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Tourist Destination Images and Local Culture

Using the Example of the United
Arab Emirates



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Tourist Destination Images and Local Culture

Using the Example of the United
Arab Emirates

Foreword by Prof. Dr. Sc. Othmar M. Lehner

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Foreword

Marketing research in Tourism, especially with a focus on a special region, is often approached from a solely functionalist perspective. Based on often out-dated theories, constructs are made applicable and hypotheses are tested without consideration of context or the dynamics of change. Especially in the realm of intercultural marketing, even current literature is grounded in long trodden stereotypes and a positivist paradigm of generalisation. Addressing these shortfalls in theory and literature, the author Verena Schwaighofer embarks on a qualitative, triangulated study on the intercultural artefacts in tourism marketing in the UAE.

The broader topic of this study make up marketing activities, especially image-creating and transferring activities of the United Arab Emirates. The subject is the influence of a personal cultural background and perspective, as well as the pre-set expectations of the marketing manager on the design and content of marketing material used for image creation and transfer. Using a Gap-analysis foundational assumptions are compared to the actual cultural image and its transfer.

For this purpose, Verena Schwaighofer sets up a deeply rooted qualitative study with a sociological background. Using an extensive Content-analysis and open interviews, data is collected on topics such as Religion, the role of women in society, body-language, traditions, diet and cuisine and on a meta level the cultural capital built by the “Sharjha”. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions are first critically examined and later used as a structuring framework for the evaluation of the data, without adapting its functionalist approach. The gained insights are often eye opening, especially from the view of European readers, when their picture of the “Arab culture” and the related stereotypes are challenged.

Besides a wide-ranging evaluation, discussion and appraisal of the data and the underlying context, the author elaborates on early explanatory models to elucidate the obvious difference between intention and perception in regional image transfer.

For this reason, the author examines the loss and resulting absence of an own distinct cultural identification within the UAE inhabitants. This feeling of loss may well be the result of other dominant influences of various cultures brought with by migrant labourers in the UAE, and the idiosyncratic over-emphasizing of only a few cultural artefacts, distorting the complexity and structural integrity of an UAE culture. As such, migrant labourers and the perceived loss of an own cultural identity are a truly global phenomenon, and insights gained in this context may therefore have high relevance to similar situations in other regions. Thus this thesis can serve as a connecting link to future research in this area, research that is drawing not upon functionalists’ generalisations, but upon respect and the will to understand phenomena in an alien context.

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List of abbreviations

Bn.	Billion
D'TCM	Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing (Dubai)
F&B.	Food and Beverage
FUJ	Fujairah
GDP	Gross domestic product
HH	His Highness
Mill.	Million
NCTA	The National Council of Tourism & Antiquities
no.	Number
ns	not specified
PPP	Purchasing power parity
SCIDA	Sharjah Commerce and Tourism Development Authority
TDI	Tourist Destination Image
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UAQ	Umm Al Quwain
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNWTO	World Tourism Organization
URL	Uniform resource locator
USD	U.S. dollar

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1. Introduction

Tourists all over the world are confronted with a wide spectrum of travel destinations (Pike 2005, p. 258). Numerous offers are provided to the customer and the choice is dependent on the destination's value for the individual person (Morgan et al. 2004, p. 48). Therefore, creating unique images of destinations and standing out from competitors has become a difficult task for destinations all over the world (Pike, op. cit.). For example, countries such as Italy, France or America already have strong brand images. People's ideas and associations concerning these destinations are consistent all over the globe somehow. Take France as an example. What comes to mind when thinking about this country? One often thinks of classy, fashionable or simply the high standard of living in this country. These descriptions are the confirmation of a strong destination brand as well as the creation of an image, setting France apart from its competitors in the market (Morgan et al., op. cit., p. 29). However, creating an attractive tourist destination image (TDI) and developing a brand fully charged with emotion is a complex process. The question for destinations should not be how they can beat their rivals, but rather how they might circumvent their fellow campaigners in order to build up a strong image in the long-term (ibid., p. 13).

1.1 The problem definition

Over the last years, the tourism industry has emerged as one of the largest and most rapidly developing economic segments across the world. The numbers of international tourist arrivals have continually increased over the past decades and are predicted to increase by 3.3 per cent a year between 2010 and 2030 (UNWTO 2012, p. 2). In addition to that, the service industry has already acquired an important position in the world economy. This fast developing sector is not only gaining more significance, but is also generating new job opportunities and innovative market segments on a global basis (Javalgi and White 2002, p. 563).

In the last ten years, the Middle East has been the most rapidly developing destination globally. Nevertheless, the unrest and the political uncertainty in the year 2011 led to a decline of eight per cent in international tourist arrivals in 2011, which in absolute numbers total 55 mill. arrivals compared to 60 mill. in the previous year. In addition to that, the number of international tourist receipts suffered as well and dropped from USD 51 mill. in the year 2010 to USD 45 mill. in 2011. Although the figures show a decrease in global tourist developments, the international tourist arrivals in the emirate of Dubai increased by nine per cent from the year 2010, with a total of seven mill. arrivals, to eight mill. tourist arrivals in 2011. In addition to that, the revenues of international tourism reached USD nine mill., which is a growth rate of 20 per cent compared to the previous year (UNWTO 2012, p. 12). The forecasts for the period between the year 2010 and 2030 predict an increase of six to eight per cent in global market share for the whole Middle East. Furthermore, it is predicted that arrivals by international travellers will increase by 4.4 per cent annually, which would lead to more than a

doubling of arrivals, from 61 mill. arrivals in 2010 to 134 mill. arrivals in the year 2030 (*ibid.*, p. 15).

As a result of the fast-growing tourism industry, there are many new and innovative destinations appearing in the tourism market competing with the already established ones (UNWTO 2012, p. 2) and in the tourism sector, destinations are the leading brands (Pike 2005, p. 258). The brands of destinations all over the world do not only affect the countries' governments but also the business sector in general (Papadopoulos 2004, p. 36). Tourist destinations need to have an individual brand image in order to differentiate themselves from competitors and render the individual destination most appealing to potential guests. Furthermore, the image and brand development need to be focused on the potential customers rather than on the individual developer (D'Hautesserre 2001, p. 306f). A destination brand is the outcome of the cooperation of different stakeholders such as the country's governments on a local and regional basis as well as the overall industry sector (Papadopoulos, *op. cit.*). Nevertheless, events like the terroristic attack of September 11, 2001 in New York, force the tourism industry to develop efficient destination marketing strategies. These developments of the surrounding environment make clear the necessity for the tourism sector to put a stronger focus on the countries' brand (*ibid.*, p. 41f). Finally and most importantly it needs to be stated that destination managers have to develop an image that is as authentic as possible (Haberman and Dolphin 1988, p. 15) and therefore, the local culture and tradition has to be the basis for the image development of a tourist destination (Hankinson 2004, p. 13). Furthermore, it is inevitable for destination managers to fully understand what kind of image already exists about the tourist destination in the minds of individual visitors (*ibid.*, p. 7) and consequently should have a holistic understanding of the different image types including the induced image (Howie 2003, p. 103), the organic image (Hankinson, *op. cit.*, p. 12), the transferred and the perceived image (Andreu et al. 2001, p. 50). To summarize, the cultural background, in other words the real culture of a country is of crucial importance for the strategic image development of a tourist destination (Shikoh 2006, *onl.*). Nevertheless, only 19 per cent of the United Arab Emirates' population are official citizens (CIA 2012, *onl.*) and especially big projects such as shopping centres, which are part of the image formation of a tourist destination, lack the historical background of the traditional Arab culture (Steiner 2010, p. 242). Therefore, the author wants to analyse if the traditional cultural background of the Arabian culture is included in the strategies of image developers in the United Arab Emirates and consequently detect a possible mismatch in communication between the real culture and the promoted image of the United Arab Emirates as a tourist destination.

1.2 The status of research and topic relevance

In chapters two to six, the author provides a detailed bibliographical review based on secondary literature, covering the topics of the image of tourist destination brands, the image

of the United Arab Emirates in general, as well as an insight into the Arabian culture and various theoretical models including both image and cultural-related concepts.

Morgan et al. (2004, p. 42) as well as Echtner and Ritchie (2003, p. 38) describe the overall image of a tourist destination as the outcome of different factors and elements, forming the specific image of a country. Pearce (1988, p. 163) claims that the image of a destination is a general idea people have in mind about a country, also called a destination stereotype. Destination strategies and brands need to be entirely coherent (Morgan et al. 2004, p. 64) and the management of services and therewith intangible goods in general is much more difficult than managing tangible goods (O’Cass and Grace 2003, p. 469). The conception of tourist destinations needs to be considered in a holistic view (Howie 2003, p. 73) and the development of a strong image in a global aspect cannot be realized from one day to the next (Lee 2009, p. 323). Morgan et al. (op. cit., p. 47f), Pike (2005, p. 258), Govers et al. (2007, p. 16) and Howie (ibid.) were in broad agreement that the image of a tourist destination needs to match the local conditions, characteristics, inhabitants and culture of the individual country. Balakrishnan (2008, p. 66), Hankinson (2004, p. 13) and Howie (op. cit., p. 75) suggest that the inhabitants and local culture of a country should build the basis for a successful development of a TDI. An alternative approach shows the significance of culture not only for the tourism industry, but also for the provided information about a destination, which is used by tourists during the process of choosing a travel destination. This research describes that the stage of avoiding unforeseen events differs from country to country and affects the image of a tourist destination even before visiting a country (Frías et al. 2012, p. 445f).

Frías et al. (2012, p. 446) state that it is inevitable for tourism service providers and managers to have a well-established knowledge and understanding of the culture of the individual tourist to successfully implement promotional activities. Furthermore, it has been argued that destination managers need to have a general understanding of their potential guests and the corresponding individual manners. According to this study, the observed cultural disparity of a country plays a part in the travellers’ selection of a tourist destination and the visitor’s loyalty (Chen and Gursoy 2001, p. 82f). Hankinson (2004, p. 7) identified the necessity of understanding the pre-existing image of a tourist destination in order to build up a strong and attracting image, as well as a successful tourist destination in the long-term. According to Ekinci and Hosany (2006, p. 137), developing the image of a tourist destination needs to consider the personality of a destination itself in order to be successful in the competing marketplace and generate a positive word-of-mouth recommendation on behalf of the consumer. Transferring the definition of Aaker (1997, p. 347) from a brand personality to a destination personality, it can be described as “the set of human characteristics” that are connected to a destination.

In contrast, Steiner (2010, p. 242) argues that big projects such as shopping centres and tourist attractions in The United Arab Emirates, with special focus on Dubai, form the image of this

country as a tourist destination. However, he states that these attractions lack the historical background of the traditional Arab culture (*ibid.*, p. 246). Hankinson (2005, p. 31) suggests that future researchers emphasise the general influence of a culture not only on the absorbed image of a destination, but also on the linkage of the country's culture to the elements of its individually developed brand. According to Hunt (1975, p. 1f), little focus was given in previous research to the tourist destinations' image and therefore the tourism organizations and tourism service providers. This kind of image analysis is crucial for a tourist destination (*ibid.*, p. 1). Steiner (*op. cit.*, p. 244) states that the amount of literature covering a theoretical-based description for the positive development of the country as a tourist destination, with special focus on Dubai, is scarce. In addition to that, Frías et al. (2012, p. 438) point out that the existing literature has paid scant attention to the area of image development and the distinction of image based on the individual cultures. According to Balakrishnan (2008, p. 85), the branding of a tourist destination is an important aspect, as frontiers start to merge and the financial income based on destination branding is growing. As a result, the author would like to use parts of these suggestions as basis for the following, cultural-focused research.

In general, the status of prior theory in this specific research area can be categorized as an intermediate archetype and is placed between the nascent and mature stage of research. This archetype enables the opportunity to make use of a hybrid research method, mixing qualitative and quantitative methods (Edmondson and McManus 2007, p. 1158ff). The author provides a more detailed insight into the planned mixed research process, the qualitative media analysis and the qualitative interviews, in chapter seven.

1.3 The aims and objectives

The research topic of this master thesis can be classified into the cluster of Imagineering. First of all, the author defines how a TDI can be generally developed and outlines the critical factors and challenges in this area. Afterwards, the United Arab Emirates will be represented with focus on the economic, political and infrastructural situation of the country. Subsequently, the seven emirates will be analysed individually with regard to the transferred image as a tourist destination brand. The next step of this master thesis is the transition to the cultural aspect. The author will set up a basic foundation of the cultural background, identifying the various elements and cultural standards including the religion of Islam, the Arabic language and the role of women in society, to list some examples. The final step of the theory-based part is the provision of a theoretical foundation, including on the one hand theoretical models referring to the image development of destinations and on the other hand, models that provide a detailed insight into the cultural area of research. Finally, the aim of research leads to the overall research question of this master thesis, which needs to be analysed empirically in the second part of this paper. Therefore the seventh chapter provides an overview of the planned empirical methodology.

“To what extent are the strategies of image developers in the United Arab Emirates interrelated with the traditional cultural background of the Arabian culture when developing the image as a tourist destination brand?”

Both Hankinson (2004, p. 12) and Shikoh (2006, onl.) agree that the organic image of a country, including the historical background, local culture and traditions, should build the basis for the development of marketing and advertising campaigns and consequently a TDI. Early evidence hints at some gap between the strategies of image developers and the huge variety of the traditional Arabian cultural background. Therefore, the author will set up a basic understanding of the image development, the United Arab Emirates and the traditional Arabian culture as well as a theoretical foundation within the second and the sixth chapter. By conducting a qualitative media analysis and qualitative expert interviews, the author wants to find out which image is currently transferred, to what extent the traditional Arabian culture is integrated in the image strategies of image developers in the United Arab Emirates and finally detect a possible gap.

1.4 The overall structure

In order to give a general overview of this master thesis, this subchapter provides a short insight into the various chapters as well as the respective content. The second chapter deals with the overall image and brands, with focus on tourist destinations, as well as related challenges and obstacles and represents the basic information for the overall area of research. The third chapter focuses on the United Arab Emirates in an economic, political and infrastructural aspect. Afterwards, the seven emirates namely Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimah, Sharjah and Umm al Quwain will be analysed in detail emphasizing the individual image as a tourist destination brand. The information is based on secondary literature, as a media analysis of existing material including brochures and websites will be carried out in the empirical part of this master thesis. In order to generate awareness concerning the cultural background and diverse cultural standards of the Arab society, the fifth chapter provides an insight into the Arabian culture itself. Therefore, cultural elements as the religion of Islam, the Arabic language, behaviour, body language and dress code, the women's role in society, traditional clothes as well as food and beverages will be analysed in detail.

The theoretical approach of this master thesis is provided in chapter six and the selected models offer the opportunity to develop a deep comprehension of this subject matter and consequently consider the research area from a more theoretical point of view. The theoretical models include, on the one hand, approaches with focus on the elements and factors of influence of a TDI as well as the 3-GAP tourism destination image formation model. On the other hand, the Five Cultural Dimensions by Hofstede and the Iceberg Model of Culture form the basis for the theory of culture. In addition to that, the author reflects the theoretical

models, with focus on the cultural theory by Hofstede, in a critical aspect. Nevertheless, the author raises no claim of completeness concerning theoretical models with focus on the image of tourist destination brands as well as cultural concepts. The seventh chapter outlines the empirical research methodology, the selected mixed method will be explained and the propositions will be built. Afterwards, the qualitative media analysis and qualitative expert interviews will be described in chapter eight and nine. In chapter ten, the empirical research process including the results will be discussed and listed and finally, a discussion and conclusion, including a critical review and a future prospect, will be drawn.

2. Image and destination brands

Choosing a travel destination in times like these is not simply a choice, it is moreover a statement of lifestyle. What kind of journey is worth investing one's hard-earned money and relatively little leisure time into? The key to success for tourist destinations is to create a product that attracts potential consumers in an emotional way (Morgan et al. 2004, p. 60f). The tourist destination needs to offer something exceptional, otherwise the potential tourists will not be attracted (Howie 2003, p. 102). Therefore, a positive image development as well as a tourist destination's branding is inevitable to classify and differentiate one destination from another. As a result, the tourist should be attracted by a motivating communication strategy in order to select a specific tourist destination (D'Hautesserre 2001, p. 300).

"Images of destinations are in the 'mind's eye' whether these places have been visited or not." (Howie 2003, p. 101). To develop an assertive and coherent image, a country and therewith its marketing strategies need to be well positioned in the world's competing marketplace (Harrison-Walker 2011, p. 135f). In general, people have specific perceptions of tourism destinations all over the world, so-called country images. These images occur independently and often without influence of the countries' conscious development of a brand image. This is the outcome of different characteristics like the countries' culture, natural environment, traditions, artworks, music or celebrities, having their origin in this specific country. Consequently, country images affect the process of choosing a travelling destination (Morgan et al. 2004, p. 42).

Furthermore, the image of a destination is the outcome of different factors such as the recommendations and views of previous visitors, advertising campaigns like media statements in leaflets and newspapers or visible on television and the actual day-to-day life and local culture of the destination (Echtner and Ritchie 2003, p. 38). In addition to that, potential customers have individually formed images about a tourist destination based on their own experiences. Nevertheless, this perceived image often does not match the tourist destination's reality (Andreu et al. 2001, p. 50). The observed cultural disparity of a country plays a part in the travellers' selection of a tourist destination as well as the visitor's loyalty. Therefore, destination managers need to have a general understanding of their potential guests and their individual manners (Chen and Gursoy 2001, p. 82f), since the overall development as well as continuous control of the TDI components is the responsibility of the destination's management (Howie 2003, p. 102).

2.1 TDI and branding

In general, tourist destinations are specific areas where elements such as the local culture, the social system, the ecologic and economic situation as well as the political background can influence the public appearance in a positive, as well as negative way. Furthermore, the phenomenon of tourism in the respective country emerged unplanned or has been consciously