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Quenching the Thirst for Local Knowledge: Hotel Bartenders as Cultural Intermediaries of Place

Introduction

Tourism promotion occurs through a variety of formal and informal channels, as travelers seek information from online reviews and word of mouth as well as from guidebooks, agents, and concierges. In the leisure sphere of tourism, bartenders have an important role as providers of products known to facilitate fun, relaxation, and escapism. However, there has previously been very little research examining bartenders in the tourism context, despite their frequent interaction with tourists. In this research, I enlist the assistance of philosophy and cultural studies to investigate the ways in which consumers and providers interact and exchange information in tourism settings, in this case hotel bar environments. To explore whether bartenders may fill roles as supplemental, alternative, or informal concierges, I have adapted a framework of investigating bartenders as “cultural intermediaries” (Ocejo, 2012; Bourdieu, 1984). This approach utilizes the assumption that bartenders may serve as representatives and agents of several tourism products: the bar itself, food and beverage, a destination and its offerings (i.e. the surrounding place and its culture), and, perhaps, the affiliated hotel business. As such, tourists may turn to bartenders as a trusted or “authentic” source of local knowledge.

This research asks the primary question: to what extent do bartenders in tourism settings serve as cultural intermediaries between tourists and the products (broadly defined as activities, attractions, restaurants, bars, etc.) of the destination? My sub-questions include: 1) To what extent do tourists actively seek travel information from bartenders? 2) Do tourists seek information from bartenders out of convenience or other considerations? 3) How do bartenders feel about interacting with tourists and purveying information? 4) Do bartenders consider themselves to be sufficiently knowledgeable or representative of (authentic) local culture? To investigate these questions, I have employed a qualitative, phenomenological approach. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with hotel bartenders in downtown Phoenix, Arizona, a top destination for business travelers with an increasingly popular urban core.

From the angle of hospitality management, this research may provide useful insights for hotel and bar managers to better utilize the strengths of employees within different aspects of business operations. I hope to bring attention to bartenders as an often overlooked but important and multi-faceted actor within the tourism economy, and encourage consideration of how other occupations that are partially embedded within the tourism industry (such as taxi, Uber or Lyft drivers) may contribute in a similar nature.

Literature Review

Bartender research has been very limited in its breadth, particularly in recent years, mostly focusing on bartenders’ roles in alcohol safety measures and in moderation of consumption (Buvik, 2013; Tutenges et al., 2013; Waring & Sperr, 1982a, Waring & Sperr, 1982b). Earlier work from Cowen, McKim, and Weissberg (1981) venture closer to the topic of this paper, analyzing how bartenders might serve roles as inter-personal self-help agents. The findings

indicate that other professions involving one-on-one interpersonal engagement, such as hair stylists, might serve this role more so due to the busy, multi-tasking nature of the bartender's job that prevents frequent, in-depth discussions with customers. However, I suspect that conversations about local travel advice could still occur meaningfully in short form. Spradley and Mann (1975) encapsulate why bars provide interesting ground for theoretical exploration:

Bars offer a unique opportunity to study certain values and norms in American society...The atmosphere is usually relaxed and congenial, a place where individuals can express themselves without the constraints of the workaday world. But in so doing, they also express those deeply held and often unstated values on which social order is based. (p. 3)

This sociable setting between employee and patron creates an interesting environment for considering the concept of a "cultural intermediary," an idea which emerged from the work of Bourdieu (1984, originally 1979), and has since been re-examined to apply to new contexts and changing times. These "intermediaries" have come to be understood as "the taste makers defining what counts as good taste and cool culture in today's marketplace" who, in working in settings where culture and economy intersect, "perform critical operations in the production and promotion of consumption, constructing legitimacy and adding value through the qualification of goods" (Maguire & Matthews, 2014). Bourdieu's (1984) writing centers on the dissection of social class, aesthetic preferences, and the people who are positioned to be agents of "taste." Art, film, and food are three cultural topics specifically explored by Bourdieu, but he proclaims that nearly anything is eligible to be bestowed aesthetic status and distinction – including seemingly "banal" or "common" things and activities (p. 5).

In tourism settings, visitors often seek authentic, "everyday" things that represent the place's culture and identity but also fulfill basic needs or allow the continuation of normal routines (White & White, 2007; McCabe, 2002). A primary example is food, but tourists may also wonder where to shop, enjoy music, or partake in physical activities, for instance. A tourist who seeks a specific type of experience within a place might seek someone for advice who seems to represent that type of experience or style of living. As tourists search for information and guidance from those around them, a bartender might be able to offer a tourist a different type of experience than a hotel concierge, tourist information center agent, or other official tourism information disseminator.

However, a bartender may or may not want to share their authentic world or "real" self with a tourist. In considering the "space of life-styles," Bourdieu states that "the agents [of the particular space] have points of view on this objective space which depend on their position within it and in which their will to transform or conserve it is often expressed" (p. 167). The opinions and knowledge of bartenders might be particularly desirable to tourists in part because of the ways in which a product (such as a trendy cocktail at an urban bar, wine at a tasting room, or craft beer at a brewery) may represent a certain lifestyle or destination image. In Bourdieu's words, "one only has to bear in mind that goods are converted into distinctive signs, which may be signs of distinction but also of vulgarity, as soon as they are perceived relationally, to see that the representation which individuals and groups inevitably project through their practices and properties is an integral part of social reality" (p. 483). Through connecting tourists to specific products or atmospheres, bartenders might be seen as conduits to other desirable offerings of a place. In particular, bartenders may be viewed as a source of more truthful or "authentic"

information about the place. MacCannell (1973) first introduced “authenticity” as an important factor in tourist motivations and experiences, proposing that tourists are most interested in accessing “back regions” (i.e. authentic local cultural settings, or areas typically utilized by residents rather than existing primarily for tourists), where they can experience more intimate interpersonal relations and a greater sense of authenticity of the place, its people, and its culture.

While there has been fairly extensive literature on the concept of cultural intermediaries in professional contexts (Law et al. 2014; Rod, Ellis, & Beal, 2012; Wright, 2005; McFall, 2002; Negus, 2002), only one previous study (Ocejo, 2012) investigates this term specifically in relation to bartenders. This research contrasts neighborhood bartenders with cocktail bartenders, proposing that cocktail bartenders fill more of a cultural intermediary role than neighborhood bartenders, as they connect customers with the products of their specialized and revered art of mixology. Ocejo focuses on the bartenders’ primary products (cocktails) and their associated cultural aura, rather than an auxiliary area of expertise (such as destination knowledge). While tourism is not a consideration, Ocejo establishes a relevant precedent in examining the less tangible aspects of a bartender’s professional role. In considering food and beverage workers more broadly, Ocejo (2014) agrees that individual actors can play multiple roles of intermediaries and be brokers of different goods simultaneously.

Methodology

For this research, I chose a qualitative research approach to openly consider the nuanced range of lived experiences that might exist within bartenders, paying particular attention to underlying cultural and intellectual significance (van Manen, 1990). I conducted this research using a social constructivist framework, understanding that my knowledge is constantly being created through interaction and my participants and I may perceive phenomena differently, yet still meaningfully. Researchers have appreciated the strengths of constructivism to explore problems related to social interaction toward developing a better understanding of how historical and cultural norms manifest in individuals’ lives (Creswell, 2014). The constructivist, qualitative approach enables me to be reflexive of my positioning as a researcher, a bar patron, a former hospitality employee, a downtown Phoenix resident, and a traveler. I selected an interview-based phenomenological approach for this research, guided by the framework of Moustakas (1994), to explore the “essences” of individual’s experiences within the shared phenomenon of working at a bar within a tourism context. Phenomenology commonly draws from philosophy and psychology (Creswell, 2013), making it fitting for this context.

Sampling

I conducted interviews during Spring 2017, using a purposive and snowball sampling method to recruit participants. The criteria for inclusion were any bartender from any bar that is inside or attached to a hotel property in downtown Phoenix. I systematically visited all qualifying bars (sixteen total, associated with eight hotel properties) personally inviting all bartenders to participate. Snowball sampling was helpful in contacting additional bartenders. I was able to complete interviews with nine bartenders who worked within a wide variety of types of hotels and bar properties. Yet, in evaluating the guidelines of Charmaz (2006), I was not confident that I had reached theoretical saturation. I will continue this research in order to yield additional theoretical insights and properties.

Data Generation

To test the protocol, I conducted a small pilot study with three hotel bartenders outside of my sample and adjusted my protocol based on their responses and feedback. I then held a small focus group with three tourism industry professionals with academic backgrounds to account for the tourism and theory-based elements of my research, which further helped to ensure validity of the interview instrument. Over a three-week period, I conducted an in-person, semi-structured interview with each of the nine participants. Each interview was between 30 to 60 minutes in duration and was digitally recorded. The interview protocol included 33 open-ended questions, derived from a review of related literature and my own travel, bar, and service industry experiences. The questions addressed themes such as the bartender's experiences interacting with tourists (and patrons, more broadly), their own self-perceptions of their level of local knowledge and expertise, and how they see themselves fitting into the hotel and tourism context based on what they have experienced.

In my commitment to the constructivist paradigm and phenomenological approach, I integrated my own observations and reflections, striving to be reflexive throughout all stages of the study (Creswell, 2013). I did this through regularly writing memos regarding the interviews, my observations while at the bars, my own travel memories, and my subsequent thought processes following the interviews.

Analysis

To analyze data, I followed the methods prescribed by Moustakas (1994) for phenomenological research. I adopted a horizontalization approach, transcribing the interview data and specifically seeking statements or quotes that stood out as particularly insightful or representational of the group's responses overall. I organized the essences of statements into clusters of meaning and developed a framework of the themes. My own past work and tourism experiences provided me with some knowledge of the participants' culture(s), which was helpful in detecting seemingly incongruous or unclear statements. By fusing these data, I was able to triangulate information, taking multiple sources and perspectives into consideration to help ensure greater dependability and credibility in my findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

The primary theme that arose was that hotel bartenders very regularly give tourists advice regarding where to eat, drink, go clubbing, shopping, hiking, and exploring. Most of the bartenders commented that they highly enjoy this aspect of their job, and in general find it engaging and fun to have conversations with people from different places. Some participants used terms like "concierge," "tour guide," and "home away from home" to describe their relationships with bar patrons.

While bartenders may be a convenient source of information, the participants frequently reflected how bartenders' reputations and personalities tend to make them trusted and sought-after as purveyors of local advice. Several participants explained their potential advantages over hotel concierges in the eyes of tourists:

Bartenders are hipper, you know? *[laughs]* They're industry people more. Not to say concierges aren't, but bartenders are going to be your people that you run into out drinking. *(Hotel restaurant bartender)*

I think maybe they feel that concierges are here to – like, they have a speech that they tell everyone almost, you know? But when they get in [to the bar] and sit down next to locals or a bartender or somebody who's been here for a while, they get more of a truth, more of a real answer. *(Bartender from Irish pub adjacent to hotel)*

We're all young, we know the scene, because all of us bartenders are pretty well connected with other bartenders in different places. So, I think that's definitely why they would come ask us more for where to go than the concierge, because they might think, like, 'oh they don't look they're having too much fun, they're just standing there!', whereas here, we're always joking around, laughing, and we want to create that positive energy. *(Bartender from themed bar adjacent to hotel)*

Many of the bartenders' comments illustrate that patrons perceive them as fun, hip, and knowledgeable about what's happening in the downtown scene, making them an appealing source of information. In turn, the bartenders often give custom-tailored advice to patrons based on what they have learned through conversation, which sometimes involves judging whether the guest is "cool" enough, or similar enough to themselves, to be told certain things. One bartender explained how this tends to work, in her experience:

So, there's certain restaurants – any bartender in the neighborhood would do this – it's really bad, but, it depends on how cool you are, kind of. It's sort of like, do you really like this person? Like, 'god, this person's really cool!' Like, they're big foodies or they're big drinkers, and that's when you start recommending, like, your friends' places. Like places that *you* go. *(Hotel lobby bartender)*

Some of the participants felt that they would receive better tips and customer reviews if they were able to help patrons, but others felt that it didn't necessarily make a big difference. Some stated that even if the tips were better, this is not why they did it; rather, they genuinely enjoyed being able to help visitors and engage in conversation. Several of the participants shared that they had formed lasting relationships with tourist patrons and have associated with patrons outside of work. Interestingly, most of the participants said that they prefer working at an establishment that serves mostly tourists rather than locals, because tourists tend to be fun and laid-back, and often willing to spend more money. Most of the bartenders recognized that there were benefits and disadvantages with either type of clientele.

Many of the bartenders felt like they served as good representatives of Phoenix local culture to out-of-town visitors, mainly because they have lived in Phoenix for a long time, are well-connected, make efforts to explore, and know what is happening locally. The bartenders who were not comfortable labeling themselves as good representatives cited that they felt Phoenix is too diverse (and evolving) for them to truly represent the holistic picture of the city. All of the bartenders revealed a high level of knowledge about either Phoenix or surrounding areas. They were also very open about the shortcomings of their knowledge, and in general seemed to place an importance on providing honest information to patrons. Many participants showed high levels

of pride for the city, especially in light of its recent changes and continuing evolution, particularly in the downtown area.

Themes regarding gender, in terms of the experiences of the bartenders as well as the behaviors of their patrons, were difficult to determine within the limited sample. This will be an area of interest as research continues.

Conclusion and Discussion

Given the lack of similar research, this paper has been largely exploratory in nature, drawing from hospitality, tourism, philosophy, and cultural studies literature, and aiming to build on previous theory-driven work on cultural intermediaries. My findings show that hotel bartenders serve as cultural intermediaries within the tourism context, as they connect tourists to local knowledge while simultaneously providing a service, selling a certain type of product, and representing specific desired aesthetics. Cultural intermediaries have commonly been understood as “tastemakers” who sell certain products. In considering tourism, the place *is* the product – which includes places to eat, drink, recreate, relax, learn, and explore. So, while bartenders may be selling a primary product – alcohol beverages – if visitors turn to them for travel and vacation advice, they are also serving as representatives of a different product – the place. Considering that people experience places in very different ways, they might also be “selling” or representing a very particular, even curated, version of that place. Furthermore, travelers might turn to bartenders because they seek a specific representation of that place. Bartenders work in settings that may be perceived in such ways as modern, active, sociable, hedonistic, historic or culturally rich. Therefore, it is not too surprising that tourists might turn to them for advice that reflects these types of characteristics.

Understanding the experiences, personalities, and preferences of hotel bartenders could be very helpful to hotel and bar managers, potentially leading to higher job satisfaction through greater recognition of employees’ strengths and the multi-faceted nature of the bartenders’ work. Tourism businesses may be able to maximize the potential of cross-promotion with bars through networking, incentives, or simply by showing greater appreciation and gratitude to bartenders and their valuable word-of-mouth potential. In this era of easily accessible online information with an expanded network of information agents, tourists have the ability to be more self-sufficient in their planning. However, this research indicates that travelers seek authenticity in local advice and value and trust the first-hand, in-person opinions of knowledgeable locals. The perceived “hipness” and connections of bartenders to the local restaurant, bar, and club scenes make tourists view them as appropriate and reliable sources of information. Through this bestowed status, bartenders become positioned as cultural intermediaries between the tourist and the offerings of the destination.

Overall, this research serves as an indication of the complexity of networks and actors in the tourism sphere. Destinations may overlook the considerable promotional value of bartenders and others who work on the periphery of the tourism industry. While bartenders may be known for providing a sociable atmosphere to their guests, their roles as “alternative concierges” have previously not been examined in tourism or hospitality literature. This research shows that this type of role is a significant component of the work of hotel bartenders. Even in this age of online

trip planning, tourists value making human connections and will make efforts to seek specialized, local knowledge from reliable sources. This research reveals a level of esteem that people hold for bartenders, which may not be fully acknowledged within the tourism industry. Furthermore, these findings illustrate that providing top-tier service within the hospitality industry often requires a diverse array of strengths and skills. It is my hope that this research will encourage other tourism and hospitality scholars to consider the complex and multi-faceted nature of many tourism-related jobs, and the significant ways in which destination and business promotion can happen through informal channels. Lastly, I believe that this research speaks to the timeless importance of human connection and conversation with friendly strangers in our rapidly evolving, digitalized world.

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