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Tourist Perceptions of Dubai and Expo2020

In 2020, Dubai will host the World Expo. Not only will the Expo 2020 draw an expected 25 million tourists, but since the announcement, it has been a focal point for progressing towards the lofty goals of the Dubai tourism vision, mobilizing people, companies, projects, and the entire country towards 2020. This particular mega-event is a crucial component of the wider branding strategy. Expo2020 has also played a significant role in the marketing communications and branding of Dubai since its announcement through multiple communication channels. The purpose of this paper is to explore tourists' perceptions of Dubai and Expo 2020 and to understand tourists' attitudes and perceived value of different information sources and marketing channels. In doing so, this paper will provide some initial insights into understanding tourists' perceptions and attitudes towards Dubai in relation to Expo2020.

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Introduction

In Dubai, tourism is a central component of the Emirate's broader economic diversification and growth strategy (Saberi, Paris & Marochi, 2018). Dubai's Tourism Vision 2020 was approved by the ruler of Dubai, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum in 2013 and aims to double the number of visitors received in 2012 to 20 million by 2020. This vision outlines the strategic development of tourism in Dubai, focusing on regulatory policies, infrastructure development, product enhancement, and increased destination marketing and branding investment. To accomplish the goals highlighted in the vision, the Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing will collaborate with multiple key stakeholders from both the public and private sectors to maintain market share in existing source markets, increase market share in high growth markets, and increase repeat visitors (Visit Dubai, 2015a).

DTCM operates twenty overseas offices tasked with branding and promoting Dubai (Stephenson, 2014), and is comprised of several entities that work together to achieve the core objectives of Tourism Vision 2020. These include the Dubai Corporation for Tourism and Commerce Marketing, Dubai Business Events and Dubai Festivals and Retail Establishment. Recognizing Tourism as a central pillar for Dubai's future economic growth and diversification, the vision's overall goal is 'position Dubai as the *first choice* of the international leisure and business traveler' (Visit Dubai, 2015a).

A key component of achieving the aims and objectives of Tourism Vision 2020 is the development and growth of a distin**ct** brand image to enhance tourist perceptions and increase visitor retention (Visit Dubai, 2015b). Already, Dubai has been able to develop a strong brand image globally, and a range of recent and new projects that include the world's largest Ferris Wheel, the Dubai Canal, City Walk, Dubai Opera, and Dubai Creek Harbour. (Deulgaonkar, 2013; Nair, 2015), will continue to provide the iconic capital to further the

destination image and brand. Further, Dubai has developed its symbolic capital through the film industry (Saberi, Paris, & Marochi, 2018), celebrity endorsements, sporting events and sponsorship, and a range of other initiatives that contribute to the strengthening of the global brand image. In 2020, Dubai will host the World Expo.

Not only will the World Expo 2020 draw an expected 25 million tourists, but since the announcement, it has been used as a focal point for achieving the lofty goals of the tourism vision, mobilizing people, companies, projects, and the entire country towards 2020. This particular mega-event is a crucial component of the wider branding strategy (Saberi, Paris, Marochi, 2018). Expo2020 has also played a significant role in the marketing communications and branding of Dubai since its announcement through multiple communication channels. The purpose of this paper is to explore tourists' perceptions of Dubai and Expo 2020 and to understand tourists' attitudes and perceived value of different information sources and marketing channels. In doing so, this paper will provide some initial insights into understanding tourists' perceptions and attitudes towards Dubai in relation to Expo2020.

Destination Image and Mega-Events

Destination images, according to Gunn (1988), are dynamic. Moreover, they may be formed organically, or they may be induced. Induced images stem from the traditional marketing channels, including destination advertisements. Induced images can be contrasted with organic images, which develop through a variety of means involving general assimilation of information, including word of mouth and actual visitation. Familiarity with a destination can impact image formation (Sun, Chi, & Xu, 2014). According to Meleddu, Paci, and Pulina (2015), repeat visitors become increasingly attached to a destination. Indeed, affective beliefs (emotions which may be aroused by experiencing a destination) are

predictive of intentions to revisit (Stylos, Vassiliadis, Bellou, & Andronikidis, 2016; Zhang, Fu, Cai, & Lu, 2014) and of increased likelihood that the destination will be recommended to others (Lee, Lee, & Lee, 2005). Word-of-mouth is undeniably important when it comes to destination decision making, and increasingly researchers are assessing the impact of electronic word-of-mouth (Albarq, 2014; Jalilvand, Ebrahimi, & Samiei, 2013).

Tourists are likely to be influenced by what they perceive as best value (Govers & Go, 2009; Reisinger & Turner, 1999). However, Phillips, Wolfe, Hodur, & Leistritz (2013) suggest that although perceptions of destination value may impact traveler satisfaction, this may not influence the likelihood of revisiting or of recommending a destination to others. Those who have not visited a particular destination may have little understanding of the destination (Beerli & Martin, 2004), and stereotypical perceptions of Dubai persist (Gangal, 2009). Safety is one of the strongest factors that influence tourist perceptions (Grosspietch, 2006) and negative notions of the Middle East due to regional political instability may deter tourists (Stephens Balakrishnan, 2008). However, Dubai is considered to be one of the safest cities in the world (Agarib, 2007). The image of a destination is a core component of holiday decision-making (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Govers & Go, 2009; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989; Ross, 1993, Usakli & Baloglu, 2011), and the number of destinations from which international tourists may choose is vast. This leads marketers to underscore strategic destination branding (Ekinci, 2003; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Pike, 2009) to gain competitive advantage (Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggot, 2002). Govers and Go (2009) argued that the projected image of Dubai as seen by the tourists is modern, but lacks a unique identity.

Furthermore, it also shows that visitors are attracted to Dubai for its facilities, to a greater extent than its cultural identity. Widening the destination offering in terms of potential tourist experiences may come at a cost. It has been proposed that the more Dubai diversifies

its tourist base, the more it risks losing its 'Middle Eastern flavor' (Dubai Attractions, as cited in Telfer & Sharpley, 2015). However recent investments by Dubai Culture, suggest that in reality Dubai is positioned well to utilize tourism as a means of further strengthening the heritage, culture, and identity.

Mega-events stimulate growth, attract international attention (Kim et al., 2012), and contribute to the before and after perception of tourists towards a destination (Kim and Morrison, 2005). They have the potential to change a destination's image through marketing campaigns (Gibson et al., 2008; Gripsrud et al., 2010; Kim & Morrison, 2005; Lorde et al., 2011), and can have both immediate and longer-term impact on the host county. The 2004 Olympic Games led to an increase in the GDP of Greece from 1997 to 2005 (Kim et al., 2012). The FIFA 2002 World Cup resulted in an increased number of full-time jobs and increased economic profit (Kim et al., 2012). Moreover, this event improved South Korea's destination image (Kim & Morrison, 2005). Kim and Chalip (2004) argued that such mega-events could act as opportunity makers for the destinations tourism industry.

The World Expo is a mega-event. Occurring every five years, its origins were in showcasing the industrial and scientific developments of the time. The aim of contemporary Expos is also to provide a platform for international discussion and collaboration, towards resolution of critical problems facing society. Benefits to the host city can be numerous and can extend to the residents. For example, air quality in Shanghai substantially improved during Expo 2010, because of stringent emission control regulations. Unfortunately, this benefit was short-lived, due to the lifting of emission control measures immediately following Expo (Huang et al., 2013). For residents of Shanghai, the Expo was seen as driving community participation.

Notwithstanding the direct effect of hosting Expo on host-country residents, the trade impact positive and statistically significant (Rose & Spiegel, 2011). Moreover, the event

attracts millions of visitors- the Shanghai Expo resulted in 73 million visitors and a profit of 8-10 billion USD (Kim et al., 2012). Ever since Dubai was named the host destination of Expo2020, there has been a prediction of positive impacts for Dubai, including increases in economic growth, investments, hospitality and tourism, job opportunities in different industries like, aviation, construction and real estate, engineering and infrastructure, logistics and transportation, and retail (Expo2020dubai, 2013).

The theme of Dubai's Expo2020, "Connecting Minds, Creating the Future." This message has been central to Expo2020 marketing communications has also played a significant role in the marketing communications and branding of Dubai. The purpose of this paper is to explore tourists' perceptions of Dubai and Expo2020 and understand the information sources they utilized.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed method design whereby data were collected sequentially, with content analysis of Instagram photos informing the development measures used in the questionnaire. In the first phase of the study, 300 user-generated images of Dubai were collected from Instagram during the spring of 2016. The photos were identified using the #myDubai and #Expo2020 hashtags. The photos were then subjected to thematic content analysis to identify common themes. The content analysis employed a series of steps. First photos were downloaded, screened, and the captions reviewed. Second, each was reviewed and initially coded, with the text of captions informing the codes utilized. Third, initial codes were used to organize the photos into thematic categories. The text of each photo was analyzed, with a particular focus for any indication of perceived impacts of the upcoming Expo2020.

As a results of the initial thematic analysis of images of Dubai included the following themes: (1) man-made attractions, (2) culture and heritage, (3) fashion and luxury, (4) business, (5) sun and beach, (6) food and dining, (7) desert and nature, (8) skyline and sightseeing, (9) leisure and relaxation, (10) Dubai Metro and Emirates, (11) Art and architecture, and (12) sports and adventure. The illustrated themes/aspects related to the Dubai Expo 2020 were: (1) connecting minds, (2) innovation, (3) social gathering, (4) future developments, (5) business, (6) sustainability, (7) culture and heritage, (8) creativity, (9) history, (10) art and architecture, (11) family, and (12) education.

Thematic analysis of the text of the captions of photos focused on identifying themes of perceived potential impacts of the Dubai Expo 2020, identified the following: (1) Increase in hotel rates, (2) Increase in transportation fares, (3) Loss of authenticity and heritage, (4) Increase in expenditure, (5) Over-population, (6) Increase in economic growth, (7) Increase in job opportunities, (8) Increase in Dubai popularity, and (9) Increase in /cultural diversity. The goal of this analysis was to uncover the key themes from which to develop the survey questions. These themes represent the consumer-generated image of Dubai and provide insights into the perception of Dubai. Further textual analysis provided details about potential perceived impacts of Expo2020 on Dubai.

Survey Development

Survey questions were formulated using the resulting themes and keywords from the thematic analysis including questions measuring respondents perception of Dubai (12 questions), Dubai Expo 2020 (12 questions), and of the potential impacts of Expo 2020 Dubai (11 questions). All of the questions were measured using a 1 to 5 Likert-type scale. Additional questions focused on destination information sources, reasons for visiting Dubai, familiarity with Dubai Expo 2020, previous travel behavior and demographics. A pilot study

was conducted with 5 participants, following which, minor corrections to the questions were made.

Participants

Surveys were self-administrated to a purposive sample of 'Tourists' in Dubai. To determine that participants were tourists, before providing the survey, they were asked if they were visiting Dubai or if they lived in Dubai. Locations for data collection were selected due to the high foot traffic of tourists visiting these areas, namely Dubai Marina, Jumeirah Beach Residences, Deira City Centre, Dubai Mall, and Mall of the Emirates. The total sample comprised 318 tourists (*Mean age* = 29.4 years; *SD* = 9.9; *Male* = 59%), including both first-time (19%) and return visitors. More than one-third of those sampled had visited Dubai on more than ten occasions. The sample comprised 60 nationalities, with the two largest subgroup coming from other emirates in the UAE and the Philippines (n = 20), followed by India (n = 15), and Egypt and Malaysia (n = 13). The nationalities most represented in this sample loosely align with the top twenty tourism source market countries for Dubai (Visit Dubai, 2018).

Results and discussion

Dubai as a destination: Reasons for visiting Dubai and representations of the emirate

Reasons for visiting Dubai varied (see Figure 1), with a large majority of respondents reporting the purpose of their visit was relaxation and recreation-related. Respondents could choose more than one reason for visiting Dubai. Nearly half of visitors visited Dubai to visit friends and relatives, and nearly one-third of those sampled (n = 97) reported that they were in Dubai on business. Additionally, nearly one-third of those sampled stated that they were motivated to visit to Dubai by the culture/heritage.
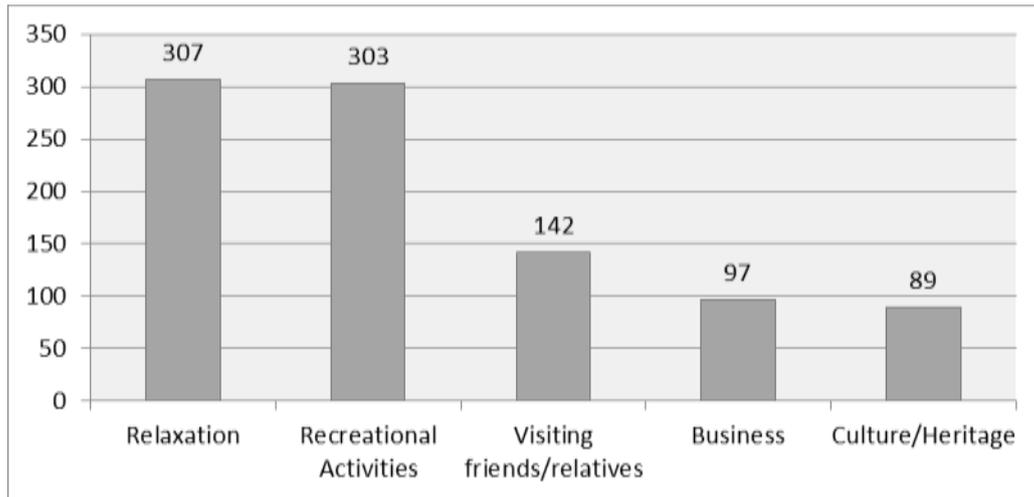
Figure 1. Bar chart illustrating reasons for visiting Dubai among the sample ($n = 318$)

In response to the question, 'when you think of Dubai, how often do each of these aspects come to mind', participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a 1-5 Likert scale. Unsurprisingly, as relaxation was the most frequently reported reason for visits to Dubai in the current sample, an image of Dubai as a leisure and relaxation destination was the most highly rated representation. These findings are consistent with findings by Valek and Williams (2018) that visitors to Abu Dhabi primarily view it as a leisure and beach destination.   Responses are shown in Figure 2, below.
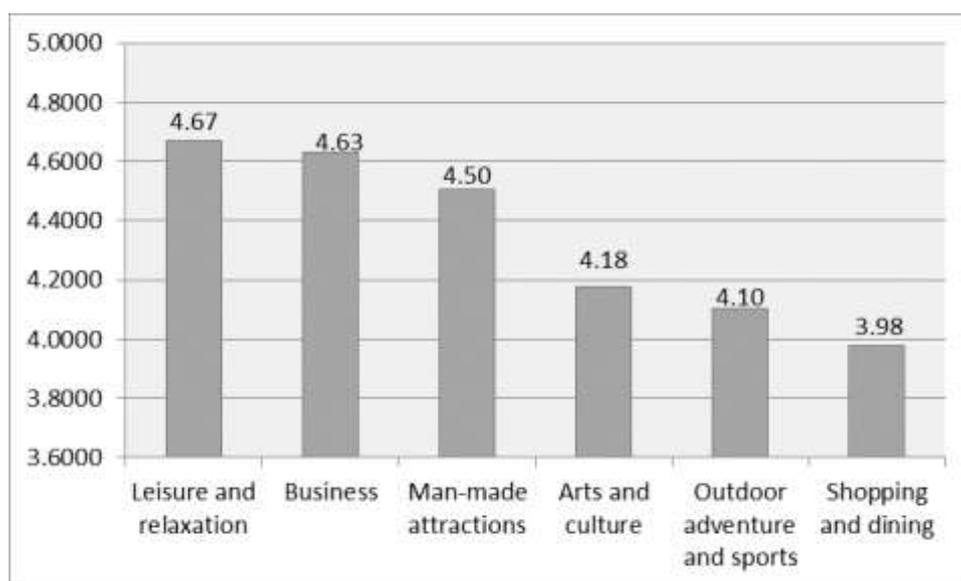

Figure 2. Representations of Dubai

Dubai as a destination: Sources of advertising and their perceived value

The sources listed for the advertisement of Dubai indicated the importance of social media. As shown in Figure 3 below, 65% of all respondents viewed social media or online sources as either very or extremely important. No respondents stated that this form of advertisement was 'not at all' important. It was perceived as offering valuable information to potential tourists to Dubai.
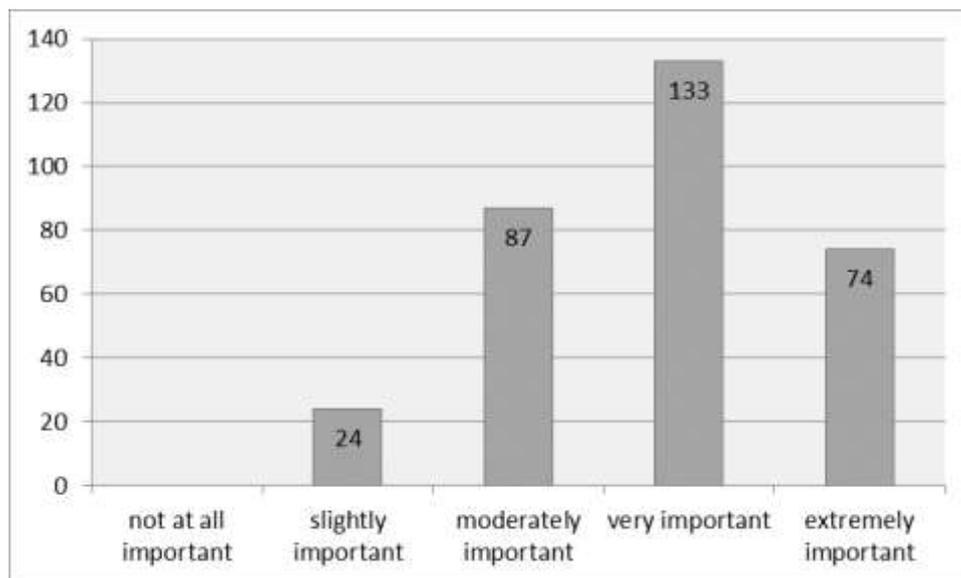

Figure 3. Perceived importance of internet/social media in advertising Dubai

A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to assess differences in the value respondents placed on three main sources of information about Dubai, namely traditional media (television, radio, print media), trusted sources (word of mouth, family and friends) and targeted marketing (travel agent, destination brochure). Mauchly's Test of Sphericity indicated a violation of the assumption of sphericity, $\chi^2(2) = 30.6$, $p < .001$; consequently degrees of freedom have been adjusted using Huynh-Feldt estimates of sphericity ($\varepsilon = .92$). Results demonstrate a significant effect of type of source on perceived value, as $F(1.84, 583.64) = 8.43$, $p < .001$.
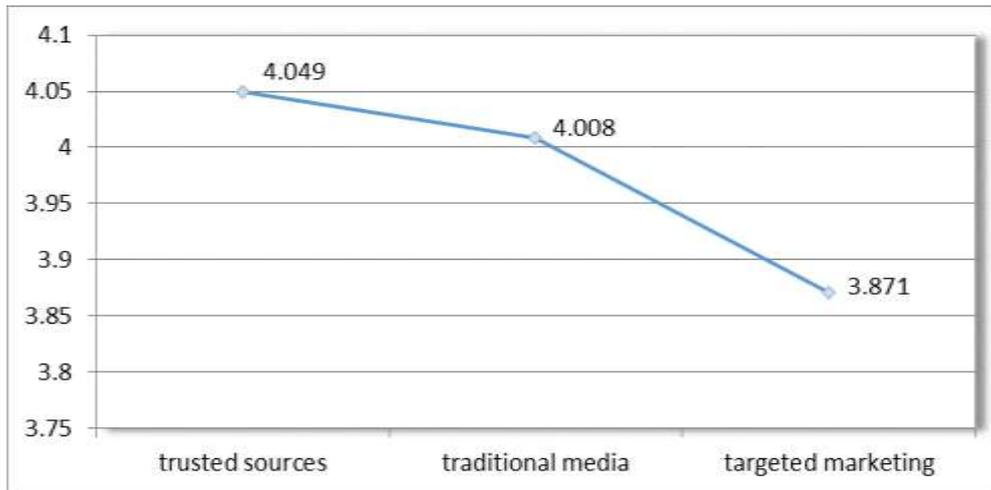
Figure 4. Means plot showing perceived value of information sources regarding Dubai as a destination

Post-hoc analyses indicated that information from trusted sources (*M* = 4.05, *SD* = .55) was regarded as being significantly more valuable than information from targeted marketing (*M* = 3.87, *SD* = .74), *t*(317) = 3.51, *p* <.01. A further significant difference was shown between traditional media (*M* = 4.01, *SD* = .62) and targeted marketing in terms of value, *t*(317) = 3.55, *p* < .001. There was no significant difference between trusted sources and traditional media, *t*(317) = .889, *p* = .374.

Since Dubai was confirmed as the host of EXPO2020 in 2013, efforts to publicise this event have been underway. Despite a concerted marketing effort within Dubai, 30% of the sampled tourists (*n* = 96) were either 'not at all familiar' or only 'slightly familiar' with the upcoming Expo. Few (9%) in the current study reported being 'extremely' familiar with World Expo 2020. Repeat visitors showed greater familiarity with EXPO. Almost 40% of the sampled repeat visitors to Dubai (in comparison with 10% of first-time visitors) were either 'very familiar' or 'extremely familiar' with EXPO2020.

Tourists' views of EXPO2020

Data regarding the potential outcomes of EXPO2020 were collected, using a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. These data included responses regarding perceived aspects of the event, regarding benefits, drawbacks, and implications for tourists. Although, as stated previously, many participants did not have in-depth knowledge of EXPO, their beliefs about the potential impact of this event were collected as these may inform visitors' future travel plans.

Strongly held beliefs about the business potential, sustainability, and future developments stemming from the Dubai EXPO were noted. This may be contrasted with views of the Dubai EXPO as having a focus on culture and heritage, or history. For this sample (as shown in Figure 1), 'culture and heritage' was the lowest rated reason for visiting Dubai. Perhaps a lack of interest or awareness regarding the heritage of the UAE may suggest why respondents in this sample reported lower perceived importance of EXPO2020 regarding history or culture and heritage.
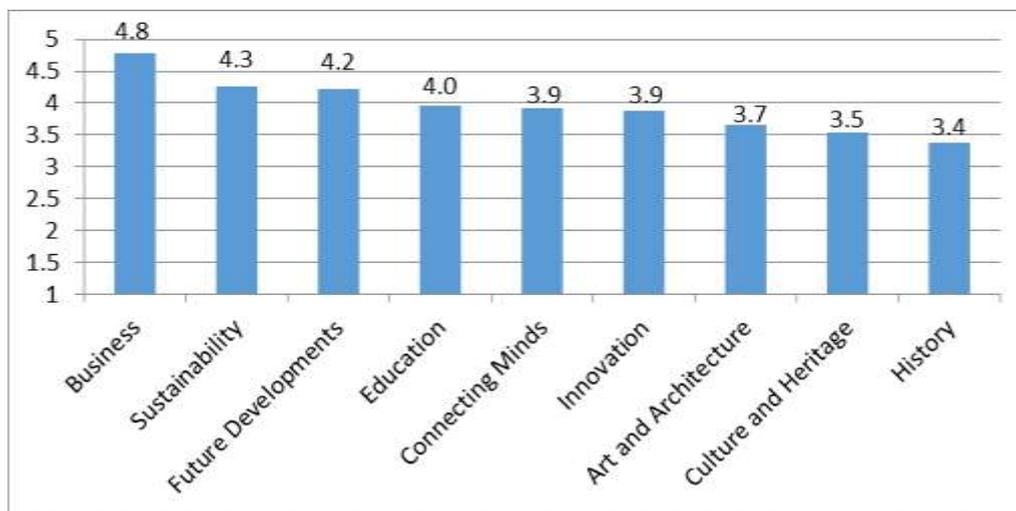

Figure 5: Perceived aspects of Dubai EXPO2020

Participants noted several potential benefits to Dubai stemming from hosting EXPO2020, including increased job opportunities ($M = 4.32$; $SD = .65$), economic growth ($M = 4.45$; $SD = .53$), and cultural diversity ($M = 4.55$; $SD = .58$). Possible negative impacts

include over-population ($M = 4.22$; $SD = .71$) and an increase in pollution ($M = 4.14$; $SD = .72$). A perceived loss of authenticity and heritage was not regarded as a negative outcome of EXPO ($M = 3.70$; $SD = .84$).

This study also assessed respondent perceptions of EXPO's potential cost to tourists coming to Dubai. Aspects relevant to tourists included perceptions of probable increases in hotel rates ($M = 4.33$; $SD = .59$), hotel tax ($M = 4.23$; $SD = .61$), and general tourist expenditure ($M = 4.11$; $SD = .50$).

Discussion and conclusion

One of the aims of the current study was to explore tourists' reasons for visiting Dubai and the schemas or representations held about Dubai. Findings suggest that Dubai is largely regarded as a destination for relaxation and leisure activities. This is something Dubai has actively encouraged, alongside a conscious widening of the target market to include those with wide-ranging budgets (Stephenson & Ali-Knight, 2010) and efforts to increase the duration of stay for those using Dubai as a transport hub (Lohmann, et al, 2009). Positioning Dubai as a leisure destination has made it attractive to regional and international tourists, as shown in the descriptive findings. However, as also noted by Govers and Go (2009), the current study found that schemas held by respondents centered around the modern, leisure activities available, rather than on the heritage or cultural features that are often overlooked by those visiting Dubai. It's possible that Dubai's current perceived identity is aligned towards the superlative, but it is a destination which also possesses a rich cultural heritage, of which many Emiratis and residents are eager to share with visitors (Paris, Baddar, Stephenson, 2011). EXPO2020 provides a great opportunity for Dubai and the UAE to leverage the global attention to share this rich cultural heritage. This is also supported by

with the Tourism Vision and the key strategies of Dubai and the UAE national plan that focuses on preserving and promoting the cultural heritage.

Dubai has positioned itself as a major tourist destination, and it has engaged in a remarkable marketing and branding effort to achieve this. Nonetheless, findings from this study suggest that information from trusted sources is valued above that from the usual marketing channels. It is this type of organic marketing that can keep tourists coming, and returning, to Dubai. Electronic word-of-mouth (social media) may further entice first-time visitors (Albarq, 2014; Jalilvand et al., 2013). Indeed, in the current study, findings show that information from trusted sources is valued above targeted marketing campaigns. Those advertising Dubai as a tourist destination might entice both new and repeat visitors to the emirate through the use of organic, rather than induced destination images. This may be achieved by fostering a positive social media presence and possibly encouraging travel community networks. Visit Dubai's refreshed social media strategy, and recent campaigns have already started to do so.

An additional aim of the study was to examine the tourists' perceptions of marketing campaigns with relation to Dubai Expo 2020. Views of this event largely focused on business, sustainability, and new developments. This can be contrasted with less widely held beliefs about the potential of Expo to focus on heritage-related issues. This may signal a perception that Expo is a forward-focused event, looking to the future, rather than to the past. It is of note that respondents in the current study did not perceive heritage-related outcomes of Expo, and only one in four reported that their visit to Dubai would include culture- or heritage-related activities. It may be that for these visitors to Dubai, their view of this emirate is one involving relaxation (e.g., on the beach or in malls), rather than exploration. As argued by Kim and Chalip (2004), such mega-events are an excellent opportunity for those in the tourism industry, and it can improve the destination image of a country (Kim & Morrison,

2005). Destination perceptions *can* change over time, but the process is often slow. Pike (2017) suggested that due to the challenge of altering consumer perceptions, destination marketers should consider a long-term approach to destination positioning. Dubai may benefit from capitalizing on the opportunity to attract a new market segment through a focus on the rich history of the emirate, and doing this now, with a focus on 2020, could attract a larger number of visitors.

Perceptions regarding the increased cost to tourists stem from the belief that prices across the hospitality industry will increase in anticipation of Expo. Respondents also reported likely economic growth to Dubai and an increased number of job opportunities in the region. Indeed, this may be the case, as shown by Kim et al. (2012) who reported increased full-time employment and economic growth stemming from FIFA 2002 World Cup. Of interest was a perception that Expo may increase pollution. Indeed, the opposite may be the case as shown in Shanghai during Expo 2010, where pollution levels decreased during the event (Huang et al., 2013). As there is limited academic information regarding the branding of Dubai and Dubai Expo 2020, this paper can contribute to the literature of Dubai branding and can be a starting point to the literature of Dubai Expo 2020.

The current research has implications for the way in which Dubai is marketed to potential tourists; focusing on what brought respondents to Dubai, and what value they place on different sources of information about the emirate can inform the decision-making of those in the industry. This study provides a small contribution to the literature, recognizing the potential value of this type of mega-event in creating a positive destination image, attracting future visitors, and impacting wider destination strategies. There are notable limitations to this study, including the opportunistic sampling at a relatively small number of sites in Dubai. The researchers question whether different findings might have been attained

where data collected from visitors to cultural sites such as Dubai Museum, for example. This

may be particularly relevant in light of the heritage-related findings.

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