unlawful or non-

permissible is prohibited from being used to feed oneself of his/her family. Allah Prophet Mohamed (Peace Be upon Him) said:

> *"No meat (i.e. person) that was nourished with haram will enter paradise. Every meat (i.e. person) that was nourished with haram is more deserving of the Fire"* (Baihaqi)

Female's employment in general and in hotels in particular is not forbidden, as long as it is within Islamic and cultural morals. However, Islam bans male-female interaction if it involves any seduction. The issues about females' employment in the hospitality industry in this respect relate to the working conditions in hotels which (Deeb, 2005; Al-Balushi, 2008):

- Do not fit with the prevailing Islamic norms, society traditions, and culture;
- Clash with the domestic female roles if a woman is married;
- Might unfavorably affect a female's reputation (i.e. Uniform, Working night shifts).

The dress code of women at work is another issue to be considered in relation to women's employment. Normally, the appearance of the worker is an important issue in the service sector. In Oman, there are no certain rules with regards to women's dress code, however, according to Islam, women's dress code must include a veil and they should cover their entire bodies except the hands and the faces. Women should not wear any clothes that show the esthetic attributes of their bodies like clothes which are too tight or short. The relevant verse of The Noble Qur'an (33:59) states:

> *"O Prophet! Tell your wives and daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks all over their bodies. That will be better, that they should be known (as free respectable women) so as not be annoyed. And Allah is Ever Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful"*

As Muslim countries are aware of all the issues related to Muslim laws and religious needs, a trend of "Islamic hotels" (Shari'a-compliant) has spread in the UAE and the Middle East. Islamic hotels contain such features as traditional uniforms for hotel staff, conservative dress code for female staff, markers indicating the direction of Mecca, female and male prayer rooms, Halal food, conservative television channels, art that does not depict the human form. Furthermore, finance used to operate the hotel should be compliant to Shari'a regulations and the hotel owner must ASSIGN a proportion of revenue to Zakat (charitable acts) (Kola, 2008).

Methodology

Interviews were conducted to achieve the study aim which is: to assess the impact of religious issues on Omanis employment in the hotel sector. The interviews were done in two stages:

In the first stage, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with tourism experts (4) and tourism academics (5). A snowball sampling technique was used (Brewerton and Millward, 2001). Each person the researchers interviewed was asked: who else might be willing to be interviewed about the topic. This was a very helpful way of gaining access to people whom without such a personal contact might otherwise refuse to be interviewed (Seale and Filmer, 1998).

In stage two of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with hotel human resource managers and hotel employees. The sample chosen was purposive (Saunders *et al.,* 2003), where the researcher already knew something about the specific people, and deliberately selected particular respondents because they are seen as those who are likely to contribute valuable data (Denscombe, 2003). The purposive sampling technique was also used with hotel employees. Although, the hotel employees interviewed in this research were chosen by the human resource managers, selection criteria were: Omanis-only, and a mixed sample of males and females.

To conduct stage two interviews, a sample of nine hotels was chosen for the study. The total number of hotels in Oman is 318 in 2015; the total numbers of 5, 4, and 3 star hotels are 11.23 and 20 respective (Omani Ministry of Tourism, 2016). The interviews were done with human resource managers and employees in five, four and three-star hotels. Three hotels of each class were chosen to be studied (Table2).

Table 2: Number of Interviews with Hotel Human Resource Managers and Hotel Employees

Respondents Job Category	Hotel Category			Gender		TOTAL
	5 Star	4 Star	3 Star	Male	Female	
Human Resource Manager	3	3	3	9	0	9
Hotel Employees	8	8	11	20	7	27
TOTAL	11	11	14	29	7	36

Findings And Discussion

In Oman, Islam greatly influences people's lives and shapes their behaviors. Consequently, some employees do not consider hospitality jobs as a life career but only as a temporary job. The following section discusses the points raised by interviewees and categorized as Religious Issues:

1) Food and Beverages

The issue of working in food and beverage is complicated for Omani employees. Concerns are raised in the light of Islamic standards of propriety, such as catering during hours of "Friday prayers" and during "Ramadhan".

"…I usually take my break during Friday prayers time…" (Personal communication, a hotel employee)

"…It is difficult for us as Muslim employees to serve food and beverage during the daytime in Ramadhan…" (Personal communication, a hotel employee)

"Ramadhan" is the 9th month of the Islamic calendar, during which all Muslims fast from dawn till sunset. While on Fridays, all Muslims go to Mosques for a congregational prayer just after noon, where a speech is delivered by a preacher before and after the prayer aiming to give Muslims guidance and advice on different life aspects and religious issues.

2) Hotel Guests Activities

Hotels are associated with alcohol service, discos and immoral activities which according to Islam are unlawful. Such activities according to interviewed employees are reasons deterring Omanis from working in hotels.

"…It is unlawful in our religion to serve alcohol; therefore, I do not like to work in food and beverage areas, but as a temporary job, I am working in reception…" (Personal communication, a hotel employee)

"…There are some hidden things which happen in hotels, we know about them, but we do not dare to talk about, we know that they are immoral…" (Personal communication, a hotel employee)

The interviewee was referring to that some hotels accommodate unmarried couples, an act which is unacceptable according to the Islamic and moral codes. Some others ask couples for a marriage certificate before check-in, and for security and morality reasons some hotels strictly prohibit guests' visitors beyond the lobby area.

3) Source of Income

Another issue raised by some employees highlighted how the income coming from working in hotels is unlawful. To make sure that the income is lawful according to Islam, a person may, of his own accord, opt to eschew any work that is in the least bit questionable, to make certain that all of his/her income is lawful and that nothing is tainted with any unlawful source (Al Mubarak, 2008). Referring to this issue, a hotel employee stated that:

"…a heavy - hearted…We all know that one of the hotel income sources is alcohol sales…"

"…Sometimes I feel burden some of doing things that I do not like, or things that I do not really believe in, but I cannot find another job, so I have to work here because I need the money…"

4) Females Hotel Employment Concerns

From the Islamic perspective, women's employment in general or in hotels in particular is not forbidden, as long as it is within the Islamic and cultural context. However, Islam bans interaction between males and females if it involves any seduction (Al-Balushi, 2008). Although it is

acceptable to find interaction between men and women in many sectors in the country such as banks, universities, hospitals and other sectors, such interaction is not acceptable in hotels. Hotels and the related jobs have a questionable reputation amongst Omani society. A female employee stated that:

"…I work in a hotel restaurant, but my family think that I work in the administration, otherwise they will not allow me to work in the hotel…I am afraid that my job would harm my reputation and lessens my chances to get married…" (Personal communication, a hotel employee)

In some regions in Oman, females still go out with their faces covered, so it is hard for them to study tourism or work in hotels and stay late at work. Tourism academic supported this issue by saying:

"…I was talking to a female student who got enrolled in the tourism department…she wants to transfer to another department…the student told me: if we still go out with our faces covered (wearing neqab) in our region, how can we study tourism or even work in hotels?"

This indicates the friction between religious conventions and perceptions of what the industry accepts. Ibrahim *et al.* (2007) discussed this issue in the travel business in Egypt and noted that tourism employers in Egypt are more willing to employ veiled women in their organizations than before. However, only those who wear the "Hijab" are accepted, while those who wear the "Khimar" or "Neqab" (cover their faces) are totally rejected.

In Oman, most females cover their heads with the "Hijab" according to Islamic rules. In hotels where females work as waitresses or in food and beverage areas, most of them wear the hijab. However, the hijab has to be worn in a very modern way to give a good impression to the customer. The following is a significant statement by a hotel human resource manager regarding this issue:

"…We cannot recruit a female who will be wearing the hijab in a very restrictive way or totally dressed in black, this might discomfort customers…" (Personal communication, a hotel human resource manager)

According to a human resource manager, a customer complained that he was hesitant about asking a female waitress to serve him a glass of wine because she was wearing hijab in a very restrictive way.

"…The way the female waitresses wear their black scarf might make a guest hesitant about asking them for some services…he won't ask for a glass of wine!!! And so, asks a waiter or an expatriate female waitress to serve him…" (Personal communication, a hotel human resource manager)

Conclusions

This study aims to assess the impact of religious issues on Omanis employment in the hotel sector. Notwithstanding the Omani government efforts to attract Omanis towards the sector, socio-cultural and religious issues are the most influential. Because of religious issues, many graduates refuse jobs which are categorized as islamically unacceptable source of income. This refusal can hardly be changed by enforcement because of the Islamic issues. Some Omani families are conservative to the extent that they object to their members working in the hotel sector. Even though some jobs in other sectors might involve mixing between males and females, females are concerned about hotel employment, because of the reputation of the hotel industry; this mixing is deemed unacceptable by Omani society. Female outfits are also another issue which deters females from working in the hotel industry. Employers in the industry place very high emphasis on the aesthetics of employees and their appearances, but in Oman, females have to wear their clothes according to the Islamic codes and society traditions. At the highest levels, the Omanisation Policy is promoted, yet the religious beliefs which shape the Omani life and society are influential in attracting Omanis to hotel careers. There exists a friction between religious conventions and perceptions of what the industry stands for.

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تقييم تأثير القضايا الدينية على العمالة العُمانية في قطاع الفنادق

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معلومات المقالة	الملخص
الكلمات المفتاحية الثقافة؛ المجتمع؛ الفنادق؛ الضيافة؛ الإسلام؛ عُمان **(JAAUTH)** **المجلد 16، العدد 2** **2019** **ص 8-15**	تقع سلطنة عُمان على الطرف الجنوبي الشرقي من شبه الجزيرة العربية. يحدها خليج عُمان وبحر العرب ولها حدود مع الإمارات العربية المتحدة والمملكة العربية السعودية واليمن. اللغة العربية هي اللغة الرسمية. الإسلام هو الدين الرسمي. حظيت التنمية السياحية باهتمام خاص من قبل حكومة سلطنة عُمان التي تطمح إلى أن تساعد هذه الصناعة على تنفيذ سياسة التعمين وخلق فرص عمل مباشرة بالإضافة إلى تعزيز الاقتصاد. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقييم تأثير المفاهيم الدينية في عمل واستمرارية العُمانيين في قطاع الفنادق. ويتضح من البحث أن المفاهيم الدينية لها أثر عميق في توظف واستمرارية العُمانيين بقطاع الفنادق. بعض الموظفين يشعرون بالقلق إزاء مصدر الدخل بسبب فكرة أن قطاع الفنادق يقدم الكحول، وبالتالي فإن مصدر دخلهم سيكون مشكوكاً فيه. بالنسبة للإناث، يعتبر الزى الوظيفي والتفاعل مع الذكور من الشواغل الرئيسية. وخلص البحث إلى إنه على أعلى المستويات، يتم الترويج لسياسة التعمين، ولكن هناك تبايناً بين المفاهيم الدينية والصورة الذهنية لما تمثله صناعة الفنادق.