Prospects for Heritage Tourism Branding in Eastern Arabia

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Abstract This paper provides an analysis on place branding, in the specific context of the United Arab Emirates and Oman. It does so through a qualitative insight into the heuristics and into the effective potential of cultural landscapes, relating to both policy and practice. It also challenges the notion that tangible heritage functions as a predictable accelerator for economic growth and favours more moderated takes on the effectiveness of geographical uniqueness as an instrument. While social development and cultural heritage are intrinsically connected in the many validations for tourism investment, the use of heritage as a destination branding element can also become a debatable option. Selecting a number of archaeological sites and cultural landscapes requires a justification as to what they effectively bring to a constructed and promoted image of a nation. Their mere inclusion as attractive pictures, instead of tangibles for consumable experiences, diminishes the return on the contemporary traveller's expectations. The paper concludes by arguing that branding a regional product in its real diversity cannot insist excessively on history and heritage, as it needs to forge a cohesive message that embraces technology, hospitality, travel, and the many other elements that appeal to the senses of the consumer.

Keywords Destination branding · Territory · Cultural tourism · Heritage · Z330 · Z380

JEL Classifications Z330 · Z380

1 Introduction

Much of the current destination branding worldwide is heavily based on bird's-eye views of pristine nature and built heritage, combined with the amenities of modern lifestyles, such as hotels, gastronomy, and individuals performing leisure activities in a holiday setting. Of course, nation branding transcends tourism campaigns and is in

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fact a major tool for soft power, political stability, and social wellbeing. The specific place of heritage landscapes, and the ways permanent communities and transitory groups such as travellers and short-term expat residents experience them, is part of daily life and, as such, of importance to a tourism mix perceived as authentic. The text below examines how a careful selection of emotionally constructed ideas on a given territory may be useful to both tourism and heritage management, taking selected Emirati and Omani realities as practical examples.

2 Literature Review

The notion that heritage components may be manipulated through procedures not dissimilar to any other parts of a tourism product is currently a mainstream idea. To be fair, the principle has arguably been present for some time now, yet initially without much theorization to fall back on. In contrast, the last two decades have been providing many a solid reference. A plethora of publications on commodification in ethnography, archaeology, or museums explored how one might consume the past, or simply otherness (e.g. Kempiak et al., 2017; Rowan & Baram, 2004; Timothy & Tahan, 2020). Based on this increasingly complex understanding, a step further consists of a proper market conceptualization, and Misiura (2006) is an early comprehensive source that overcame embryonic, self-justifying, passive assumptions on cultural heritage, by plainly regarding it as a customer-centred entity. This pulls heritage into the field of consumer satisfaction and business insights, in which a key factor is the perceived level of authenticity, which directly determines the quality of the product. Such a relationship has been systematically studied (Domínguez-Quintero et al., 2020; Park et al., 2019). Indeed, authenticity is affected by managerial approaches to cultural tourism, in establishing relationships with the consumer, ultimately creating destination post-experience behaviours such as loyalty (Bryce et al., 2015; Fu, 2019; Girish & Chen, 2017; Kolar & Zabkar, 2009).

The tourism landscape has become more complex to define, as it is now vastly integrated and interdependent, challenging traditional branding methods and engaging with local stakeholders in non-prescriptive ways. Especially from the demand side, activities carried out independently by consumers transform what used to be a one-dimensional picture into a dynamic "tourism-landscape nexus" (Meneghello, 2021) that eludes naive messages from the supplier to the consumer. One major yet understated hindrance in landscape heritage branding relates to the future of heritage itself. A recent study (Högberg et al., 2018) concluded that prospective analyses are focused mainly on technical means, to ensure for instance continuation in conservation and restoration, but not at all on the future as a concrete reality. Interviewed heritage professionals were unable to state coherent viewpoints on future generations or professional practices, although the preservation of heritage is obviously at the core of their profession. This represents a limitation that inherently impacts the consistency of a brand. Improving such consistency may be accomplished through a range of awareness strategies, some of which funnelled from large national tourism

campaigns, or via UNESCO World Heritage designations, for instance. The latter confers no direct branding distinctiveness, yet has become a booster for enhancing a heritage resource and, to a certain extent, embodies a brand in its own right (Jimura, 2019; Ryan & Silvanto, 2009). This has been empirically demonstrated in regional case studies (e.g. Terlouw et al., 2015; Adie et al., 2017), and WH sites are routinely used as leverage for an already existing market offer.

3 Materials and Methods: Branding UAE and Omani Landscapes

Focusing this matter on the geography of eastern Arabia, namely the UAE and Oman, a primary image is that of daytrips into desert locations, which have been widely studied worldwide in terms of both value co-creation and authenticity (Michopoulou et al., 2021), but also of the general hidden costs related to developing quality desert infrastructures (Luo et al., 2020). The use of arid or desert landscapes, articulated with ultramodern urban skylines, has indeed provided the Gulf states with the potential for relatively predictable but successful service structures, mainly targeting long-haul, centric tourism with reduced loyalty, i.e. few returning visitors. One needs to point out that this has changed over the last few years in the specific case of Dubai, where the urban tourism industry has matured into a multi-segmented reality, with comparatively affordable, mainstream tourism offerings. In this and all other Gulf destinations, the typical off-road day trip, which may include different marketization degrees of falconry, gastronomy, and other ethnographic performances is a powerful and reasonably inexpensive experience, and one with a high social media return. Yet regardless of actual consumer satisfaction levels, it remains a one-time experience for many an intercontinental traveller, despite its meaningful contributions towards sustainable intangibles. Desert tourism has been seen as a niche product for revitalizing traditional ways of life, ethnic values, or pastoralism (Chatelard, 2006; Narayanan & Macbeth, 2009). On the other hand, quality matters, and international tourism demand for desert products stems from a sort of "lure of the Sahara" (Kohl, 2002), a pervasive tourist preconception between fantasy and reality that is often an effective revenue generator in desert tourism. Explanations on this success go back to the roots of spiritual significance, but also to the idea of openness, archaeological or geological heritage, photographic potential, wildlife, and adventure, with obvious marketing potential (Preston-Whyte et al., 2005; see Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 for an assortment of such elements). It is this combination, not a sequence of mere background sceneries that provides substance and exceptionality to Arabian desert landscapes, and becomes an influential instrument for cultural tourism in places such as the United Arab Emirates (De Man, 2020).

The intimate connection between tourism and nation or region branding seems straightforward to the contemporary observer, but it is worthwhile reminding that this is a relatively recent phenomenon. What nowadays is taken as commonplace in

Fig. 1 Palm groves at Al Qattara Oasis

Fig. 2 Hafeet Tombs

Fig. 3 Hili Archaeological Park

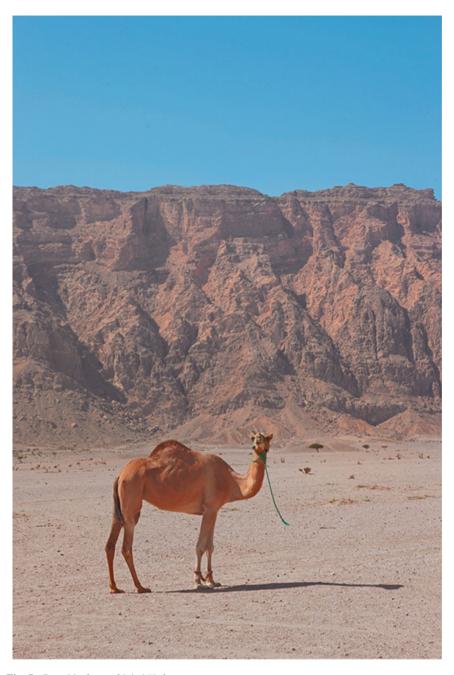**Fig. 4** Al Ain desert landscape

Fig. 5 Camel in front of Jebel Hafeet

destination branding, namely the creation of an image for countries or regions, to which the price function alone is not decisive, has a history of little more than two decades (Anholt, 2004; Blain et al., 2005; Giannopoulos et al., 2011; Bagramian et al., 2016). In a highly competitive leisure landscape, the importance of continuous branding initiatives by the different national tourism organizations cannot be understated and has indeed become indispensable to achieving economic success (Marczak & Borzyszkowski, 2020). Zooming in on the eastern Arabian Peninsula as a case study, there has been quite some marketing research on Dubai as a brand. Traditional clusters, among which tourism, are greatly constructed on the emirate's geography (Hafeez et al., 2016), and part of the communicational success of Dubai's image is based on international ingredient branding, which creates additional confidence, sense of affiliation, as well as a foundation for cultural affirmation (Balakrishnan, 2008; Keshodkar, 2016). By its very logic, the Expo 2020 world exhibition has epitomized nation branding practice. Dubai is but one paradigmatic example activating a number of marketing and branding principles—still within the UAE, Abu Dhabi is another, with a definite strategic investment in culture and heritage (De Man, 2020), and one finds comparable branding efforts in neighbouring countries, either through landscapes or events; see Alsedrah (2021) for Saudi Arabia, Mansour (2018) for Oman, or Ahmed (2020) for Qatar, to name just three references. For nations such as the United Arab Emirates, which are rapidly investing in economic diversification, physically transforming itself through urban and infrastructural projects, it becomes a demanding effort to produce a unique, stable, hence marketable brand.

For the purpose of this paper, multi-level marketing, scaling from the private company to the national agency, is taken as a proxy for supplier perception on the usefulness of the desert imagery. A first observation is that no entity currently invests in monothematic products and services, meaning that the market would respond negatively to heavily allocentric consumer experiences such as exclusively desert-branded destinations. In other words, the desert allure is always used as a main, distinctive ingredient providing coherence, but not as the objective core attraction for conventional family-based travelling. This proposition applies as much to international as to domestic tourism, although the latter is naturally more prone to specific daytrips and social pastimes, such as regular weekend off-roading, cycling, hiking, camping, and so forth. These activities by residents are usually community-based and less commercially inclined in terms of scale. With this caveat in mind, a desert-focused advertisement can be interesting for targeting potential domestic visitors as well. But this directly leads to the concept of competitive identity (Anholt, 2007), that is, to the fact that other contenders use similar instruments to create recognizable nation brands. The UAE has become a top challenger in the Middle East, by investing early and persistently in this type of branding (Zeineddine, 2017). A particular case is that of neighbouring Saudi Arabia, where mass tourism has been well integrated in the local economy for a long time, but almost exclusively in the form of pilgrimage tourism, whereas other leisure dimensions were not easy, or simply not possible, to experience for international tourists. Very recently, the geographical attractiveness of the kingdom has been recognized in the economic transformation efforts that look at imminent post-oil scenarios. Through the Saudi Commission for Tourism and

National Heritage initiatives, the confluence of cultural, heritage, and geotourism has become a cornerstone of the nation's Vision 2030 strategy (Abuhjeeleh, 2019). It has been critically observed that the region makes some use of western forms of tourism discourse (even entering discussions about possible forms of "self-orientalism"; see Feighery, 2012), yet this is precisely what one might expect from hyper-stylized cultural experiences anywhere in the world, especially if the market to be targeted is primarily "western", from a very broad consumer behaviour perspective.

This is observable in multiple recent online campaigns, promoted directly or not by the national tourism authorities in eastern Arabia, namely in the UAE and Oman. According to the most obvious criteria (number of tourists, travel and tourism contribution to GDP, hospitality statistics), Dubai is arguably the primary destination for leisure in the region, and is branded as a welcoming cityscape by Dubai Tourism. The "desert adventure to remember" is a well-integrated component but not the core image; in other words, the urban experience is very dominant. Neighbouring Abu Dhabi feeds its tourism landing page with a message focusing culture, arts, and an effective hook into sea and desert sands that, at a certain level, inverts the suggested experiences, by including shopping and exclusively urban forms of leisure in a second degree of attention for the website visitor. This reflects, first and foremost, the respective geographies and the economic tissues, with local governments capitalizing on their respective iconic strengths. The northern emirates do invest in differentiation through picturesque landscapes that significantly differentiate from the sand dune bias. Ajman's Masfut enclave, surrounded by the eastern regions of the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah, and very close to Fujairah, with which it shares the Hajar mountains, is depicted as unique experience, with its "rocky countryside surrounding the town […] ideal for walking, mountain biking, picnics, and wadi exploration". The first experience on the Ras Al Khaimah tourism authority website is the Jebel Jais Flight, presented as the world's longest zipline, on the UAE's tallest mountain. Oman's governorates list a comparable assortment of experiences, based on a triple grouping of nature, leisure activities, and culture. The list goes on, with the seven emirates, and as a matter of fact all Gulf states, investing in the promotion of regional products that are frequently complicated to differentiate for international markets. Apart from ultra-recognizable anchor elements, such as the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, or the Louvre Abu Dhabi, many hinterland landscapes do not cater to the foreign tourist with the quintessential vigour of the Italian cuisine, or the Kenyan safari, or the Patagonian serenity. This is a challenge shared with many low-density regions worldwide, namely in the cases where heritage is used as a stimulus for regional development (De Man, 2016).

4   Results and Discussion

Archaeology undeniably constitutes a powerful segment not only for the obvious tangibles leading to tourism demand and satisfaction but, both up- and downstream, for added marketing value as well. What this means is that, no matter any existing

(micro-) commodification of such a product, a brand extension requires, first and foremost, sustainable meeting grounds between archaeology and tourism (Walker & Carr, 2016). Second, a heritage brand identity necessitates a value proposition secured precisely through heritage (Ko & Lee, 2011), which seems self-explanatory but deserves a comment. When archaeology articulates with the wider tourism mix, it must not do so without substance but, on the other hand, it still needs to convey implicit messages, communicating emotional benefits for the consumer. This is facilitated in the case of well branded destinations, as long as the message is authentic and understandable, and links to the important concept of positioning a destination (Kolb, 2006). Simply put, branding relates to the (nation) supplier projecting an image, while positioning focuses on how the tourist will differentiate between comparable experiences. From this perspective, archaeological heritage offers a seminal uniqueness to otherwise rather similarly perceived landscapes.

Three examples inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list may conveniently illustrate the intricacies of these tightly interwoven dynamics, linking archaeological sites to the involving landscape, and the social territory providing an economic meaning for tourism to articulate with. The oasis city of Al Ain in the emirate of Abu Dhabi, bordering Oman, is perhaps the finest example of sequential archaeological landscapes, with archaeological and natural components (Power & Sheehan, 2012) that interact with a modern city, its physical expansion, and its population of about three quarters of a million. The Department of Culture and Tourism has been investing in strict archaeological research, but also in the transformation of isolated heritage elements into family-oriented products, of which the Jebel Hafeet Desert Park is a recent example. Key imageries are Abu Dhabi's tallest peak, Jebel Hafeet, the main oasis, the forts, among other historical attractions, in a packaging that suggests an authenticity different from that of the close-by centres of Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and even Muscat. In fact, Al Ain shares its wide desert landscape, including the Hafeet Mountain, with Oman, and there is easy road access to the Indian Ocean, and from there to the capital. But one of the main Omani postcard destinations is Salalah, quite far away, in the southern region of Dhofar. It corresponds to a continuously changing landscape, with the yearly monsoon, or khareef, producing temporary green areas and waterfalls in an otherwise desertic countryside. The region includes the Al Baleed Archaeological Park, UNESCO-classified as well, in the "Land of Frankincense", the catchy designation given to this part of the Arabian Peninsula. The archaeological site of Al Baleed, the ancient Zafar, reflects a longstanding and culturally diverse trade centre (Fusaro, 2020) that becomes easily marketable as cosmopolitan intersection between Arabia and India, and beyond. Hospitality-wise, quality is based mainly on beach resorts. Thirdly, Mleiha, in the emirate of Sharjah, is a small town with little distinctiveness apart from its archaeological park, and the involving desert landscape combining hilltops with sand dunes. In scientific terms, it corresponds to a massively important site undergoing continuous research (Overlaet et al., 2016; Stein, 2017), although with challenges for tourism development, given the nature of the remaining structures. Again, these create a distinctive, saleable theme, yet for the actual sensorial experience they function as one of the emotional constituents

of a landscape. Aspects central to archaeology matter little, or even become counterproductive regarding the tourist, to whom visiting two or three similar negative structures may be interesting—twenty will however become fastidious, especially in the absence of additional quality layers. One such layer is the narrative and physical reference provided by the local museum, while another relates to the hospitality arrangements, which in a certain sense do suffer from their very competitive advantage: a perceived remoteness connected with factual proximity to ultra-developed tourism centres. Good road infrastructures make it so that most landscapes in the UAE and northern Oman can be experienced as day trips. As mentioned, Salalah is an exception, located 1000 km south of Muscat, but plenty of domestic and regional flights serve its airport. It is however easy to reach Mleiha and Al Ain, and in fact most of the other UAE regions, by car, from the main tourism hubs of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. This poses challenges to the local hotel and restaurant business, which needs to produce a heritage appeal distinctive enough to supplement urban and beach alternatives.

The steps between these important yet either generic or standalone heritage units, on the one hand, and integrated product communication, on the other, contain potential obstacles to consumer attention. Articulations between landscape resources and the destination marcom of those same branded resources become perceptible, and therefore comparable, through the various parallel communication strategies put in place. As an example, five official tourism promotion websites (omantourism.gov.om, visitdubai.com, visitabudhabi.ae, visitrasalkhaimah.com, and ajman.travel) may provide a multi-level insight into apparently very similar approaches. By their very nature, they consist of one-way information, in stark contrast with interactive forms of social media. Still, the respective entry pages are structured differently from a user-based perspective; commonalities include external links to governmental and corporate services. But the incorporation of archaeological and landscape-based heritage is done at different levels and intensities. In the case of the Omani website, images of natural and manmade sceneries offer a general overview on the country's potential, and as far as heritage and archaeology are concerned, the user is invited to explore a tab with descriptive information. The Dubai website, on its turn, provides an interactional impression, directly engaging with the prospective tourist, both visually and through updated cultural activities. The main product is not archaeology-based, and one is required to delve into a second or third level, intertwined with the beaches and cityscapes, or the desert Bedouin experience. In addition to the beaches, dunes, and mangroves, a wider cultural territory is promoted as a core strength in the promotion of Abu Dhabi, intensified by the calendared activities and the serene, thematically organized "Find beautiful spaces that…" sections. Tangible heritage is also immediately accessible on the Ras Al Khaimah and Ajman sites, and, as in the cases above, fittingly linked to the idea of discovery and experience, and then also to the industry. In reality, the distribution features are central to a tourism entity website, as they cater to the expectations of the consumer, who is not spending time and effort to merely look at beautiful pictures, but to be persuaded and directed towards a decision, namely a purchase-based one. Critical in this relationship is the notion of authenticity in the promotion

of UAE heritage tourism and archaeology (De Man, 2016; Seraphim & Haq, 2019). The major private players engage in fairly equivalent modules, with the top 10 tour operators offering city trips and desert experiences. In the UAE, the importance of entrepreneurship, smart tourism, and innovation in a heritage context has been instrumental for the cultural tourism SME, with spillover to and from other sectors (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2015; Khan et al., 2017).

This convergence between tourism and landscape, which may seem self-evident in marketing campaigns, is indeed built on a tense balance and results in disordered notions of what the latter means to the former, in addition to providing carefully selected pictorial elements. A constructive tourism-landscape analysis should use geotourism as an approach that avoids sterile, contrastive discussions on either component (De Man, 2022; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2015), and it is crucial to explore landscapes as dynamic systems, meaning that their geographical identity is not an immutable resource for tourism. In fact, a useful determinant is that of landscape optimization for tourism building (Anwar et al., 2020), as practice demonstrates different community relationships with theoretically promising tourism environments. Especially, the idea of landscape loss is emotionally disturbing to local people, a factor on which marketing and communication heavily depend, bearing in mind that the branding of landscapes also encourages group coordination (Maessen et al., 2008). Branding then becomes not a mere tool for optimizing commercial development, but ultimately social cohesion as well. This bottom-up dimension cannot ignore the integration of creativity in the branding process, and that new place identities may emerge from the successive formation and rediscovery of sensoryscapes (Lalou et al., 2017). This may, in theory, become a fully renewable resource, as it triggers emotional attitudes towards a constructed image. For instance, it was shown that UAE residents have positive but different opinions on what local cultural heritage actually entails, and very recent built environment is clearly considered part of it (Abbas & Dutt, 2017). In this domain, the Gulf states in particular have successfully invested in the creation of some hyperreal or non-places, in which an atmosphere of exoticism becomes the core of slogans and landscaped images for entire nations, as is the case for Oman (Wippel, 2014). In addition to the external, or demand-side vectors, comprehensive initiatives such as "Brand Oman" need to be communicated to local communities, creating a distinctively Omani branding awareness (Al Balushi et al., 2013). Precisely, the same effort is done at both federal and emirate-level in the neighbouring UAE (Haq et al., 2021; Saad, 2020; Valek, 2017).

5   Conclusions

An abundance of studies has demonstrated the decadence of monothematic, mass tourism products, and the growing opportunities that are heavily structured on both uniqueness and authenticity. The small-scale discovery of cultural landscapes often (but certainly not always) outmanoeuvres all-inclusive, pre-packaged formats. From the supply side, distribution as well has become much more democratized, and

the industry is less dependent on a reduced number of players dominating the market, leading to a considerable grassroots variety. This is a highly competitive new normal in selected destinations and has growth potential in Arabian desert areas as well. Conditions are different, in terms of the landscape itself of course, and this includes climate and ancillary services. Also the motivation and expectation of overseas tourists are different from when they seek semi-domestic products in a neighbouring country, where cultural references are less contrasting. Luxury desert resorts have therefore occupied an interesting segment, by providing an arrangement of comfort and sufficient exclusivity, based on both the preconceived and the experienced landscape. But the positioning of archaeological and natural heritage in the branding, commercialization, and expected consumption of a product requires a careful balance. A nation brand conveys an inclusive message, not a niche concept, and therefore finds itself restricted to stereotypical advantages it cannot discard. In terms of heritage, what provides substance is the uniqueness of the experience, as many geographies offer highly produced cinematic panoramas that may come over as interchangeable, especially in desert environments. In contrast, archaeology is ultimately one of the few immutable building blocks in a tourism landscape, to be optimized as such in the competitive business of place branding.

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