

Using Direct Observation to Examine the Relationship between Smoking and Consumption Patterns in a Middle Eastern Food Services Setting

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Abstract: Despite the widespread implementation of tobacco control efforts, tobacco use persists in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR), which is projected to experience the smallest decline in worldwide smoking rates. Although researchers have never explicitly examined the relationship between smoking and consumption behaviour, the two phenomena may be interrelated, especially in social settings. Utilising unobtrusive observational research, the current study examines the influence of smoking and social interaction on food and beverage purchases in one specific EMR country, Kuwait. The findings indicate that smokers tend to congregate in larger parties, purchase more items, spend more overall, and exhibit longer dwell time in comparison to their non-smoking counterparts. One explanation is that smoking and social interaction remain entwined in the social and cultural traditions of the region.

Keywords: coffee, *diwaniya*, dwell time, EMR, Kuwait, observational research, smoking

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the famous nineteenth-century American essayist and poet, had a well-known predilection for cigars. He even wrote about the connection between creativity and stimulants such as tobacco in an 1844 essay entitled, 'The Poet'. The ability of tobacco to fuel and arouse the mind is also what led him to memorably state: 'A man of no conversation should smoke' (Bosco and Johnson 1982: 20). Much to the likely dismay of Emerson and his contemporaries, and in spite of the purported ability of tobacco to inspire conversation, tobacco use has become a contentious practice in many



societies. In fact, public health authorities throughout the world are increasingly finding success in their efforts to persuade public policy-makers of the dangers of casual smoking and the need to curtail the practice whenever and wherever practicable. As a result, a wide variety of public policy instruments, ranging from awareness programmes and mandated health warnings to excise taxes and public smoking bans, have been implemented throughout the world (Vellakkal et al. 2022). The result of these public policy initiatives is that the use of tobacco has been significantly declining in industrialised nations for decades. Unfortunately, this is not necessarily true in developing regions (Perez-Warnisher et al. 2018). Instead, despite the fact that tobacco use is considered the single primary cause of preventable mortality, many people in developing regions continue to use tobacco on a daily basis. This is especially true in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR), where tobacco use remains firmly entrenched in society. In fact, despite the widespread implementation of tobacco control efforts, the smallest decline in worldwide smoking rates is projected in the EMR, with smoking rates expected to only decline from 33.3 per cent in 2020 to 31 per cent by 2025 (Abuh-Rmeilah et al. 2022).

Researchers refer to consumption behaviour that has negative consequences for the long-run well-being of the consumer as injurious consumption (Griffin et al. 1996). Injurious consumption can be driven by a variety of factors, including reference group influence. For example, despite the adverse health consequences associated with smoking, social influence can have an important impact on the use of tobacco. Indeed, since first gaining widespread acceptance throughout the EMR in the seventeenth century, tobacco use has been established as an affordable diversion and an expected accompaniment to ‘warm fellowship and lively conversation’ (Grehan 2006: 1360). Not surprisingly, in one recent study of smokers in the EMR, respondents reported that their principal motive for engaging in this form of injurious consumption was to relax and socialise (Karaman et al. 2022). Moreover, many individuals report that their predominant pattern is to smoke primarily or even exclusively while in the presence of others, a phenomenon known as ‘social smoking’ (Villanti et al. 2017). Social influence has been shown to play a significant role in many consumer behaviours, including behavioural patterns in the retail shopping process. For example, interactive social influence, including within-group discussions and conversations, tend to slow shoppers down and encourage larger purchases (Zhang et al. 2014).

Although researchers have never explicitly examined the relationship between social smoking and socially driven consumption behaviour, the two phenomena may be especially interrelated in the EMR, where customs and traditions tend to link the two practices. This may be particularly true in the context of the hospitality and restaurant sectors of the economy, which rely on the benefits of relaxation and socialisation for much of their appeal (Zhou and Yang 2019). Moreover, smoking bans that restrict the use of tobacco in public spaces do not completely curb the practice, as many bars and restaurants in the

region still have designated outdoor smoking areas. In the EMR in particular, the food services industry has seen tremendous growth in recent years as globalisation has led to the introduction of a plethora of multinational restaurant chains (Batat 2021). In addition, the food service sector is a key determinant of customer traffic for many adjacent brick and mortar retailers (Fresia 2018). Considering the importance of the food services industry in the EMR, the persistence of tobacco use in this region, and the impact of social influence on consumption patterns, the purpose of the present study is to examine the intersection of those forces. Specifically, utilising observational research, we will examine the influence of smoking and social interaction on food and beverage purchases in the context of contemporary food services retailing in one specific EMR country, Kuwait.

Background and Hypotheses

The World Health Organization (WHO) divides the world into six regions for reporting, analysis, and administration. These include the African Region, the Region of the Americas, the South-East Asian Region, the European Region, the Western Pacific Region, and the Eastern Mediterranean Region. The EMR includes 21 predominantly Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa (Usmanova and Mokdad 2013). Largely due to the growth of the urban populations in this region, the EMR market continues to create opportunities for marketers (Jaad and Abdelghany 2021). This is especially true in the food services industry, where a wide variety of international restaurants, coffee shops, and other retail food establishments have been flourishing in recent years (Batat 2021). Yet, the unique aspects of the EMR market, including the distinctive cultural and social patterns that typify daily life, do not always reflect the expectations of foreign marketers. Instead, the rhythm of daily life in emerging markets such as the EMR may still be dictated by unique traditions and lifestyles that may be difficult for Western marketers to fully understand or appreciate. As such, research specific to this market must be conducted if we are to aid strategic decision-making with market specific knowledge and insights (Nielsen et al. 2018).

One important aspect of culture in the EMR is the social interaction that revolves around food and beverage consumption. According to Eléonore Armanet and Christian Bromberger (2020), food, cooking, and mealtime rituals are the strongest markers of individual and collective identity for consumers in this region. One important example of this in Middle Eastern society is the traditional social institution known as the *diwaniya*, which has been principally associated with the country of Kuwait (Al-Naser 2001). Long before the advent of Islam, the *diwaniya* emerged as a place where men gathered to engage in social discourse. The setting could be a tent, a pavilion, or an open area inside or outside of the house where the participants would meet for

general discussions about social, political, or religious matters. The *diwaniya* could also be less formal, as participants would often listen to music, recite poetry, share jokes, entertain themselves, and just enjoy company. One central feature of the *diwaniya* was the furnishing of food, beverages, and other refreshments, as participants would often drink tea, sip coffee, and smoke tobacco well into the night.

Moreover, the custom of the *diwaniya* has persisted and evolved into the modern era. Although traditionally thought of as a gathering place for men in the Arab world, men no longer strictly monopolise this forum. According to Uche Onyebadi (2021), changes in the Kuwaiti political system, especially in 2005, when women gained the right to vote and hold legislative office, have enabled women to convene and hold their own *diwanis* as well. Nowadays, many Kuwaitis, male and female alike, belong to multiple *diwanis*. Personal ties and friendship are considered the most crucial factors for inclusion, thereby 'forming an interlocking network of regularly meeting groups of people throughout the country' (Al-Naser 2001: 1). The *diwaniya* is a socialising force that continues to serve as the centre of entertainment, recreation, and discourse for young and old alike and that lays the groundwork for the shared social communications system (Al-Naser 2001).

Thus, the *diwaniya* is a historic entity that has adapted and survived, and its traditions continue to impact the Kuwaiti consumer. Through the historical phenomenon of the *diwaniya*, there is an exceptionally strong and enduring tradition within Kuwaiti society of combining social discourse with the consumption of food, beverages, and tobacco products. Smoking tobacco, in particular, is an important aspect of *diwaniya* culture. In fact, in one recent study on the health implications of attending the *diwaniya*, the majority of respondents indicated that the *diwaniya* was primarily responsible for encouraging them to start smoking (Al-Sejan 2018). Although very few studies indicate any positive benefits related to smoking, smokers themselves often report that the practice of smoking can help individuals to reduce anxiety, relax, concentrate, and 'focus their thoughts' (Klein et al. 2014: 78). This is consistent with Emerson's view that tobacco has the power to 'fuel and arouse the mind'. Although these perceived benefits may only be a form of ego-defence, constructed in the minds of smokers to help rationalise their addictions, they can nevertheless help explain the link between smoking and social discourse, including the social interactions common in the *diwaniya*.

In light of the continuing influence of this ancient tradition in the Middle Eastern world, it is our expectation that the various elements of the *diwaniya*, including the consumption of food and beverages, smoking, and social interaction, will be mutually reinforcing. Furthermore, in the context of the Kuwait market, we can expect the interactions among these elements to be mirrored in the modern food services sector as well. For example, much like in the *diwaniya*, we can expect smokers to congregate in larger groups, to purchase and consume more food and beverage items, and to stay at their tables for a

considerable length of time as they engage in conversation and social interaction. This leads us to the following hypotheses regarding the behavioural characteristics of EMR consumers in a modern food services retail setting:

- H1: Customers who smoke will tend to congregate in larger groups than non-smoking customers.
- H2: Customers who smoke will purchase more food and beverage items than non-smoking customers.
- H3: Customers who smoke will have larger total purchases than non-smoking customers.
- H4: Customers who smoke will exhibit longer dwell time than non-smoking customers.

Sample and Data Collection

The data for the current study were generated from a sample of Kuwaiti coffee shop patrons. Just as tobacco gained popularity throughout the Middle East in the seventeenth century, so did coffee. Indeed, these products are often grouped together as ‘commodities of pleasure’ (Baram 1999). For over four centuries now, both tobacco and coffee have been integral aspects of the region’s culture and customs, which explains their prevalence in the *diwaniya* tradition of Kuwait (Al-Naser 2001). Nevertheless, as the country has undergone rapid modernisation since the discovery of oil in the region, a number of Western-style coffee shops, many of which are international retail brands, have begun to dominate the market. With a focus on Western-style food service retailers, four of the largest international coffee outlets were selected for study: Starbucks, Caribou Coffee, Second Cup Coffee Co., and Coffee Republic. Starbucks and Caribou Coffee are both US brands. Second Cup is a Canadian chain, and Coffee Republic is a British brand. Each of the selected retailers operates in a variety of locations throughout Kuwait.

Data for the current study were obtained by unobtrusively observing customers at the various retail coffee shops through the use of human observers. This represents a departure from the standard data collection practices of the marketing and retailing fields of study. Research in the field of marketing has traditionally been dominated by quantitative research methods, including consumer surveys and controlled experiments. However, many researchers in the social sciences are beginning to recognise that overreliance on a relatively narrow range of research methods may constrain understanding and insight (Carins et al. 2016). Unfortunately, actual behaviour often differs significantly from both self-reported survey results and laboratory experiments (Levitt et al. 2010; Slack and Rowley 2001). Consequently, alternative methodologies, including anthropological research techniques, have been slowly gaining acceptance in the field of marketing (Martin and Woodside 2017). This is because unobtrusive observational research, a mainstay of the field of anthropology,

has the potential to generate a more accurate understanding of the consumer and the context in which they behave (Martin and Woodside 2017). In fact, unobtrusive observational research actually offers two distinct advantages over traditional survey studies (De Gauquier et al. 2021). First, it permits researchers to study actual behaviour rather than behavioural intentions alone. Second, the technique of observation is not subject to social desirability bias or the well-known Hawthorne Effect. Consequently, researchers have been slowly embracing unobtrusive observational research as a method to examine and model shopper behaviour (Seiler and Pinna 2017).

In total, 22 groups of observers were set up in 22 separate locations throughout Kuwait, with between five and six locations selected for each retail brand. All observers were specifically trained to classify retail customers on a variety of demographic and behavioural dimensions. In order to enhance reliability, observers worked in groups of three, allowing for multiple judgements of each customer observed. In addition, a series of pre-tests were conducted in which the observers classified a preliminary sample of subjects according to each of the demographic and behavioural variables in the study. Although formal methods and procedures were developed to facilitate the classification process, in the end, observers were trained to utilise their best judgement when faced with ambiguity. The pre-tests revealed intercoder reliability, or the percentage of classifications on which different observers agreed, to be approximately 90 per cent. Any differences in customer classifications in the actual field data collection process were reconciled through group consensus.

Each group of observers purchased items and occupied a table that allowed them to observe customers as they entered the retail establishment and as they purchased their own items. The observer groups were instructed not to interact with the customers and to record their findings with discretion and confidentiality. Each group was instructed to gather data on 100 customers. Only those customers who actually placed an order were selected for observation, and all customers between the first observation and the hundredth were included in the study. On average, four hours elapsed between the first and the final observation for each group. This procedure resulted in an initial sample containing observations from 2,200 different customers. In total, 105 observations were excluded due to incomplete data. This resulted in a final sample size of 2,095 coffee shop customers.

Measurement and Analysis

Consistent with the hypotheses, five main behavioural variables were included in the study. These variables were (1) the smoking behaviour of customers (Smoking), (2) the number of individuals in each group (Group Size), (3) the number of items purchased (Items), (4) the total purchases by each subject (Spending), and (5) the length of time that customers stayed at their tables

(Dwell Time). In addition, observers recorded the estimated age of the subjects as well as their gender. Smoking was operationalised as a nominal variable: yes/smoked or no/did not smoke. Since smoking is not permitted inside any restaurants or within any closed public places in Kuwait, smoking is done in a designated outside area. Observers recorded whether the customer had a cigarette, e-cigarette, vape pen, cigar, or other smoking item during his or her stay in or near the coffee shop. The sample revealed that 735 customers smoked while 1,360 did not smoke. Descriptive statistics for the variables studied are provided in table 1.

Group Size, a ratio variable, refers to the number of associates that were with the measured customer in a group. Observers counted the number of people who both entered the store together and sat together, utilising the smaller of the two numbers, in order to determine the size of each party. Group Size ranged from zero to seven with a mean of 1.13, a standard deviation of 1.23, and a standard mean error of 0.027. Dwell Time, a ratio variable, refers to how long the customer stayed in the coffee shop or on the premises in minutes. Observers recorded when the customer came into the shop and when he or she left. Dwell Time ranged from a low of only 1 minute to 600 minutes in the case of one particularly steadfast customer. The mean value for the Dwell Time variable was 42.82 minutes, with a standard deviation of 62.79, and a standard mean error of 1.37. Items, a ratio variable, refers to how many different menu items the customer bought. The number of items ranged from zero (no purchases) to four, with a mean of 1.686, a standard deviation of 0.756, and a standard mean error of 0.017. Spending, another ratio variable, refers to the amount of money paid in Kuwaiti Dinar (Kd) by the observed customer. Observers recorded each customer's purchases and later calculated the amount spent from the menu prices for the items bought. Spending ranged from zero (no purchases) to Kd21.50, with a mean of 2.826, a standard deviation of 1.655, and a standard mean error of 0.036.

For the analysis, we began by examining the demographic characteristic of both the smoking and non-smoking subsamples. Due to the limits of

Table 1. Basic Statistics for Behavioural Variables

Variable	n	Mean	s.d.	s.e.m.	min	max
Group Size	2095	1.13	1.23	0.027	0	7
Items	2095	1.686	0.756	0.017	0	4
Spending	2095	2.826	1.655	0.036	0	21.5
Dwell Time	2095	42.82	62.79	1.372	1	600
Smoking	yes	735	64.90%			
	no	1360	35.10%			

observational research, which restrict the classification of subjects to only a handful of readily observable demographic categories, as previously mentioned, observers limited the demographic analysis of the subjects to age and gender estimates. Also, since the classification of age was necessarily subjective, the data were reclassified into two simple age categories, ‘older’ and ‘younger’. As noted in table 2, male coffee shop users were more likely to be smokers than female coffee shop users. In addition, as noted in table 3, older coffee shop customers were more likely to be smokers than were younger coffee shop customers. Moreover, table 4 reveals that smokers exhibited higher mean values for each of Group Size, Items, Spending, and Dwell Time. From table 4 we also see that these differences are all statistically significant. Thus, in the context of Western-style coffee shops in the Kuwait market, and in support of hypotheses H1 to H4, it can be concluded that smokers tend to congregate in larger parties, purchase more items, spend more overall, and linger for an extended period of time in comparison to their non-smoking counterparts.

Table 2. Cross-tabulation of Smoking and Gender

Smoke		Gender		Total
		Female	Male	
No	Count	720	640	1360
	expected	540.105	819.896	
Yes	Count	112	623	735
	expected	291.895	443.105	
Total		832	1263	2095

$\chi^2 = 283.294$, d.f. = 1, ‘p’ = 0.000

Table 3. Cross-tabulation of Smoking and Age

Smoke		Age		Total
		Older	Younger	
No	Count	356	1004	1360
	expected	375.866	984.134	
Yes	Count	223	512	735
	expected	203.134	523.866	
Total		579	1516	2095

$\chi^2 = 4.136$, d.f. = 1, ‘p’ = 0.042

Table 4. Independent Sample *t*-Tests of Smokers (SM) vs. Non-smokers (NonSM)

	<i>t</i>	d.f.	' <i>p</i> '	
Group Size (GS)	4.765	1322.44	0.000	SM : GS > NonSM : GS
Items (I)	4.471	2093	0.000	SM : I > NonSM : I
Spending (Sp)	2.118	2093	0.034	SM : Sp > NonSM : Sp
Dwell Time (DT)	5.863	1098.31	0.000	SM : DT > NonSM : DT

Discussion and Implications

The cultural ecology perspective argues that cultural adaptations are common over time as individuals experience different social environments (Frake 1962). One example of a shift in social environments that has had major repercussions throughout the EMR is the trend toward globalisation. Globalisation can be thought of as 'a social process in which geographic constraints on social and cultural relations disappear' (Masoudi et al. 2017: 338). In the context of the food services industry, this means that consumers are willing and able to patronise international retailers that may operate with a retail process, an aesthetic style, or a menu of items that is not wholly consistent with traditional methods and practices. In the country of Kuwait, globalisation has led to a plethora of foreign brands entering the market, effectively transforming the retail options available to the typical consumer. However, according to Ann Jordan (2013), the world is not really becoming homogenised by globalisation. Instead, 'human groups around the world express their local identities in the ways in which they reconceptualize' goods and services from other cultural groups (Jordan 2013: 6).

Our study seems to provide evidence that supports this view. One clearly identifiable behavioural pattern of the Western retail consumer is the tendency towards 'precision shopping'. With busy and hectic lifestyles, many Western consumers exhibit what has been described as a strategic shopping orientation (Gerzema 2011). Rather than shopping or dining for pleasure, they tend to emphasise convenience and speed. The result is that dwell time, which is typically associated with higher sales, has been sacrificed as shoppers have adopted a more purposeful approach to shopping. However, our observations suggest that rather than modifying their consumption patterns to the Western style, Kuwaiti consumers have merely modified traditional social interactions within a modern global food service context. In essence, even in the Western-style coffee shop, smoking, social discourse, entertainment, and refreshments all interact in a unique manner that mirrors the tradition of the *diwaniya*.

With regard to smoking in particular, research suggests that smokers from countries with stronger tobacco control policies have more anti-smoking 'injunctive norms', referring to perceptions of what others think people should

or should not do (East et al. 2019). Not surprisingly, in many countries, especially in the industrialised world, smoking has been banned outright in bars, restaurants, and public spaces. However, only about 20 per cent of the world's population is protected by smoking bans in public places (Fiedor et al. 2022). Moreover, the result of these bans is often difficult to assess. Studies often indicate that many businesses where smoking had been previously allowed recorded decreases in both visitor rates and revenues immediately after the introduction of smoking bans (Fiedor et al. 2022). Furthermore, many of these declines persisted for up to two years. Nevertheless, on a global level, smoking remains a common practice in social settings. In fact, our findings indicate that smoking may have social implications that serve to stimulate retail sales in Kuwaiti food service venues. Regardless, considering the positive impact on health and safety, it is difficult to advocate against anti-smoking campaigns or policies.

Finally, two important limitations must be acknowledged. First, the data were only collected through the observational method, and this technique raises issues of subjectivity (Slack and Rowley 2001). By incorporating traditional survey research as a supplementary source of data, future replications of this study could help to establish the concurrent validity of the findings and could supplement the observable behaviours of the consumers studied with information on the beliefs, perceptions, and motives that underly their actual behaviour. In addition, the study examines only one retail category in one specific EMR country. Therefore, our findings may only be specific to the Kuwait retail coffee market. Consequently, future research should focus on additional product categories and even additional geographic markets to enhance the generalisability of the findings.

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