

Participant observation of an arab cafe



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

I have conducted a participant-observation research in an Arabic hookah café in Georgetown, the Zenobia Lounge. While I was expecting to get more insight about the way Arabs practice Islam in their daily lives, my observations were about the service sector in collectivist cultures and expression of cultural identities. I realized that the intimate relationship between a business and customers was more important than the service itself in collectivist cultures. I also realized that Arabs expressed their belongings to two distinct cultures, Arabic and American culture, in their outfits by carrying both modern and oriental elements.

I have spent a total of six hours in the café, three hours each in two consecutive days. Considering that I would have more opportunity to make observations while the place is crowded, I decided to be there between 6: 00 pm and 9: 00 pm on Friday, and 9: 00 pm and 12: 00 am on Saturday. Since the café was open to public, I didn't need to get any permission from a gatekeeper, or put any extra effort to be accepted in the field. I was also not in a marginal status, so I didn't cause any observer effect nor had to deal with any emotional discomfort of being in a different cultural setting.

As I was on my way to the hookah place, I wondered, would my own cultural identity effect my observations? I was exposed to both the individualistic Western culture and the collectivistic Eastern culture, therefore I didn't consider myself as a complete cultural outsider. I realized, however, that I could turn my familiarity with both cultures into an advantage: My familiarity with the individualistic culture could let me observe the Arabic culture from an outsider lens, and my exposure to the collectivistic culture could actually provide me the interpretive tools to understand the " thick description" of

their actions. My exposure to both cultures did turn out to be helpful: While I was observing the Arabs, I could analyze their outfits as an outsider to Arabic culture, but my knowledge about the religious significance of growing beard in Islam helped me interpret my observations.

As soon as I entered the café, I felt like I was in Middle East: The environment was structured carefully to simulate an Arabic experience. There was Arabic music playing in the background, and an Arabic channel on TV. There were bookcases in every wall, and the shelves were categorized into various topics such as Arabic relations, Arabic democracy, Arabic kitchen & cookware. The customer profile was diverse; there were both Americans and people with Arabic origins.

The waitress brought me the menu 15 minutes later I sat down. Instead of appetizers, there was brief information about Zenobia, who turns out to be the queen of the Palmyrene Empire in Roman Syria, in the first page of the menu. The menu was also covered with Arabic motifs, and there were no alcoholic drinks. I ordered an apple hookah, and started taking notes.

My first observation with a cultural significance was the interaction among customers. Customers, people who are completely foreign to each other, were constantly interacting with each other. At some point, seven people from three distinct tables were in a coherent discussion. If I hadn't realized that those people came to the café separately, I would think that those people knew each other and got along well. As I watched these randomly occurring interactions, I realized that the concept of "stranger" varied from

culture to culture. While stranger was a distinct and alien object in individualism, interacting with it was welcomed in collectivism.

I was lucky enough to get involved in this interaction as the girl sitting next to me asked, “ What are you doing?” after we had a few eye contact. I was not just an observer anymore; I was a part of this interaction. I also realized that I had the chance to do a brief interview to get more insight about the meaning of this particular cultural setting to an Arabic person. Even though I didn't have any interview questions in my mind, I decided to direct the conversation toward my inquiries about the meaning of this cultural setting and interactions.

The girl, Azra, told me she was from Libya, but she was born in Arlington, VA. She was a student in George Washington University. After a brief introduction of ourselves, we talked about Turkish coffee and foods in the menu. I decided that it was now time to ask her what this café meant to her. I knew I wasn't going to be able to record our talk or take notes while we were talking since the conversation occurred randomly, and tried to increase my concentration to memorize what she was about to say.

Instead of directly asking her “ What is the meaning of this place for you?” I asked her if she knew any other good hookah places around Georgetown. She mentioned some other hookah places in Adams Morgan and Arlington, than added: “ No other place is like this one.” She told me that she loved this place because everything was perfect. She was a Muslim, and she didn't like other hookah places where alcoholic drinks are sold. The place was just fine, and she was feeling home when she was here.

Azra's usage of the word "home" directed my focus to another relationship: service sector in collective cultures. I was in the right place to observe expectations of customers from a business, especially in collective cultures. As I started paying attention to waitress - customer relationships, I observed that there were long and intimate conversations. People were chatting for a few minutes before getting an order. I also realized that many customers and waitresses actually knew each other. Some people who came to the café was greeted not only with handshakes, but also hugs. One of the customers that a waitress greeted cheerfully didn't even order the hookah that the waitress brought. Around 11 pm, I realized that a waitress actually sat next to a customer and they chatted for approximately ten minutes. Considering that the place was very crowded and there were customers waiting to be served, this behavior would be considered as laziness or lack of professionalism in other settings.

All of these interactions that I observed brought me to one conclusion: For the people from collectivist cultures, the way service is delivered counts more than the service itself. They expect intimacy, not formality. Even though prices were high, qualities that would render a restaurant good in an individual culture were missing: They took my order 15 minutes later I came to the café, and they forgot to serve me a fork and a knife with the falafel. However, it was not the quality of service, but a feeling of intimacy that those people were expecting from a café.

Other than the interactions among people, I made some observations about the culturally significant elements in the customers' outfits. Many of the people here had both oriental and modern elements in their outfits. A girl

with a dark Arabic style eye make-up and thick Arabic eyebrows had a Tony Burch flat. A woman with headscarves was wearing high heel shoes. A boy who had grown a beard, a practice with a religious significance in Islam, and had a t-shirt with an Arabic text on it, was wearing a hipster hat.

In order to find out the meaning of carrying elements from two distinct cultures, I needed more demographic information. I made a couple of visits to the restroom to overhear these people's accents. These were people with Arabic ethnicities and native English accents, Arabs that spoke English as a foreign language, or just people talking Arabic with each other. Overall, I could see that many of these people were connected both to U. S. and Middle East, and probably had multiple citizenships like Azra.

I interpret that this specific combination of distinct elements in outfits is a way to express participation in both cultures. These people embraced two cultures, and wanted to reveal their relations with them. They didn't want to give up on their Arabic culture, but embrace the culture here as well.

Before I conducted this participant-observation research, I was expecting to have a deeper understanding about the Arabic culture. Instead of discovering about Arabs' Islamic practices, I gained insight about the service sector dynamics and identity issues. If I had visited this café only to have a hookah, I would not be able to make such observations. As I became more sensitive to my surroundings, I could feel my dormant senses being activated. Overall, it was a great experience to look through the world with the lens of a researcher. What I observed was completely different than what I was expecting to observe.