# BRANDING HERITAGE TOURISM IN DUBAI: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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**ABSTRACT**

This qualitative paper explores tourism branding for Dubai to develop brand differentiation based on factors influencing heritage tourism. Data was collected through direct interviews with relevant tourists and tourism experts. The paradigm of critical realism was adapted to analyze the data with thematic analysis by extracting related themes. Five emerging themes have been identified: perception of brand authenticity in heritage tourism, Dubai's tourism offerings, heritage branding, marketing suggestions, and heritage tourism valorization. Research outcomes present a strategy for brand marketing Emirati heritage tourism as new strategic advances in tourism management. Practical implications suggest that heritage tourism can achieve brand differentiation among heritage tourism destinations by leveraging authenticity and modernity. This paper contributes to the theory of tourism marketing and management, with the unique case of branding Dubai as part of UAE heritage tourism, by adopting brand communication, brand identity, brand positioning, and brand personality strategies.

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# INTRODUCTION

A heritage brand is based on longevity, positioning, and value proposition, which need precise marketing and communication (Balmer & Burghausen, 2019; Wilson, 2018). The quality of the product reflects the quality of the place, and the story must be emotive and appealing (Pera, 2017; Yilmaz, 2020). Hence, the destination/country whose marketing succeeds in appealing to environmental and cultural associations successfully delivers on corporate, regional, destination, and individual branding. The main purpose of this research paper is to identify factors for successful brand marketing of Heritage Tourism in Dubai particularly and in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) generally. The UAE Tourism Brand is facing proliferation and 'Heritage Tourism' could be presented as a solution to usher in clarity. This will be constructed on brand differentiation strategies based on discussions with tourism providers, consumers, and other stakeholders. This paper suggests that Dubai needs to adopt a brand differentiation strategy to deal with brand-communication, brand-identity, brand-personality, and brand-positioning. These strategies are further justified by explaining the brand value and by preserving authentic cultural heritage as well as the built environment.

The United Arab Emirates is divided into seven Emirate provinces. This study focuses on the Emirate of Dubai, as Dubai has the highest number of in-bound tourists in the country. In 2016, the Emirate of Abu Dhabi welcomed 4,440,314 guests. Sharjah received 1.8 million visitors, whereas Dubai had 14.9 million tourists (The United Arab Emirates Portal, 2020). Dubai entices tourists for its diverse attractions such as beaches, luxury resorts, glamorous shopping malls, the desert and also for its heritage tourism (Seraphim & Haq, 2020). This research attempts to grasp the perception of heritage tourism in Dubai, from the tourism demand and supply perspectives, to craft a branding strategy and contribute towards advances in hospitality and tourism research.

Recently, marketing and tourism researchers have studied the phenomenal growth of Dubai as a business hub and tourism destination (Balakrishnan, 2008; Picton, 2010). However, most studies have been focused on destination branding and place and events marketing, with little interest shown in heritage tourism (Balakrishnan, 2008; Seraphim & Haq, 2020). This gap in literature inspired the authors to study Dubai's heritage tourism as a dynamic tourism product that needs to be designed with valued opinions shared by all stakeholders. This study adopts the qualitative research methodology based on direct interviews with heritage

tourism consumers (demand-side) and experts associated with Dubai tourism (supply-side). The ontology of critical realism was adopted where the data was analyzed through thematic analysis to recognize the emerging themes. To enhance the quality and objectivity of this qualitative research, the sample is composed of tourists from three countries with distinctive cultural and institutional backgrounds - Australia, France and Pakistan. Tourism experts (who operate in Pakistan and UAE) that offer heritage tourism in Dubai were also consulted.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Heritage Tourism in Dubai

A country's heritage includes authentic intangible assets such as traditional cultural practices, performances/shows, knowledge or skills, as well as tangible assets including natural and cultural environment, historical sites, and man-made environments (Alexander, 2009; Haq & Medhekar, 2019; Santa & Tiatco, 2019; Su et al., 2020; Timothy, 2018). Intangible assets from Dubai (and the UAE) are falconry, weaving techniques such as *al sadu*, traditional dances such as *Al Ayyala*, knowledge about date palms, the majlis as a cultural and social space, and Arabic coffee (UNESCO, 2019). There are two main types of heritage tourism: (i) natural heritage includes mountains, rivers, beaches, and the desert as part of eco-tourism, and (ii) cultural heritage includes human history, archaeological sites, monuments, and inventions (Kumar & Singh, 2015; Picton, 2010; Timothy & Ron, 2013).

Heritage sites are recognized by the World Heritage Committee, an agency under UNESCO (UNESCO, 2016). With regards to tangible heritage, archaeological sites of the UAE qualify with a high level of authenticity (Bak et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2016). In the case of the United Arab Emirates, one cultural site of the Al-Ain region (Bidaa Bint Saud, Hafit Hili, and Oases areas) was listed, by UNESCO in 2011, as dating from the bronze and iron ages, prior to 2500BC. These areas include prehistoric villages, tombs, palaces, towers, residential and administrative buildings, and wells. The other eight sites on the tentative list and six nominated in 2012 are (i) Settlement and cemetery of Umm-an-Nar Island, (ii) Sir-Bu-Nair Island, (iii) Khor Dubai, (iv) Ed-Dur Site, (v) Al-Bidya Mosque, (vi) Sharjah city: The Gate to Trucial States (in 2014), (vii) The Cultural landscape of the Central Region in the Emirate of Sharjah (in 2018), and (viii) Abu-Dhabi Sabkha. Being part of UNESCO's listed heritage sites attracts more international tourists, "because the inscription guarantees the value of heritage" (Bak et al., 2019, p. 917). In summary, tourists visiting Dubai have access to

intangible heritage such as coffee, traditional dances (*al ayyala*), handicrafts (*al sadu* weaving), and cultural practices (falconry, majlis). Tourists can also explore the Creek or Khor (in Arabic) Dubai and learn about maritime trade, pearl diving, and the spice souk, while admiring the old gold souk and traditional merchant mansions.

Interestingly, these UNESCO listed and nominated world heritage sites of the UAE are not properly marketed (Seraphim & Haq, 2020). Hence, the challenge that remains is effective branding of tangible and intangible cultural heritage through marketing, valorization, and communication with stakeholders for tourism planning and development (Mijnheer & Gamble, 2019).

**Brand Marketing in Tourism**

In order to comprehend the brand-differentiation for Dubai's heritage tourism, the differences between country, place, and destination branding must be perceived accurately. Destination branding only manages the attraction of tourists, while country branding involves the attraction of investors to the country thereby enhancing the sale of local heritage goods, improving the interest of foreign talent and overall development of the country's image (Haq & Medhekar, 2019; Papp-Váry, 2018). In the pursuit of destination/country branding, related to heritage tourism, goals must be set towards the branding of a good, a service, or a company. This set of goals will be attained through the core elements of market branding based on: brand communication, brand identity, brand purpose, brand image, brand positioning, and brand personality.

Goulding (2000) presented a grounded research to measure the authenticity of experience of tourists traveling to heritage sites. Tourists were surveyed about sites' authenticity based on the heritage value of destinations, which proved useful for this study. Alexander (2009) explained brand authentication related to the understanding of tourism destination branding. Consciously following the gaps in earlier authentication studies, this research does not judge the heritage authenticity of a destination or event and accepts at face value each tourist's self-assessment of the authenticity of their heritage experience. Ram et al. (2016) stressed on destinations winning the loyalty of tourists based on the authenticity of the experience offered by the place.

Tourism brand positioning is based on two major approaches: subjective and objective positioning (Chacko, 1996; Rinaldi & Cavicchi,

2016). Objective positioning refers to a destination whose image is built on real physical characteristics; while in subjective positioning, the image is built on perceptions of tourists and intangible characteristics (Eraqi, 2011; Zandieh & Seifpour, 2020). Positioning Dubai as a destination brand involves narrowing the image, and hence subjective positioning needs to be adopted. Destination branding is challenging since perceptions of a destination are linked with multi-dimensional bodies and mean different things to different stakeholders' requirements (Kim et al., 2018). The destination image of the UAE and Dubai, as a Muslim and multicultural place, supports the data collection and business implications for heritage tourism branding.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Problem and Objectives

The core problem regarding heritage tourism in Dubai is the brand proliferation of tourism offerings cloaked in confusing layers of similar services. This study intends to fill the vacuum in the literature on heritage tourism brand marketing with triangulated qualitative data. The predominant research question is: "How can brand differentiation be achieved for heritage tourism development in Dubai?"

Given the exploratory nature of this research, a qualitative methodology was considered suitable to reach credible findings based on interviews with tourists and tourism experts. Ontology of critical realism suggests that an objective reality exists that is imperfectly perceived due to different limitations (Pegues, 2007; Perry et al., 1999). The authors decided to adopt critical realism due to the availability of several viewpoints and 'realities' in the heritage tourism environment, and in the thoughts of stakeholders, hence strengthening the impartiality and scholarship of research outcomes (Lincoln & Guba, 2003; Pegues, 2007). Moreover, the opinions of industry experts render the research more effective (Garrod & Fyall, 2000). During data collection, most respondents were reluctant to express their feelings about the heritage and culture of the UAE as they could, unintentionally, cause offence. Hence, consent was sought, and the authors assured all the respondents that their identity would not be disclosed and that their honest feelings on the subject would benefit the research and tourism of Dubai.

## Sample Collection and Size

The research problem was addressed by conducting interviews with heritage tourists and tourism experts residing in Australia, France, Pakistan, and the UAE. A balance among the tourists was sought on the basis of gender, socio-economic status, education level and age. There are four reasons for selecting these four countries. Firstly, non-probability sampling constitutes a relevant method suitable for exploratory studies, especially when the topic is new and narrow (Lincoln & Guba, 2003; Rihova et al., 2015). Secondly, since the countries are geographically, socially, and economically very different, the research outcomes could present a distinct contribution to tourism literature. Thirdly, the authors reside in three different countries; therefore, convenient sampling was adopted for data collection. Fourthly, many tourists from these three countries visit Dubai. In 2019, Australia ranked as the fifteenth country with the highest number of tourists visiting Dubai, France was the eleventh, and Pakistan the ninth country (VisitDubai, 2020).

Convenience and purposeful sampling methods were used to identify easily accessible and qualified respondents. Heritage tourists and tourism experts, as part of this study, were chosen by following a pre-set criterion: individuals and tourists who, upon inquiry, expressed interest in heritage, had visited Dubai previously, and consented to be interviewed. Similarly, tourism experts in these countries had to be engaged in tourism businesses focusing on Dubai as a destination and offering heritage experiences as one of their tourism products. All participants had to submit a written consent for the interview and were assured of data confidentiality. Primarily, private and government tourism agencies and heritage centers were requested to nominate heritage tourists and specialists in the four countries. The snowball technique was applied, as the study progressed, to reach out to more relevant respondents (Chen & Shih, 2019; Seraphim & Haq, 2020; Yin, 2017). The questionnaires used to gather data from the two types of respondents (tourists & experts) can be viewed in Appendix A.

This study did not seek the quantity of data but pursued quality. Hence, the sample size was concluded by adopting the criterion of data saturation point - where the received information became saturated after reaching comprehension of distinct understandings linked to the study with no new information being generated, hence validating the number of participants (Alam, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 2003; Yin, 2017). This research included 49 respondents: 32 tourists and 17 experts. Among the 32 tourists,

8 were from Australia, 16 were from France, and 8 were from Pakistan. Of the 17 experts, 2 work in Pakistan while the other 15 reside in Dubai.

**Data Collection and Coding**

Through interviews with tourists and experts, distinct understanding about heritage tourism was achieved. All interview copies were read multiple times, by each author, for cross-case thematic analysis validation and probing for meanings and perceptions in the explanations of each interviewee (Chen & Shih, 2019). The thematic analysis used data coding that was steered by research questions guiding the researchers towards findings mapped with research objectives (Miles & Huberman, 2002; Yin, 2017). The primary coding of data collected from each country was based on evidence extracted from all interviews and was managed as separate exercises for cross-case content inquiry, as advised by Miles and Huberman (2002). Subsequently, the same procedure was applied to the four national groups of tourists and experts. Later, memos were posted on transcripts to grasp credible and valuable ideas discernible from discussions with interviewees.

Australian tourists were coded as AT-1 to AT-8. The Pakistani tourists were coded as PT-1 to PT-8 and the experts as PE-1 and PE-2. Similarly, the French tourists were coded as FT-1 to FT-16 and experts working in the UAE were UE-1 to UE-15. Information about each respondent is listed in Tables 1 and 2. The substance of interview transcripts of heritage tourists related to brand perceptions, image, and personality were highlighted and analyzed separately. Likewise, the content of each interview transcript of heritage tourism experts related to brand differentiation, tourism marketing, and heritage were highlighted and analyzed separately. The approach focused on cross-case investigation suggested by Miles and Huberman (2002): responses of tourists and experts to research questions, in four countries, were individually coded, analyzed and connected with the four emerging outcomes. Subsequently, the investigator triangulation was applied: each author analyzed the collected data individually, and finally, all emerging insights were triangulated to identify themes (Alam, 2005; Yin, 2017). This approach facilitated the emergence of ideas and themes reflecting upon the brand-differentiation of heritage tourism for Dubai (Appendix B).

## RESULTS

As mentioned earlier, tourists and experts in tourism were interviewed and through these interviews different themes emerged. Experts and tourists began by discussing their perception of authenticity of heritage tourism in Dubai. They then described what Dubai has to offer as a tourist destination. Tourists and experts also suggested initiatives to improve Dubai's branding as a heritage tourism destination and its marketing possibilities. Finally, they thought of ways to valorize heritage tourism in Dubai.

### Theme 1: Does Dubai possess authentic heritage tourism attractions?

The heritage attractions that were defined as authentic by the tourists interviewed are historical buildings such as the spice souk, the gold souk, and the forts (where leading families from the Emirates would live and conduct political business). These forts are now museums. Heritage villages are also mentioned, as they showcase Emirati traditions and erstwhile way of life. Religious buildings such as mosques are also considered authentic. The interviewees discussed nature, like the desert and oasis, and the lifestyle that revolves around it. Traditional practices are highlighted through Emirati cuisine, camel races, and palm tree cultivation. Heritage festivals are also appreciated as visitors can experience, in the reconstructed venues, Emirati handicrafts, delicacies, coffee, dances, and songs.

In opposition to these statements, some tourists questioned the authenticity of heritage sites. They believed that the heritage sites were "decorated". Some argued that the desert safari experience in the desert, organized by varied tour operators, looks staged. In fact, numerous desert safari experiences feature dune bashing in the desert, a middle-eastern buffet (that barely features Emirati food), the smoking of 'narguileh' (another middle-eastern practice that is not native to the UAE), a belly-dancing spectacle (Egyptian dance that is performed by a non-Emirati woman), and/or a dervish dance (a Turkish dance) (Seraphim & Haq, 2020). One tourist complained that Muslim history and culture were not adequately promoted:

> "[*Dubai heritage places such as palaces, museums, and markets*] *seem like decorated heritage, not very natural for me*" (AT-8).

Tourism experts acknowledge that Dubai has prominent historical and authentic places.

*"We have a very long history, of archeological sites: Saruq al Hadid, Jumeirah. We have 3000 years of history and archeology. Tourists can come to Dubai to see how people were living in Dubai in 1930s. They can visit the old house, old courtyard. We have the traditional market, the 'bazaar' a unique thing. That you cannot see in other parts of the world"* (UE-14).

However, they regret that sometimes when tourists see historical sites, some of them believe it is "fake" authenticity. Dubai, in an effort to showcase clean heritage sites, has thoroughly renovated its sites to the point where the original look has unfortunately been lost entirely.

*"Bastakiya has been refurbished/renovated. Now a part of Old Dubai looks brand spanking new, they are refurbishing, to make it look more sanitized. The problem when you sanitize the place, you are rubbing away the reality of it"* (UE-4).

## Theme 2: Dubai's tourism offerings

Despite the challenges faced by heritage tourism, Dubai's attractions are much diversified. On the one hand, Dubai is a famous shopping destination. Visitors also want to see the record-breaking side of the city such as the Burj Khalifa (the tallest building on earth) and unique entertainment options such as indoor skiing. On the other hand, others love Dubai's natural beauty such as the sea and its water sports, the desert, the mountains, and the oasis.

Similar to the tourists interviewed, the tourism experts that were consulted mentioned multiple attractions. They believed that many tourists visit Dubai primarily to see the futuristic part of the city and to have the opportunity to enjoy luxury shopping.

## Theme 3: A prominent position for heritage and culture in branding Dubai tourism

As stated earlier, Dubai has a lot to offer. However, heritage sites, traditional practices, and handicrafts are not advertised. Yet, some tourists believe that Dubai cannot compete with its neighboring countries in terms of heritage, such as Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, or Lebanon. Nonetheless, Dubai distinguishes itself from its competitors as being a unique city offering modern and luxurious holidays alongside heritage sites and access to cultural practices such as falconry or camel racing. Many tourist respondents suggested that Dubai should focus its branding on this mix of the historic and the modern. They would like the history of trade routes, pearl trading, and nomadic desert lifestyle to be better explained and

valorized. They stated a wish to discover more about indigenous Emirati culture. Some expressed the desire to learn more about Muslim heritage, as the UAE was one of the first countries to have converted to Islam. Others commented that they enjoyed the multicultural aspect of Dubai through food, social interactions, and handicrafts. They preferred to see multiculturalism as part of Dubai's tourism branding.

> *"Dubai should continue to be showcased as a city of the future BUT WITH a past as well"* (UT-3).

> *"[…] offering unique and authentic Arab heritage tourism experience, where the traditional provides a symbiotic experience with the ultra-modern Dubai"* (AT-1).

> *"I found it cool: as it is a cosmopolitan city, you see people from many horizons, and there are other cultures (Lebanese, Indian among others) that are very present in the Emirates"* (FT-1).

Some experts, like the tourists, pointed out that the UAE has a limited range of heritage sites, due to the fact that Emiratis used to be nomads. Their shelters were built for practical purposes and not necessarily for endurance. *"In India there are still many historic buildings recognized by UNESCO. In Dubai people transited and did not leave a lot of traces."* (UE-4). Despite the challenge, experts reached the same conclusion as tourists and believed that Dubai should openly promote its heritage tourism. The best way to publicize its heritage tourism, according to tourism experts, was to center their branding on Dubai: the city where the future and the past meet. They also believe that Arab culture and folklore should be increasingly showcased. Experts also expressed their hope that multiculturalism could be further valorized as a modern feature.

**Theme 4: Marketing suggestions**

The heritage tourism of Dubai is not marketed aggressively enough, as extrapolated from most of the interviews.

> *"The marketing of heritage tourism needs to be more visible and accessible. Most people visiting Dubai do not see it as an option"* (PT-8).

Heritage tourism should be publicized inside the country, in particularly at the airport, to ensure that tourists arriving in the country or during transit, international students and professional business visitors, are all aware of the heritage offerings in Dubai. Advertisements for museums and heritage sites could also be placed in city malls, airports, and on roadside billboards. International publicity for heritage tourism in Dubai,

through video and poster campaigns, should be promoted to help potential tourists plan their stay. In addition, Dubai is a transit hub that attracts many short-term visitors - many tourists visit Dubai for a short trip, for business or while in transit to other destinations. Some interviewees believed it would be useful to tailor a 4-days package offering a combination of futuristic elements and shopping sites along with tours of the heritage sites. One interviewee even suggested fostering a partnership between modern sites and heritage sites, in order to enhance cross-promotion for combined visits. Another initiative would entail publishing the top 10 heritage sites to visit on Internet engines such as Trip Advisor.

Some distinct sites and features of Dubai require aggressive advertisement. Tourists were agreeably surprised to see that Dubai's society is liberal minded. The dress code is not restrictive, with minimal instructions for women's attire in public. As Paris et al. (2016, p. 10) stated "The cosmopolitanism resulting from the large percentage of expatriates and the international tourists has resulted in a more open-minded population".

Furthermore, Dubai distinguished itself for being a safe place in a troubled Middle Eastern region. There are no geopolitical, terrorist, or political coup issues in the United Arab Emirates. At a personal level, visitors do not fear losing their personal belongings nor do they fret over having entered the "wrong side of the city, at the wrong time".

> *"Show their open-mindedness.* […] *The beauty of the older heritage, and the cleanliness of this country. Because in the end I was afraid to go, I was prejudiced, and it became my favorite country!* […] *Interesting to walk around, learn, discover and change the clichés instilled by the Western media"* (FT-16).

The experts interviewed also believed that marketing and promotion should be done abroad, at the airport and on flights bringing visitors to Dubai. They advocated for an increase in advertising, inside the country, on diverse heritage attractions. They suggested that these promotion videos should showcase heritage, multiculturalism and inform visitors that the city is more liberal, in comparison to its neighbors, and that women are free to dress in "Western style."

> *"The video needs to be improved. They should showcase Dubai as a multicultural city, not just a multi-activity Dubai.  When people want to come in Dubai, they do not know if Dubai is conservative or not, how should they dress, etc…"* (UE-4).

## Theme 5: Heritage sites and attractions valorization

In addition to marketing advice, tourists and experts suggested valorizing heritage sites and promoting heritage tourism in Dubai. Tourists believe that the heritage sites could be livelier and engaging activities, such as heritage and/or cultural thematic tours, could be added. The introduction of more heritage festivals emerged as a solution to increase tourist interest in heritage tourism. Hosting activities such as concerts, plays, and musicals at heritage sites could also be a way of increasing tourist footfall at these places. One tourist even suggested pairing heritage sites with new technologies, such as virtual reality, to help visitors have an immersive experience of the history of Dubai.

> *"Potentially by associating it with the new technologies […]. I would have loved to walk in the Dubai 80's, 50's or even before Virtual Reality on a carpet to have a total immersion, and scalable to live in full size instead of imagining with photos of museums"* (FT-15).

Tourists would also like to interact more with Emiratis in hospitality sectors or tourist sites. Currently, only a minority of Emiratis work in the hospitality and tourism sectors (Seraphim & Haq, 2020). On a similar note, tourists said they wished they could have experienced more of the Emirati culture. They would have liked to see how traditional crafts were made, to have participated in Emirati cooking classes, to have visited a typical local house, to have learned about camel racing and falconry. In shops and in the souk or bazaar, many of the handicrafts were actually not native to the United Arab Emirates. *"I find that we do not have enough opportunity to see or test local crafts"* (FT-2). Local handicrafts should be showcased and advertised in a greater capacity. One tourist even thought of combining traditional handicrafts with the modern and luxurious.

> *"Include luxury and modernity in the Arab tradition. […] Ex: Arab perfume, which is a tradition, transformed into a luxury product"* (FT-11).

Some tourists complained that a few of the heritage sites or attractions are mostly in Arabic, hence multilingual services were needed: *"Promote dual languages on the spot, because going to a Heritage Festival and half of it is only in Arabic, it cools down a little bit"* (FT-2).

As mentioned earlier, some expressed regret that Islamic history and culture were not highlighted enough. They believed that these should be increasingly valorized and recreated:

*"I wish to experience how this part of the world was like before and after establishing Islam. How Islam contributed to social transformation of the tribal lives. Then eventually how the invasion of Western ideas changed the dynamics of the original structures"* (AT-8).

Multiculturalism should also be showcased through ethnic neighborhoods and restaurants. *"Like Singapore, Dubai could maintain its old Arab or Indian quarter and provide authentic experience of heritage to the visitors…as to various nationalities which help to build Dubai as to what it is today… a melting pot of various cultures plus old heritage side by side with modern Dubai"* (AT-1).

Others also mentioned the need for a more widespread and smoother transportation system to access the sites. Experts had similar ideas as the visitors that were questioned. One expert believes that Dubai's heritage tourism needs to design and offer activities and attractions that inspire a tourist to return to the city and experience the sites again.

*"Having an experience that is so moving that it guarantees a customer to come back. Dubai does not do well with its repeat visitors. People do not stay for long* (average length of stay: 3.5 nights) *and they do not come back.* (2017 figures-obtained from Dubai Tourism's performance-reports)" (UE-5).

Furthermore, professionals pointed out that more Emiratis, especially the youth, should be involved in the tourism and hospitality sectors, in order to relay their knowledge, traditions, culture, and history.

Experts believe that heritage tourism should be more interactive and engaging. They feel that heritage festivals are one of the solutions to enable visitors to experience Emirati culture. Emirati cuisine, including preparation and cooking, also needs to be promoted aggressively.

*"The problem in museums often, is things are behind glass, you need to read it, you need a guide. There is no cultural experience.* […] *You just see things behind glass. What you need is real experience: The Perfume museum: you can smell the perfume. Coffee tasting at the coffee museum. In many places, there is a lack of inter-activeness, and experience"* (UE-2).

Mobility has also been determined as an obstacle to heritage tourism: *"It takes so long to get there (at the heritage site), there is more traffic. We need to promote the metro. We need golf cart or open tram/heritage tram from the metro to the museum"* (UE-2).

## DISCUSSION

Dubai tends to target mostly affluent tourists and the city should also consider attracting tourists with modest budgets and should offer accommodation and experiences for budget tourists:

> *"It is costly; the city is marketed to be costly. One of the cities with the highest visitors spending. It is quite expensive, so people feel that they have to pick what they want to do. People have to forgo one activity, they can do only one activity, and have to cancel the other, but they would have a better experience if they could do both activities. Big gap: no backpacker tourism. No paying guests, family lodging tourists. Airbnb is relatively new"* (UE-5).

The comparison between interviews with tourists and experts indicated many similarities. Experts and tourists agreed on the existence of many heritage sites in Dubai. However, the authenticity of these sites is, sometimes, questioned by tourists. Experts argue that these historical buildings have been renovated to the point of looking "too clean and too new."

In brief, experts and tourists believe that neighboring countries have more heritage sites and Dubai cannot compete on heritage tourism alone. However, what makes Dubai unique is the fact that Dubai is a futuristic city with a soul, implying that it has a rare history that combines the Bedouin lifestyle, pearl trade, and trade routes. Both groups of interviewees highlighted that Dubai should focus its branding on the combination of modern Dubai and historic Dubai. The importance of multiculturalism and Muslim history should also be covered in the heritage tourism package.

With regards to marketing, both groups suggested advertising heritage tourism abroad, on flights, in the Dubai airport, and in the UAE as a whole. Both experts and tourists thought that the open-mindedness of the country, its safety, and its multicultural aspect should be effectively communicated in the marketing campaign.

Many ideas were recognized in this study regarding the valorization of heritage tourism. Both groups believe that more Emiratis should participate in the hospitality and tourism sectors. Tourists want better promotion of Emirati handicrafts and advise an upgrade to Emirati handicrafts by combining traditions and luxury. Some tourists proposed that heritage sites could be paired with artistic performance (concerts, theatre plays) or with technology (like virtual reality) to have a more immersive experience. A few tourists also complained about the lack of communication and the need for multilingual communication at venues.

Experts also asked for more interactive presentations of heritage. They proposed enabling visitors to experience the making of handicrafts or tasting Emirati cuisine. Experts would like Dubai to be more welcoming of budget travelers by offering affordable activities and accommodations. In addition, they would like to have a more widespread transportation system to make the heritage sites more accessible. Experts and tourists often had similar points of view, but their different perspectives enabled them to give additional suggestions for branding and marketing.

All interviews with heritage tourists and experts in the four countries, regarding heritage tourism in Dubai, had similar messages of authenticity as the key attractive opportunity as well as the major weakness. The importance of authenticity supports the findings presented by earlier researchers (Goulding, 2000; Ram et al., 2016). Likewise, modernity and luxury were the predominant brand identity features of Dubai, which mismatched with the spirit of heritage.

> *"It is only about the modern Dubai, they think about its tall buildings and malls and that's it.* […] *Shopping malls, brands, only. No, I don't think Dubai is seen as a Heritage Tourism place unfortunately"* (UE-1).

> *"The limited Arab heritage places of Dubai offer good exhibits and are informative. It is a great learning experience.* […] *The places are not well attended nor well promoted. Most people go to Dubai to visit the modern and extravagant constructions"* (AT-2).

In the opinion of interviewees, the brand positioning of heritage tourism in Dubai is blurred due to the combination of authentic, traditional, modern, and luxurious. The ideas collected exclusively from heritage tourists indicated authenticity as the priority, followed by heritage valorization, affordability, and family packages with the aim of brand-differentiation.

Most experts, who have contributed to this study, also stressed upon the weakness of authenticity in Dubai's heritage tourism, including the challenge of affordability and accessibility. Better communications with travelers could cover the gap in the context of knowledge, culture, people, cuisine, and the innate spirit of society. This research recommends that brand marketing of heritage tourism in Dubai can be achieved by adopting the following branding strategies.

## Brand Communication

Most tourists interviewed referred to the lack of effective brand communication as an obvious weakness in Dubai's tourism sector. Again, tourists complained that the information given at various heritage sites was either inadequate or only in the Arabic language. Similarly, at heritage villages in Dubai, most tourists found it hard to talk with locals at the village stalls, indicating serious issues with brand communication.

> "*The museums are well preserved but require more information dissemination mechanisms. Audio guides are needed to better learn about the sites and stand we go through*" (AT-2).

Some tourists expressed frustration that there was no link between tourists, agents, site-managers, and tour guides, and hence they felt shortchanged during their heritage experience which could have been taken as an online or virtual tour. Hence, officials from the tourism and heritage departments need to visit the sites, mingle with tourists, and ask for their opinions and feedback for improvement.

## Brand Identity and Image

The brand identity of Dubai is naturally embedded in the desert sand, sea, and cultural dimensions. However, local authorities have recently invested and sincerely worked to alter the identity into that of a modern, multicultural, and open-to-all society, with large Mosques and nightclubs coexisting. Identity and branding of a destination are also based on stories told by tourists (Chen & Shih, 2019; Chronis, 2012; Pera, 2017). Some UAE tourism experts claimed that they used storytelling as heritage tourism marketing. The dominating theme of this study was authenticity that is linked to identity issues related to the tourism of the place (Ram et al., 2016; Timothy & Ron, 2013).

## Brand Positioning

Heritage tourism brand positioning in Dubai will require narrowing the image and focusing minutely on heritage tourists. Following the standard tourism positioning process, there is a need for identifying and selecting the competitive advantage and communicating it to tourists (Chacko, 1996). As discussed in findings, the competitive advantage for Dubai is the unique combination of authenticity with modernity and luxury. The authenticity shall primarily be based on the engagement of local Emiratis in heritage tourism activities such as indigenous apparel, cuisine, inherent knowledge,

history, and storytelling. When heritage tourists engaged with locals, they found every aspect of their experience to be authentic.

> *"People need to know about culture and traditions. I want them to have contact with us. I encourage local tourist guides. To get in the field and to attract the customer. It is not what is important for you, it is important for the country"* (UE-8).

## Brand Personality

Heritage tourism destinations need to enhance their attractiveness, accessibility, and competitiveness, against other niche tourism segments, to cater to the needs of the target market. For example, heritage forts, sites, and monuments are usually located in and around remote archaeological sites, villages, and deserts. The brand personality is required to drive heritage tourism targeting specific market segments. For Dubai, a dual-brand personality is the only option where specific tourists are approached for specific tourism products and services.

A brand personality cannot be a combination of different people; it must be the person with whom tourists would like to associate. Tourists have expressed their preference to mingle with an authentic indigenous Emirati man or woman, who is family-oriented, amiable, and has multi-lingual communication skills – since the demand for authenticity is the bottom-line. Local handicrafts and experiencing traditional practices and cuisine are also in high demand. The theme of modernity and luxury can be covered by apparel and gadgets, but an authentic personality must be natural and a symbol of the local culture and society.

> *"Go to the desert, see the camels, the lifestyle that was at the time the Emirati, taste the dates, henna tattoo, visit a fort, an oasis, because all these things seem authentic, and I have not seen / done elsewhere in another country. It's unique"* (FT-1).

The themes emerging in this research revealed the identification of Dubai branding needs: better brand communication that does not neglect heritage tourism; better coordination between tourists, agents, site managers, tour guides, and site workers. A clear identity that highlights all the attractive elements that Dubai has to offer (such as heritage, modernity, culture, spirituality, open-mindedness, and multiculturalism). A more focused identity might create a more accurate and efficient positioning contributing to an effective brand personality that will target the appropriate tourist groups.

The winning heritage tourism brand for Dubai would begin with highlighting the past, including Arab and Muslim roots, maritime trade routes, and commercial and cultural exchanges with Asia (India and China), Africa, and the Middle East. This past is intimately connected with Dubai's future tourism prospects characterized by multiculturalism, open-mindedness, current Arab and Muslim urban lifestyle, skyscrapers, and modernity. These characteristics carry on the mission of the Golden Age of Islam. For example:

> *"The history of the city is presented as a "success story" or how a small port of pearl fishermen became a powerful metropolis thanks to oil resources" (FT-10).*

The experts have confirmed, in this study, that they are already communicating with customers to modify and improve their branding through customer feedback. The experts note that tourists in Dubai tend to stay for short periods, 3-4 days, and usually do not return. Like the tourists, experts have also highlighted the necessity of preserving authenticity in Dubai's heritage tourism. They regret that, ironically sometimes, in renovating historical buildings, people did not perceive these as real historical buildings as the buildings became too polished and artificially undamaged. To increase authenticity in heritage tourism with an increased focus on Arab and Muslim roots, experts advised including, developing, and promoting more Emirati based activities. Through these cultural and historical features, the link between the past and the future can be exhibited to current and potential tourists.

> *"Amazing feeling to see modern sky rise buildings in the desert is authentic" (AT-3).*

> *"Dubai gives a picture of "young" country with little historical heritage. I think it would be very interesting to focus on its history; especially that of the nomadic peoples and to facilitate and promote access to the desert (around)" (FT-8).*

> *"You need to tell tourists about history and the oldest parts of the city. If you do a tour at the Burj Khalifa, you can start with the old city then transition it down to the Old Dubai, to show people the difference and see there is a history to it" (UE-4).*

## CONCLUSION

This qualitative research based on interviews with heritage tourists and providers indicates the significance of heritage authenticity and valorization as key elements for brand differentiation of Dubai's tourism sector. Implications of the research are explained below.

**Theoretical Implications**

This paper delivers theoretical contributions for advances in tourism research by providing new empirical evidence in relation to heritage tourism brand differentiation. The documentation of differences and similarities regarding brand-differentiation of Dubai- heritage tourism among buyers and sellers across four countries is a significant theoretical outcome of this research. The study has contributed to the theory of brand differentiation and heritage tourism by classifying cohesions and differences between tourism buyers and sellers in four countries. Major themes emerging from the data analysis are authenticity, modernity, and heritage valorization. The unique nature of recognized themes strengthens the theory of brand marketing for heritage tourism.

**Managerial Implications**

The research findings form a foundation for tourism agencies to understand their customers and can support them in developing an effective heritage tourism branding, planning, and development strategy. The strategy is based on similarities and differences between heritage tourists and tourism providers in various countries. The Dubai based heritage tourism operators need to leverage the major themes of authenticity and modernity. The key tactic is to combine authentic and modern aspects of heritage tourism and deliver these to the market. This paper has stressed upon the engagement of local Emiratis to enhance the authenticity of Dubai heritage tourism. Modernity, luxury, and heritage coexist as an accepted lifestyle in Dubai's society and industries.

The evident threat of tourism brand proliferation can be managed by tourism operators if they adopt brand differentiation based on communication with all stakeholders (Morgan et al., 2003). The brand differentiation has been derived in this study based on brand communication, identity, positioning, and personality. The branding strategy that could be adopted by tourism operators is to position their offerings as means for better communication, clear identity, direct positioning, and a genuine Emirati personality.

Heritage sites should be more valorized and used not only for visits, but also for artistic performances. Local handicrafts should be aggressively promoted and adapted for contemporary use and tastes. Traditional practices should be shared and advertised through marketing of Emiratis

restaurants, heritage festivals, camel races, and in making camel farms and falconry training more accessible.

The use of social media and other digital technology shall be implemented frequently to receive feedback and suggestions from tourists. Based on these suggestions, the tourism operators and players can modify and create new offerings for their consumers. The tourism industry needs to specify heritage related goals and pinpoint the people involved, starting from booking agents and ending with travel guides. The training of multilingual guides could include topics such as history, cultural depth, and influence of the site.

## Limitations and Future Research

A major limitation of this study was the reluctance of respondents to discuss their observations regarding heritage and culture of the UAE out of the fear that they could, unintentionally, cause offence or even break the law. Several potential respondents, as tourists, or as providers, could not be interviewed due to this reluctance. In addition, the global pandemic of COVID-19 created a barrier for communications with respondents. Most respondents who agreed for an interview later refused due to the threat of COVID-19. Most interviews were finally conducted via ZOOM meetings. Moreover, the secondary interviews, taken after receiving suggestions from reviewers, had to be conducted through online channels. This communication gap also presented a limitation for this research and was managed via ZOOM meetings, with the respondent and team of authors agreeing to mutually convenient times for all.

This research has distinctively applied branding for brand differentiation of Dubai as a heritage tourism destination. Direct interviews were conducted with tourists and experts where findings were analyzed within the ontology of critical realism. Major themes emerging from the data and investigator triangulation were brand perception of Dubai tourism, position of heritage in Dubai's tourism, heritage valorization, and brand building. The research concludes the need to strengthen Dubai's tourism branding based on authenticity, while preserving the heritage and modern/luxury identity.

A future confirmatory research could test the validity of qualitative findings with a larger sample of tourists and experts. The efficacy of global adaptation of proposed brand-differentiation for heritage tourism planning and development could be evaluated in future studies. Furthermore,

classification by co-creation of historical sites from Lempert (2015) can be applied to tangible and intangible heritage in Dubai. Quantitative data could be collected from different groups of heritage tourists and experts in other countries to identify new tourism perspectives related to brand differentiation and heritage tourism, for more effective tourism planning and development.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A - Details of Interviewees

Table 1. *Tourists Interviewed*

|  | **Official Description** |
|---|---|
| **FT** | **Tourists from France** |
| FT-1 | Young, single, visited twice during her engineering studies, travels for fun. |
| FT-2 | Married, mother, artist, travels for fun and family reasons. |
| FT-3 | Married, mother and grandmother, retired, travels occasionally to visit family members. |
| FT-4 | Married, father and grandfather, retired, travels occasionally to visit family members. |
| FT-5 | Married, mother, psychologist, travels internationally once a year. |
| FT-6 | Married, husband, teacher travels internationally once a year. |
| FT-7 | Originally from Germany, works in the finance sector, travels for fun. |
| FT-8 | Young, single, nurse, travels for fun. |
| FT-9 | Married, mother and grandmother, travels internationally once a year. |
| FT-10 | Young, single, works in a bank, travels for fun. |
| FT-11 | Young, teacher, travels for fun. |
| FT-12 | Young, PhD student, travels for fun. |
| FT-13 | Married, mother, retired, travels occasionally. |
| FT-14 | Married, father, retired, travels occasionally. |
| FT-15 | Young, married, PhD student, travels for fun. |
| FT-16 | Young, married, mother, psychology student, travels for fun. |
| **PT** | **Tourists from Pakistan** |
| PT-1 | Middle aged, housewife, retired from teaching profession, wife of retired Diplomat so has traveled to many places. |
| PT-2 | Retired Diplomat, traveled to many places. |
| PT-3 | An independent software company owner. When he gets a chance, he visits many countries including UAE for business and personal reasons. |
| PT-4 | Young and married, family business, travels for fun and business. |
| PT-5 | Young and single, software engineer. Visited Dubai many times. |
| PT-6 | Young and married, travels with husband for fun and business. |
| PT-7 | Young and married, mother, open-source IT specialist, travels for business and family trips. |

| PT-8 | Middle aged, housewife. She lived for a while in the UK and has been for Hajj and Umrah. She visited some churches and temples in the UK but did not feel any spiritual presence. |
| --- | --- |
| **AT** | **Tourists from Australia** |
| AT-1 | Middle-aged, single woman in university teaching profession. Travels for family visits, holiday, culture and heritage, and tourism. |
| AT-2 | Middle-aged, married woman in university teaching profession. Travels for family holiday, fun, and tourism. |
| AT-3 | Middle-aged, married man in university teaching profession. Travels for family visits, holiday, fun, entertainment, and tourism. |
| AT-4 | Young and single woman in university teaching profession. Travels for business and tourism. |
| AT-5 | Young and single woman in university teaching profession. Travels for business, family visit, fun, holiday, and tourism. |
| AT-6 | Retired married man, electrical engineer. Travels for family holidays and tourism. |
| AT-7 | Young female dentist. Travels for family visits, fun, heritage tourism, food, and sightseeing. |
| AT-8 | Married medical female specialist. Travels for business, family visits, and tourism. |

Table 2. *Tourism Experts Interviewed*

| | **Official Description** |
| --- | --- |
| **UE** | **Tourism Experts from the United Arab Emirates** |
| UE-1 | The Assistant Head Manager at a Dubai museum. |
| UE-2 | Local entrepreneur owning forty businesses in USA and UAE. He started The Arab Culturalist as a UAE based socio-cultural consultant. Earlier, he was the supervisor and trainer at "Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding". |
| UE-3 | Project manager |
| UE-4 | A founder of an experiential tourism company |
| UE-5 | A founder of an experiential tourism company |
| UE-6 | A founder of an experiential tourism company |
| UE-7 | Tour guide & tour manager |
| UE-8 | Emirati tour guide |
| UE-9 | Emirati tour guide |
| UE-10 | Emirati tour guide |
| UE-11 | Falconers/operation manager |
| UE-12 | A founder of an experiential tourism company |
| UE-13 | A professional architect who was born and bred in Bastakiya, an area of old Dubai. He retired from the respected position of Director of the Architectural Heritage Department at Dubai Municipality. He is enthusiastic about protecting heritage and has been involved in activities to protect historical locations in the UAE. |
| UE-14 | Group Marketing Director of an experiential tourism company |
| UE- 15 | Emirati Tour Guide |
| **PE** | **Tourism Experts from Pakistan** |
| PE-1 | Young and married, family business in travel and tourism, seeking innovation in tourism business. |
| PE-2 | Young and married, ancillary business of booking trips in Pakistan and the Middle East. |

## Appendix B - Questionnaires

**Questionnaire for tourists**
1. How do you perceive Dubai in general in terms of tourism?
2. How do you perceive Dubai in terms of Arab heritage tourism?
3. What do you think is the brand identity or brand personality for heritage tourism in Dubai?
4. What is an authentic experience for you in terms of heritage tourism in Dubai?
5. When you visit the UAE what do you hope to experience in terms of Arab heritage tourism?
6. Which authentic heritage tourism experience did you experience in Dubai?
7. What do you think about Old Dubai heritage, desert villages, and the Dubai Souks?
8. What could be improved in Dubai in terms of heritage tourism? What do you wish to see in terms of heritage tourism in Dubai?
   a. How could it be delivered?
   b. How would it help Dubai differentiate itself from other touristic destinations in UAE, like Abu Dhabi?
9. How could Dubai differentiate itself from other countries based on heritage tourism, such as Turkey, Oman, and Egypt?
10. What do you think Dubai should modify in terms of Arab heritage tourism branding? Why? To what end?
11. If you were a marketer, how would you like to brand Arab heritage tourism experience in Dubai?

**Questionnaire for tourism experts**
1. Regarding heritage tourism, what is your business' brand identity?
2. How do you think your customers could help to improve your branding?
3. How is Dubai perceived in general in terms of tourism?
4. How is Dubai perceived in general in terms of heritage tourism? What is Dubai's image?
5. What could be improved in Dubai in terms of heritage tourism? What do you wish to see in terms of heritage tourism in Dubai?
   a. How could it be delivered?
   b. How would it help Dubai differentiate itself from other touristic destinations?
6. How could Dubai differentiate itself from other countries based on Heritage tourism?
7. What do you think Dubai could modify in terms of branding? Why? To what end?
8. How do you use customer, market, and media (specifically social media) to improve your business marketing and branding?
9. How can we improve communications between agencies, government, tourists, media, and heritage tourism places to improve the heritage tourism branding & marketing in Dubai?