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Legal drinking age? Sorry, dude, you're still too young

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Hani Zakaria had just started his first year at the University of Toronto when his older brother invited him to a friends' birthday party at the Madison Avenue Pub, a popular watering hole near campus. His evening ended before it even started when Mr. Zakaria was denied entry to the club solely on the basis of his - legal - age.

"I had to leave the event. I was obviously annoyed," said Mr. Zakaria, who had ID showing he was 19, Ontario's legal drinking age.

His experience is repeated nightly at drinking establishments across Canada and around the world. Even in this era of human rights statutes and commissions, a lot of clubs turn away legal-age customers - particularly young men.

Some of the country's hottest clubs, including Toronto's Muzik, Maison Mercer and Pravda Vodka Bar; Ottawa's Velvet Room and Montreal's Candi Bar practise such ageism. Obviously drinking establishments are allowed to cultivate a convivial atmosphere - Canada is not a despotic state after all - but blanket discrimination directed toward an entire demographic is, well, surprising in this PC age.

Muzik, whose management was unavailable for comment, seeks a mature crowd and (according to its website) restricts men under 25 and women under 21. It's Mr. Zakaria's experience that in many cases "it seems as though they are willing to forgo the rule if it is a girl." Other bars in Toronto known for their age policies include Century Room (21 and up) and sister club Maison, where they have recently begun to only accept patrons 25 years or older.

Matt Sims, a Toronto event producer who has thrown more than 600 events since 2005, sees the business logic behind such policies. "If the club is in high demand like Muzik or Century Room, they want to be able to save the space for their older patrons who they gather will spend more money," Mr. Sims said, adding that "they want the current clientele to feel important and [safe] at their venue."

These age restrictions can be flexible, however. Mr. Sims adds that "the bouncers will also make exceptions based on how you're dressed, and often they will only turn away men who are younger, but not the girls."

Raj Anand, a human rights lawyer and former chief commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission, says, "there are certain circumstances in which the stereotype of irresponsibility that attaches to young, unmarried men is sanctioned by law - see their car insurance rates - but visiting a bar or

nightclub is not one of them. In my view, exclusion of an adult of drinking age is a violation of the Human Rights Code."

The general manager of the Madison Avenue Pub, Jim McCardle, says their age rule is enforced only during certain late hours. "We put the restriction for them to come here before 11 at night. That way they aren't coming in half-inebriated and having one drink after sitting at home drinking all night," he said.

Michael Ungar, a professor of social work at Dalhousie University who specializes in youth issues, called the practice "profiling."

"I don't think we should be barring young men. We should be holding them accountable, and giving them other ways in society to have a powerful identity," he says. "Until we do that, barring them from drinking establishments is just a futile finger-in-the-dike solution."

Similar age policies exist in other countries. Kristopher Bosch, who works in theatre in London's West End, had a friend turned away from a birthday party at a Soho bar. "He was sent away because he wasn't 21, he was 20," Mr. Bosch said. The drinking age in the U.K. is 18.

"Ageism is not the only problem here. I recently went to Maddox Club in Mayfair, of which I am a member, and they denied my friend and I entry because we were not with a girl," he said.

Phil Mak, a Concordia University student, was upset he was turned away from Montreal's Candi Bar, which is known for its wacky Mega Bloks decor and mouth-watering martini toppings.

"They say it is the only bar in Montreal that brings back your best childhood memories," he said. "When they turned me away for being months away from 21 it certainly made me feel like a kid again."

Mr. Mak argues that a gentleman should be defined by his conduct, not by his gender or year of birth. As he put it, "I just felt belittled, put into a box because I was a young man, not because I was a young person. ... I'm sure if the shoe were on an older foot this issue would be much more talked about."

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