

Halal Service Provision - Understated, but not Undervalued:

A View From Oman

By Bronwyn P Wood and Hamed Al-Azri

Introduction

In contrast to other of our papers on Muslims and their consumption, this study looks at Muslims not as much by how they can be grouped by practice regardless of geography (Boulanouar et al., 2017), but more how they can be grouped by practice and geography. It does this by considering the interest in halal service provision by Omani outbound travelers, particularly in their longer summer holiday travels. Omanis share general characteristics with their geographical neighbours – Yemen, and the GCC countries of United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar – but also present some distinctions that make their experiences of particular interest. It is hoped that this study, as an exploration of Omanis travel preferences, will allow the development of a framework which has generalisable characteristics to the wider Gulf, and possibly Muslim, travel market. Insights into how to best meet the needs of Muslim tourists in general, and the higher spending GCC travelers, in particular, could interest both academics and hospitality providers, in designing projects, commissioning market research and developing offerings.

There are certain difficulties in writing about Muslims in English as the English language literature is commonly produced using western paradigms and or with the underlying assumption that these paradigms are universal (Mukherji, 2004, Elmessiri, 2006, Venkatesh, 1995), in spite of the knowledge that only a small portion of the world is western or has an individualistic or even Christian heritage. With this in mind, citations from literature can also often fail to provide a comprehensive or complete applicable comparison, and we will try to address all elements relevant to our study in the clearest terms to make these citations relevant.

Oman

Oil was found in Oman in 1964, and Oman is a member country within the group known as the GCC (Gulf Corporation Council). These are the Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern countries which have economies centred around oil extraction and export located around the Arabia Gulf. All the countries in this group share common ethnic, religious and geographic elements, but there are a number of distinctions amongst them as well. Oman is, in fact, the most distinct in a number of ways. Oman is the homeland of Ibadism (Hoffman, 2001), a variation on the majority Sunnism of the surrounding countries (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Qatar, Kuwait) and of Muslims worldwide (~90%, Pew, 2009). The majority of the world's Ibadi Muslims live in Oman, and Oman's Sultan, Sultan Qaboos, is an adherent of Ibadism. Oman also has nationals from Sunnism (Peterson, 2004) and a small number of Shia'a groups – around 5% of the population, according to Pew (2009). There are also a number of other religious denominations residing side by side in Oman, in the form of the expat workforce. Oman is often considered the 'Switzerland' of the Middle East due to its policies of diplomacy and peacemaking in the region. For example, during the recent embargo of Qatar by neighbouring countries, Oman has stood, with Kuwait, in not censuring Qatar.

Amongst the oil producers in the 6-country member GCC, Oman is the second smallest producer, before Bahrain. It has a GDP of 26.9B Omani Riyals giving a GDP per capita of 6456 Omani Riyals (\$US16,775) ((NCIS), 2015). Since the current Sultan came to power in 1970, Oman has experienced rapid and

extensive growth in terms of infrastructure, education, and all other aspects of life, at times reaching speeds as high as 1370% (1970's). Lamki (2002) highlights this point by noting that pre 1970 there were just 3 primary schools in Oman, catering to only 900 male students. Today, Oman has a literacy rate of almost 100% in the age group 24 and under, with literacy being lower in older age groups, and lowest in females over 50 at 30% (NCIS, 2017).

Oman also differs from its neighbours in that it has a history of growing and catching food, despite the temperatures being very high and the summers hot and long. The Bedouin (nomadic) population in Oman is very low compared to many other countries in the region, due to the opportunities the landscape provides.

A commonality of Oman with its neighbours is that the government is interested in diversifying the economy and moving away from oil dependency. A further commonality is the large proportion of foreign (expat) labour in the workforce. Oman has 45% expat population, meaning Omani nationals total only 1,142,579 males and 1,117,126 females, for a total of 2,260,705 people as at 2014((GLMM), 2014). Omani nationals also make up a relatively small percentage of the workforce – almost 200,000 people in the public sector, and around 218,000 in the private sector as at 2015 ((NCSI), 2016) from a total population of 4.4M. If one considers that 30% of the Omani population is under 14 years old (Gulf Research Centre, 2015), and 35% are women of whom many do not have any intention of seeking work, that proportions look less stark. Oman has a very diverse linguistic population structure with English commonly spoke in addition to the native Arabic, and Baluchi or Swahili. Large numbers of Omanis who were living abroad returned to Oman when Sultan Qaboos came to power, most settling in the capital, Muscat. A significant number returned from East Africa where Oman had been a ruling power for several hundred years (Patterson, 2013, Valeri, 2007).

The rich tapestry represented by the many nationalities and languages spoken in addition to the diversity of religion and religious practice and the diplomatic policies of governance make Oman, and particularly Muscat, a varied and colourful environment.

Islam

While Oman hosts several different strands of Islamic practice, the overarching teaching is, in great majority the same. Islam is a comprehensive way of life, which offers guidance on every aspect of life from food to sleeping (Maududi, 1960, Al-Qaradawy, 1995, Al Faruqi, 1977) . There is extensive acknowledgement that Islam embraces all aspects of social and economic life (Alserhan, 2015, Bin Yusuf, 2010). Yusuf (2010, p.220) argues that “the social life of a Muslim is Islam; the economic life of the Muslim is Islam; the political life of the Muslim is Islam”. Although Islam is frequently represented as a monolith, legalistic and rule-bound it is, in fact, nuanced, synergistic, interlaced and balanced (Elmessiri, 1997) and, as such, gives rise to different cultures of practice.

The shared sources of Islamic law (shari'ah) are several. They consist of the Qur'an (the Muslim Holy Book), the hadith (the collected traditions of the Prophet Mohammad), and the rulings of Islamic Scholars of two types - analogy and scholarly consensus (as distinct from academics).

In Islamic teaching Muslims (believers) are considered equal in terms of worship – the evaluation of a Muslim's quality being measured on their performance of the requirements of the way of life, and the persons deeds. Muslims are required to demonstrate modesty (haya') in their speech, thought and action, as modesty is seen as a defining characteristic of the Islamic way of life (Boulanouar, 2006). Islam privileges privacy, but characterises privacy as a situation related to the people present, rather than a particular location. This illustrates the twin considerations of a Muslim, which are the vertical, or

personal relationship with Allah, and also the horizontal, or societal relationships which make up active adherence to the Islamic model.

All Muslims are required to eat halal (permissible) food, which is almost everything, but does exclude pork and alcohol and their derivatives. For meat to be considered halal, it must be from an animal which has been killed as the name of Allah is mentioned. Any meat killed without that condition being met, cannot be considered halal. The concept of halal is much more than just an idea relating to meat or halal slaughter, it also relates to purity (tayyib) and considers people, products and process, in a word pairing mentioned many times in the Qur'an.

Gender roles come into play in terms of division of labour and are considered to be related to the natures of each gender, both of which are considered complimentary (not equal, not interchangeable). Women are responsible for the internal running of households, which includes educating children and managing décor, but is primarily a role of emotional support to family members; men, on the other hand, have financial imperatives, meaning they usually deal with external matters affecting the family. Motherhood is a very highly regarded role in Islamic teaching. In the majority of schools of Islamic law, the internal portion of the wife and mother's role does not include any responsibility for either cooking or housework. While there is a widespread belief that Islam is a patriarchal teaching, it should be noted that a sexist enactment of Islamic teaching by Muslim followers is not inherent in the framework (Sönmez, 2001, Al Mazro'ei, 2010).

In Islamic teaching women are free to make and keep their own money. Any money earned from rents or labour is not required to be shared or spent on the upkeep of the family or of the wife – the financial responsibility for the family belongs to the husband. Should the wife wish to contribute to the family, this is a charity from her to her husband (Briegel and Zivkovic, 2008).

For Muslim women, there are considerations in terms of travel. Islamic teaching has stated that women must be accompanied by a male relative if travelling. There is a difference of opinion on this point in modern times, depending on whether the Islamic scholar believes the rule to be based on issues of safety, or on more than that – given that travelling is generally safe these days (Khimish, 2014). In terms of marriage, Shari'ah allows women to choose their own spouse and encourages decision-making by consensus (shura), as it does in business and all of life (Weir, 2000).

All of these aspects of Islamic teaching bear some relationship to travel decision-making, selection of destination and service requirements.

Omani Culture

Ibadism emphasizes mu'amalat, which is one of the branches of Shariah, and is the dealings between people (the horizontal worship mentioned above). This may explain the demeanour of the Omanis, which is polite, friendly and welcoming to visitors and strangers. Omanis pride themselves on this reputation and extend it through their manner of international relations, as mentioned above. The model of relationships between people, especially genders, employed in Oman may not fit into the expected or dominant paradigm in the literature. Employing the wrong paradigm can lead to incomplete, misleading or meaningless interpretations of study findings (Boulanouar and Boulanouar, 2013).

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) note that “most philosophers and psychologists agree that for a person to develop his or her potentialities fully, it is necessary to take on challenges outside the home. The family, no matter how warm and fulfilling, cannot provide the varied contexts for action that are necessary for the growth of a self. From a societal viewpoint it is equally obvious that a healthy community requires participation in its affairs; excessive investment of attention in the family might in fact drain psychic energy from the pursuit of broader goals and thus decrease the vitality of the community” (p153). In keeping with this viewpoint on (especially) women's development and empowerment, a number of papers in the literature stream concern Omani women's empowerment

through both entrepreneurship (Riyami et al, 2002; Ghouse et al 2017) and specifically tourism (Afifi et al, 2014; Mazro'ei et al, 2014; Mazro'ei, 2017). The idea is that working in tourism could provide both personal empowerment and financial independence, and act as a salve for rural poverty is widespread.

Varghese (2011), quoting Keller and Mbwewe (1991), in defining women's empowerment as "a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination" (p37).

Despite identifying tourism as a vehicle for women's empowerment, and also as a good economic objective for a country interested in finance diversification, many of the papers are pessimistic about a successful match between local culture and working in the sector. Varghese (2011) concludes that "the women in Oman are empowered, but still her interest towards domesticity affects her empowerment, otherwise women would have been more empowered. In fact, 'social power' plays an important role in generating/sustaining inequalities between men and women" (p47).

Amzat et al (2017) are rather scathing about the attitude of Omani males to females, calling it 'traditional....including their chauvinistic bias and stereotyped perception towards the status and roles of women in society' (p6). In fact, despite the policy introductions by the current Sultan, Amzat et al (2017) regard 'culture and tradition [as] still hold[ing] them back from becoming equal with men' (p6). In their sample of female respondents in their 20's they found that when no financial need exists for women to work, men prefer them to stay at home. They also reported that respondents feel themselves 'that from a social point of view, they believe the women's place is in the home' (p13). They conclude that 'Omani society is a conservative one in which people stick to their traditions and sociocultural stereotypes remain wherein men believe that a woman's place is at home' (p16).

Issues of definitions of what constitutes sexism and also where the focus of attention of members of societies should be are reflections of the cultural and religious paradigms one accepts. As mentioned above, believing empowerment to exist only in the paid workforce is just one framework, and seeing education as having an end no more extensive than vocational, a pair for that. The findings of the studies above with regard to Omani samples, may reflect shortsighted conclusions if respondents are not able to answer open-ended questions which unpack the detail of their responses. Goveas and Aslam (2011) identify several factors that encourage women to pursue careers in Oman. Amongst those are "the rights of women as stated in Islam, the role of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos [and] education" (p233).

Tourism in Oman and the GCC

Although Omanis have been travelling abroad for quite some time, the positive attitude towards inbound tourism is relatively recent. Tourism courses are newcomers to university and college course offerings, and have only been available at all since 2001. Inbound tourism was impossible as late as 1986, with no tourist visas being issued for Oman (Ritter, 1986). Several studies of tourism students in Oman show the industry is not well regarded as a career path (Khan and Krishnamurthy, 2016), and despite government encouragement into the sector, targets are not met, and tourism courses fail to recruit their maximum capacity of students (Bontenbal and Aziz, 2013). In distinct contrast, Alsawafi (2016) found strong support for tourism as a career for both women and men, and reported students found conflicts between culture and roles in both Islam and Omani culture to be insignificant.

A number of themes are present in the literature available on the GCC outbound tourism. Young, well-educated travelers like to show off their economic well being and social status (Tourisme, 2014) and the permeates their travel behavior (Michael et al., 2017). Kester and Cavao (2004) note that international travel is still an activity of the upper middle and upper income groups, and these people also tend towards upper-level education, which is a common trend in emerging markets. As far as

outbound travel is concerned, a study by Malhotra (2012) showed GCC nationals spend 260% more on airfares and 430% more on accommodation than the world average (Bundhun, 2012).

Observatoire Valaisan du Tourisme (2014), in their analysis of the Gulf travel market, see Oman as an emerging source market. They note Omanis travel mostly in families for leisure, with the husband as the main travel decision maker. This makes Oman in the group with Qatar and Saudi Arabia, whereas in UAE, Bahrain and Kuwait children and wives play a more significant role in travel decision-making.

University students in general are commonly seen as travelers who seek risk-taking and sensation-seeking activities (for example, Mohsin et al, 2017), but many studies also fail to acknowledge that GCC outbound travel is largely family travel (Tourisme, 2014). Young adult travel also features considerations related to the use and communication properties of social media and photo-sharing sites (Dileep et al., 2017, Pengiran-Kahar et al., 2010, Hosie, 2017) with young men more interested in this than women.

A series of papers has been produced on outbound tourism from Oman by Alsawafi (2013, Alsawafi, 2016) and Almuhrzi and Alsawafi (2017). The sample for all of these studies were undergraduate students from Rustaq College of Applied Sciences, which is a public college over 130km inland from the capital city, Muscat. Mohsin and Alsawafi (2011) examined push and pull motivations finding that the top 10 were safety and security at the destination was the most important pull motivation, followed by natural attractions, availability of mosques, ease of communication (language), local attitudes towards Islamic culture in destination, shopping variety, availability of Arabic and or halal foods, attitudes towards Arabic culture at the destination, prices for goods and services, and a different climate to the one at home (p41). Across these studies halal service provision, particularly access to Mosques, language issues, destination attitudes towards Muslims and availability of halal food were attractive to respondents (Mohsin and Alsawafi, 2011).

The Current Study - Results and Discussion

For the study's exploratory primary data analysis, a mixed method was used. First, an interview with a local travel agent was conducted to examine their view of the Omani outbound tourism market. This was followed up with a survey of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) students about their summer holidays in July and August 2017.

Stage One: Interview with a travel agent

An interview was conducted with the two co-founders of a local travel agent in Oman that organises both inbound packages/tours and outbound packages/tours. The company was established in 2007, and both co-founders have given up their usual, full time employment to focus on their travel business. The interview was conducted during the agency business hours, so was not recorded, rather, notes were taken. The strongest themes from the interview follow.

Most of the company's revenues (about 70%) come from outbound tourists. The owners believe that inbound travel to Oman is affected by the regional political crises and international terrorism events, even though Oman is not directly involved in any of these. The travel agent has recently started organising business tours to Istanbul and China. While these tours are not yet sufficiently profitable, the travel agent is keen on them because they help build relations and strengthen the brand locally.

In terms of leisure travel, which is more relevant to the study at hand, the travel agent mostly serves honeymooners and families. The most popular destinations for their customers are Turkey, Malaysia, and Thailand. The travel agent believes that these top destinations are perceived by the market to be

less risky, and have a good destination brand recognition in the country. Emerging destinations were also identified and included Azerbaijan and Bosnia. Customers usually enquire about general tourism information, safety, halal food, and privacy. However, they do not specifically demand halal services and will adapt whenever it is required, by seeking vegetarian or sea food when halal meat is not available, for example. They would rather have value meals, than expensively promoted “halal” food. The customers do not usually ask for alcohol-free accommodation and tours, and are more concerned about the overall experience of the destination.

The co-founders feel that the wives in families are highly influential in travel decision making. This may be due to their education level, or the fact they are contributing to the financial cost of the trip. As mentioned earlier, in Islamic teaching Muslim women are not required to offer money they have or earn in support of the family, even if their husband has lesser means than themselves. The travel agent is, consequently, targeting wives in promotions. They report that this strategy seems to be successful in attracting customers.

Stage Two: Survey of University students

Sample demographics:

For the second part of the study, a survey was distributed to a sample of Sultan Qaboos University students. A total of 81 students responded to the survey, 54 of which reported traveling in the summer. Consistent with a typical university student population, 81% of the respondents were aged between 21 and 25 years old and 17% aged between 17 and 20. None of the respondents was over 25 years old, or under 17. More than half the sample (58.3%) were females. Family sizes were relatively large with 41.5% having between 6 and 7 members and 30.2% having 10 or more members. Close to 90% of respondents' fathers were in the workforce (46.2% in the government and 23.1% in the private sector). Most mothers (84.3%), on the other hand, were either retired or not employed. Most of respondents' fathers were educated, with 36.5% having a high school/general diploma and 44.3% having a Bachelors degree or higher. Mothers, on the other hand, were significantly less well educated with only 23% earning a university degree of any kind, 32.7% having high school graduation, and 44.2% had less education than that. As mentioned in the literature covering this region, most travel is family travel – only one of our respondents reported travelling alone. This is consistent with the age group of the respondents, the culture and also Islamic norms, particularly for women.

Overall results:

- Destinations traveled to:

The first question asked respondents about their travel in the summer of 2017. Close to half the sample (46.3%) traveled domestically, with Salalah leading the destinations (29.6% of respondents). The UAE was slightly more popular (51.9% among respondents) with Dubai being the most popular UAE – and overall – city destination, at 37% of the sample. Only a few respondents traveled to Middle Eastern (13%) and Asian destinations (7.4%) and this consisted mostly of travel to Mecca & Medina (KSA) and to Malaysia. None of our respondents travelled to Turkey, despite it being identified as a good market for our travel agency. We consider this may reflect the age and life stage of our respondents. Turkey is considered a desirable honeymoon location for Omanis, and most of our sample are still single. Europe attracted 18.5% of respondents, with the UK being the lead destination (11.1% of the overall sample). Just 4% reported travelling to an emerging destination (Azerbaijan). No respondents reported travelling further afield (to the Americas or Oceania).

Upon further investigation, small families (5 or less members) were found to be more likely (50% v.s. 17%) to travel to Europe than larger families (6 or more). This may reflect both the cost of a trip like

this for many people and/or reflect the income level of the family. For example, it was found that all families that traveled to Asia had fathers with a government or private sector job. In terms of parents' education, there seems to be a clear association between both parents' level of education and travel to Europe; 34.8% of those with highly educated fathers (Bachelors degree or higher), compared with 10.3% of those with lesser educated fathers; and 46.2% of those with highly educated mothers, compared with 12.5% of those with lesser educated mothers. Also, the data suggest that the lower the level of fathers' education, the higher the likelihood that the family would travel within Oman. This may reflect a lower salary being paid to a less well educated person, but also the recent financial downturn in Oman, and the concomitant response in the population with regard to spending. Value for money is a notable pull factor in this sample, given destination choices.

- Major pull factors:

Respondents were asked to rank the most important destination aspects they consider in making destination choices. As the table below shows, the two most important factors reported were destination fame (2.1) (ranked number one by 41% of our sample with 1 being most important, and 5 being least important) and value for money (at 2.34 rank). Surprisingly, the provision of halal services was ranked the lowest on average (at 3.44). However, throughout the survey halal considerations were frequently mentioned and emphasised. This point will be discussed more fully below. In terms of the destination appearance, or 'instagrammability', our finding is consistent with the literature and suggests it is of more interest to males than females.

Destination aspect	1st
Famous destination	41%
Value for money	31%
Destination distance	31%
Destination offering halal services	26%
The look of the destination (Instagrammability)	24%

- Preferred types of destinations:

Mostly, respondents reported a preference for destinations very similar to Oman (at 28.3%), equaled by no clear preference, and followed at some distance (13.2%) by a preference for destinations very different to Oman (15.1%). As would be expected, destination choices in Oman and nearby were favoured for their safety, closeness in terms of both distance and culture, and affordability. The most cited explanations for far-flung choices were, in the majority, seeking new experiences, followed at some distance by the weather. The data suggests that smaller families with highly educated parents residing in the populous and dense coastal regions (Muscat and Batinah) are more likely to travel to Asia or Europe. These regions are historically more linked to the outside world by seafaring and contact with the Portuguese, the British and Africa and are home to a more diverse sub-cultural society.

Dest similarity preference	Freq.	%
Only cities and attractions within Oman	6	11.3%
Very Similar to Oman (GCC)	15	28.3%
Somewhat Similar to Oman (Arab/Muslim)	7	13.2%
Somewhat Different than Oman (Asian/African)	2	3.8%
Very Different to Oman (Europe/Americas)	8	15.1%
No clear Preference	15	28.3%

- Halal services

When asked about how important the provision of halal services is, 83% indicated that they prefer (48%), or would only (35%) travel to destinations with halal services. This is not to say that they would not travel to places that did not provide halal services, as travelers were clearly prepared to alter their eating habits (by going vegetarian or eating only seafood) for the duration of the holiday. A further 15% were indifferent, while none (0%) preferred destinations not offering halal services. These results suggest that the provision of halal services could encourage Omanis to visit a destination, but absence of such services is not necessarily a hindrance. The most important halal services to respondents were halal food (83.3%), a nearby mosque (48.1%), a prayer mat at the hotel room (44.4%), and a gender separated gym or pool (40.7%).

A few interesting associations were found in this regard. First, male respondents were more likely to rank halal provision more highly than female respondents (56% male and 44% females, compared to overall 42% male and 58% females). Second, families with highly educated fathers (Bachelors degree or higher) were more likely to highly rank halal service provision (56% highly educated versus 44% lesser educated, compared to overall 44% highly educated and 56% lesser educated).

In terms of the provision of halal services (mostly food, prayer facility, and separated gym/pool), the survey results are generally supportive of the interview results in that halal services are probably in the minds of Omani travelers, but such services are not necessarily conditional in the choice of travel destinations. This is seen in respondents' lower ranking of halal service provision among important pull factors, and that at least half the respondents would not mind traveling to "non-halal" destinations. Respondents justify this by saying they could adapt to the absence of halal services by eating vegetarian/sea-food meals, by abstaining from drinking alcohol, and by using mobile apps to find out the *Qibla* (direction of Mecca for praying).

That being said, when asked for any further comment, respondents mentioned that halal service provision was appreciated by Muslim travelers, made them feel welcome and 'showed respect for their family'. This is very important, because for hotels, these preferences are reasonably simple to incorporate into a guest experience. Just offering a prayer mat at check in could make all the difference in terms of perceived quality of guest experience for travelers such as these.

- Travel decision making:

The most important role in travel decision making was attributed to fathers (at 56% of respondents), followed by brothers (16%), then mothers (14%). In their explanation, respondents indicated that fathers were "leaders" of the family, those with more experience in the area of travel or about the destination and the ones mostly financing the trips. Respondents had a very respectful and positive view of this, and were thoughtful about value for money in relation to the trip themselves, even though they were not funding it. This is a less common finding in the literature (Mohsin and Alsawafi, 2011). Results also suggested a positive association between mothers' educational level and their role in travel decision making. Namely, 20% of highly educated mothers (Bachelors degree or higher) have a greater role in travel decision making, compared with only 12.5% of less well educated mothers (high school graduation or less).

Dec. Mak	Freq.	%
Mother	7	14%
Father	28	56%
Other	15	30%
Brother (among "Other")	8	16%

The survey findings in regard to travel decision making are in contrast to the findings of the travel agency interview, where mothers/wives were perceived to be the main travel decision makers. It is

important to recall here that the travel agency has reported more honeymooners utilising its services. These couples would generally be younger than the parents of the survey respondents, as well as slightly older than the respondents themselves, and the wives would be expected – given the population demographics – to be more highly educated. This could largely explain the disparity in the finding of travel decision making between the travel agency interview and the student survey. There was little evidence of shura decision making between husbands and wives in our student sample. Where there was more mention of shura, it was between siblings or the whole family together, rather than just between parents.

Conclusion

This exploratory study sheds more light onto the emerging area of halal travel by investigating travel preferences, perceived importance of halal service provision, and the role of mothers/wives in travel decision making amongst Omani nationals. The three main themes which emerged in the travel agent interview have been further investigated through a sample of students reporting on their summer holiday travel. A very clear outcome of this investigation, has been the distinct segments reflected in the outcomes. University students, aged 25 and under, clearly reflect the cumulative policies implemented since 1970 and evidenced by the almost 100% literacy of this group. In contrast, the parents of these students, fall into the age groups which were less extensively effected by the introduction of extensive schooling for Omanis (particularly women) and from a marketing, and tourism targeting perspective, this is a very valuable finding.

While the travel agent interviewed is targeting younger and more educated urban couples, the student survey conducted gave attention to an older generation. A commonality across our two rather disparate segments, was the perceived importance of halal service provision, which was very similar among the two sets within the market. This reflects halal service provision as a ‘constant’ of consideration, rather than a top of mind consideration. Across all age and gender, geographical location and education levels, halal service provision was important. In fact, Islamic considerations were strongly reflected throughout the study, with a noticeable demand indicated for segregated pools and gyms a strong nod in the direction of both privacy and religious norms – albeit one service hotels may find it more difficult to provide. One solution is to ensure the pool and gym are provided with window coverings which can be closed during women’s only session times if completely separate facilities are not provided.

The preferred destination selection and the role of wives/mothers in travel decision making signalled in the travel agency interview, were not reflected in the student survey data. It is speculated that this disparity is an indication of a coming generational shift. While the parents, and especially the mothers, of the student respondents were less well educated and less likely to be employed, newer generations are increasingly advancing in their education level and career aspirations. This suggests that the Omani travel market is about to witness an important change in travel preference and travel decision making. Nevertheless, the opposing force of changing economic conditions must also influence this market. The combined effect could lead to an increase in the preference for domestic and nearby destinations in the Middle East and Asia, although it is expected that Omanis would continue to explore different and new destinations, consistent with their history, culture and outlook.

Future Directions

This study has indicated findings which bear considerably more scrutiny. An expansion in terms of number of respondents, in terms of depth with the incorporation of interviews, and also in terms of time in seeing if the expectations signaled here are borne out over the next few years – particularly in the area of women’s decision-making roles and influence – are warranted. Extending the sample well beyond university students would overcome a limitation of the present study, and we hope will provide useful and useable insights to those interested in this area.

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ⁱ This paper uses Islamic scholars as references for matters of Islamic teaching. Islamic scholars are acknowledged herein as products of a different education system to western-trained academics. Islamic scholars are required to be experts in Arabic language, to have memorised the Qur'an and fulfil other requirements as well as being accepted as a scholar by other accepted scholars ROALD, A. S. 2001. *Women in Islam: The Western Experience*, Routledge. A range of scholars is referenced here. "Islamic Studies Academics" cannot issue fatawa (Islamic rulings), are not recognised by Islamic scholars, so are palatable to other academics but are not specialists in this field, and are not accepted as sources of legislation for Muslims.