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Branding Al Ain as a tourist destination

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Abstract

This paper focuses on developing a tourist destination in the UAE, alongside the Sustainable Development Goals of increasing work opportunities and economic growth. The UAE has long recognised the importance of tourism for developing its economy. Abu Dhabi registered five sites in the UNESCO list of global heritage in 2011, and one of these sites is in the Oasis city of Al Ain. There is a potential for Al Ain to grow as a tourist destination, as part of the UAE nation brand. The research approach is mainly quantitative, using marketing research techniques such as Discrete Choice Analysis and Max-Diff to ascertain consumer preferences. The present study uses the 178 online questionnaires completed out of about 350 respondents. The findings of this study pose several practical implications. In the first place, it will determine how Al Ain can fit within a brand architecture of the Abu Dhabi Emirate or the UAE nation brand. Secondly, it can shed light on brand associations and the brand identity that Al Ain must pursue. It is considered that this piece of research can contribute to the development of Al Ain as a tourist destination and help organisations such as Abu Dhabi Department of Tourism and Cultural with the promotional messages and the positioning of Al Ain.

Keywords: Destination branding; Al Ain; tourism; UAE

Introduction

The UAE has long recognised the importance of tourism for developing its economy. In 2016, the tourism sector's total contribution accounted for 12.1% of the GDP. Recent forecasts point toward 12.4% of GDP by 2027 (Portal of the UAE November 2019). It should not be forgotten that not only international tourism is important, but also domestic tourism, which accounts for 23% of the total tourism sector. With the restructuring of the UAE industry from being Oil and Gas based to diversification into other industries, the tourism sector became a strategic industry on a political and economic level. In relation to the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, the tourism sector plays a very important role. Indeed, it is a key contributor to Abu Dhabi's diversification strategy (Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce, October 2018). As pointed out in the same report by the Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce, Abu Dhabi registered five sites in the Unesco list of global heritage in 2011, and one of them is the oasis city of Al Ain. The researchers have understood the potential of both Abu Dhabi and Al Ain as tourist destinations, but currently, they are eclipsed by dominant destinations such as Dubai. This research will aim to contribute towards means of tapping into that potential.

There are new interesting developments in promoting tourism in the UAE. The UAE Federal government launched the 'UAE Strategy for Domestic Tourism' in December 2020. This campaign, called "the World's Coolest Winter, also has the aim of avoiding duplication of efforts and reinforcing the importance of tourism for the UAE economy while aiming to unify local and federal efforts to harness the UAE's tourism resources and reinforce the role of

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domestic tourism in the national economy (Official Portal of the UAE Government, December 2020).

Al Ain as a tourist destination was researched recently by Eid and Elbanna (2018). However, the results are insufficient to draw a complete picture of the destination image making. This piece of research can serve as an excellent contextual starting point for wider research on developing Al Ain into a tourist brand as part of the umbrella brand of Abu Dhabi. The authors are residents of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi and consider that Al Ain merits research because of its unexploited potential.

An exciting and interesting area in tourism studies appears to be destination image, an area pioneered by Hunt (1975). Its impact is such that it has become one key theme in tourism research (Hosany, Wkince and Uysal, 2006). Destination image is a construct affected by personal factors and stimulus factors (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). That complex construct requires careful study and consideration when marketing tourist destinations. Furthermore, with the importance of tourism for many economies, many tourist destinations have to offer a strong image to appeal to potential tourists. Due to many destinations competing, it is critical to communicate a unique destination identity by offering a compelling differentiation from its competitors. That differentiation is termed “destination branding” (Morrison and Anderson, 2002). Qu, Kim and Im (2011) agreed with the complexity of approaching a destination as a brand and proposed a model integrating branding and destination image. This influential paper guides the researchers on many areas to be considered in this research. Campelo et al. (2013) emphasise the importance of understanding the sense of place and positioning the people of the place at the centre of a branding strategy. This is essential for the development of an effective destination brand. Previous studies about Al Ain as a tourist destination focused on a perceived city image (Eid and Sabanna, 2018). Destination branding is an important topic in tourism studies and particularly in an under-researched context such as Al Ain, UAE. It is of interest for the Tourism and connected industries of Al Ain as well as the Ministry of Economy and Department of Culture and Tourism Abu Dhabi, to investigate the potential of Al Ain, its tourism attributes and the best way for it to be positioned and promoted as a tourist destination. However, it is important to note that the federal government is moving towards a unified brand identity of the UAE as a tourist destination. This new strategy, coupled with the increasing importance of domestic tourism, highlights the need to develop tourism destinations such as Al Ain.

Another important consideration is that of determining the right destination brand umbrella strategy for Abu Dhabi and Al Ain. This interesting area of research was indicated by Pike (2009) as an area that needed attention. Few papers have paid attention to this area ever since, i.e. Datzira-Massip and Poluzzi (2014), but it seems particularly important to contribute to the topic in this context. In this research, the brand infrastructure is of paramount importance because at present, Al Ain is marketed as a sub-brand of Abu Dhabi. Saraniemi and Komppula (2019) studied the case of co-branding and provided examples in which co-branding may not be effective. Brand architecture seems an important concept here. This relates to the way a portfolio of brands can be structured and about establishing valuable interrelationships among those brands (Harish, 2010). However, the organisation and structure of this portfolio is fraught with challenges and issues. These relate to stakeholders’ interests, administrative borders, assignment of responsibilities, human resources, the power of private stakeholders



and budgetary issues (Datzira-Masip & Poluzzi, 2014). This is connected to destination identity, which is formed of brand associations.

Another concept to analyse is destination identity. This is related to brand associations. Hanna and Rowley (2011) defined destination identity as the essence of a place, which is determined by an interaction between the brand infrastructure and its stakeholders. This is because they influence consumer evaluations toward the intention to visit the destination (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). A key category within brand associations is that of attributes (Keller, 1993; Keller, Parameswaran & Jacob, 2011). An attribute is what a consumer thinks the brand has to offer and what is involved with its purchase or consumption. Ascertaining those attributes related to the brand is a key task for a marketer and the methods for determining those attributes will be subject to analysis in the research methodology section.

As per the above, the areas of interest in research and its main aim of on assessing the potential of marketing Al Ain as a tourist destination are indicated. Following this, the following research objectives (ROs) are set:

RO1: To find out key elements for developing brand associations for Al Ain.

RO2: To determine a brand architecture for the UAE as a “nation brand”, with Al Ain as one of its constituents.

RO3: To analyse how brand identity can be built for Al Ain.

RO4: To evaluate the true potential of Al Ain as a tourist destination.

Finally, it is important to add that this paper has been written during the COVID-19 outbreak that has so badly affected tourism worldwide. Henderson (2014) examined the differentiation strategy of Abu Dhabi as a tourist destination focused on education and culture. This is really pertinent today as it will be in the future. The authors strongly believe that there is a need for cities like Al Ain and Abu Dhabi to retain their identity. This “anti-mass tourism” approach was discussed by Dioko (2016) as one of the reasons that brings researchers like us to study destination branding. Keeping the right balance is fundamental in the face of a changing tourism industry.

Destination Branding

The importance of a strong brand applies not only to products but also to destinations. One of the best examples that can be recalled is New Zealand. The destination was branded as 100% Pure New Zealand. This long-term branding exercise was significantly successful. The country increased its number of visitors from 1.6 million in 1999 to 4.5 million in 2010 (Peralta, 2019).

First, we should define a brand in a simple way. According to the American Marketing Association (2020), a brand is a ‘name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller’s goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers’. So the key objective is to make a clear differentiation. Költringer and Dickinger (2015) explain that destination branding, similar to products, includes brand name, logo, or symbol creation that identify and differentiate a place. Significantly, effective branding enables travelers to associate the symbols with the destination.

Lund and Kimbu (2020) argued that the branding of a destination is more complex than product branding. This is because of the fact that tourism products are multidimensional (Fakfare and Lee, 2019; Zhang and Lin, 2018; Jiang et al, 2017, Gallarza et al, 2017). Almeyda-Ibañez and George (2017, 14) contended that “the complexities of developing a destination brand are related to the development of the experiential element and the understanding of the tourists’ decisional process”. Furthermore, Blain, Levy and Ritchie (2005) see destination branding as a combination of marketing activities. These marketing activities, in the particular case of a destination, serve to strengthen the emotional connection between the tourist and the place visited. In order to disentangle that number of marketing activities, it is necessary to discuss the following concepts associated with destination branding: Destination image/identity and brand associations.

Destination identity/image

The researchers agree with the explanation given by Qu, Kim and Im (2011) about these two terms. These are two representations of the same entity but are differentiated by who generates the representation. Kapferer (2008) presented that as a sender-receiver model. The sender wants to convey the idea of a brand identity shaped by messages that contain signals about products, places, people and communication. The receiver decodes that message, which is affected by external interferences such as competition and noise. The decoding of those messages is what is known as brand image. Florek *et al.* (2006) summed it up: “thus, the place is able to create a place image based on its identity”. That image is shaped by perceptions about a place which are reflected by associations that tourists store in their memory (Cai, 2002). These brand associations pertaining to the brand image encompass both affective and cognitive evaluations (Balogu and McCleary, 1999). The development of a strong and favourable brand association depends on the degree to which consumers have become acquainted with the brand (Leone, Vithala, Luo, McAlister and Srivastava, 2006)

With regard to destination identity, Kladou *et al.* (2017) debated the two approaches to the topic. The first one considers this as a managerial problem, perceived as process. This research takes the second approach which considers destination brands as complex, multi-dimensional and dynamic. This approach has been supported by several theorists, more recently, Kavartzis and Hatch (2013). Sicard (2013) posits that brand identity should not be seen as a state but as an evolving process.

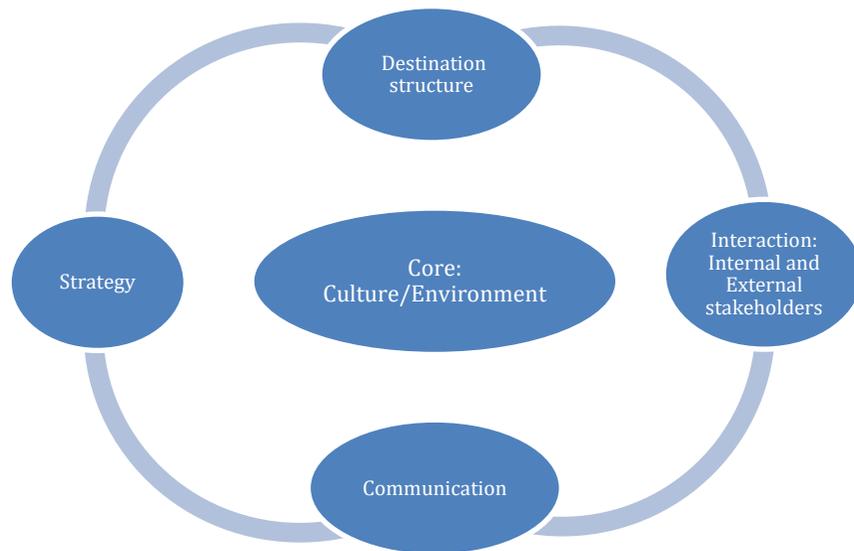
Saraniemi and Komppula (2019) proposed a framework with elements of destination brand identity (Figure 1). From the figure it is evident that the core elements are culture and environment. The cultural elements such as values, meanings, histories and myths are connected and intertwined with their environment in the form of cultural and historical places of interest (Lee and Xue, 2020). These historical and cultural places can have a strong influence on destination image (Beerli and Martín, 2004; Kladou and Kehagias, 2014). Likewise, the location and social infrastructure form an integral part of the destination. In parallel, the natural environment is another strong influencer on destination image (Fong et al., 2017).

Another important element is stakeholders. As a matter of fact, stakeholders are so important that various authors have approached the study of destination brand identity from a stakeholder perspective; amongst them are: Agapito et al. (2015), Ashton (2014), Garcia *et al.* (2012); Kong and Du Cross (2015), Machado and Medeiros (2012), Saraniemi (2011). Because



of their variety, it is necessary to simplify the classification of them as internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders are in this case the community and external stakeholders are, for example, visitors and hotel chains.

Figure 1. Elements of destination brand identity (adapted from Saraniemi and Komppula (2019))



In terms of destination structure, the focus was on the role of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), a name which evolved from Destination Marketing Organizations. The first seems like a more suitable name because its role extends from simply promoting a destination and understanding visitors to “destination developers”. Their function is to catalyse and facilitate the development of tourist destinations (Presenza et al., 2005). The role of DMOs should not be underestimated. In today's world, the complex challenges that Howie (2003) discussed are amplified in the light of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. For the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, the DMO, Visit Abu Dhabi, part of Abu Dhabi’s Department for Tourism and Culture, has taken the role of tourism development quite seriously. This DMO coordinates and supports ten global offices. Their aim to increase tourist numbers is attempted through promotional activities in various media and by improving hospitality infrastructure (Visit Abu Dhabi website, 2020).

In the framework in figure 1, strategy is seen as an element of brand identity. As strategy guides much more than brand identity, the strategy would be better referred to as “strategic elements”. These elements are vision and positioning/differentiation. Saraniemi and Komppula (2019) argue that starting by defining a vision for the brand is the traditional approach. Likewise, Konecnik and Go (2008) highlight the importance of the strategic vision of decision-makers and the corporate culture of decision-makers on brand identity. Now, brand identity should have been connected to a clear differentiation strategy. The destination should position itself based on assets such as quality accommodation, public spaces, natural environment and so forth (Baker, 2007). Hence the vision guides the differentiation strategy which is connected to the brand identity. In short, the brand identity mirrors the management

vision of how the destination differs from other destinations (Pike and Page, 2014). A successful strategy may lead to brand loyalty. This is critically important in medical tourism destinations but could be extended to destinations like Al Ain. Brand loyalty is measured by repeat visits and recommendations (Das and Mukherjee, 2016).

Communication is a multi-faceted component of brand identity. It is extremely influential because image formation can be seen as aggregate perspectives. These perspectives or knowledge accumulate over time in various media and through word-of-mouth (Kotsi *et al.*, 2018). The role of communication in brand image is even greater in this era. This has a considerable impact on how organisations manage brands. This reinforces the idea that brand images are not always the consequence of the brand identity that managers want consumers to perceive. This is because consumers are fundamental authors of brand stories. Moreover, the high level of interactivity in consumers' and brands' social networks and the difficulty in coordination attest to the critical influence on brand image (Gensler *et al.*, 2013).

Destination brand architecture

Datzira-Massip and Poluzzi (2014) applied Aaker and Joachimsthaler's (2002) framework of brand architecture to tourism destinations. The authors identified four big categories:

- a) House of brands
- b) Endorsed brands
- c) Branded house
- d) Master/sub-brand relationships

A house of brands consists of a portfolio of brands (Reibstein, 2005). This may apply to large organisations with various brands. The brands are well differentiated, and a brand's image is unlikely to affect another. If the UAE were to be marketed as a single tourist destination, then Abu Dhabi, Dubai and other regions or Emirates would be the brands forming the house. Endorsed brands have the main disadvantage of being severely affected by the endorser (Lee and Kwak, 2016). Before the scheme to develop the UAE national brand -termed "nation brand" by policy makers in the UAE-each Emirate followed its own policies and regulations. This endorsed brand strategy could be followed in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, though. For example, the endorser would be Abu Dhabi and the endorsed brands could be: Al Ain-Abu Dhabi, Yas Island-Abu Dhabi, Baniyas-Abu-Dhabi and so forth. The branded house is suitable for unifying a corporate brand (or, in this case, a whole political jurisdiction) across a portfolio (Hsu, Fournier and Srinivasan, 2015). This seems to be the strategy followed by the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. A powerful brand, Abu Dhabi, has improved its branding from just mentioning the destinations and not as cities but as attraction sites to advertising them as single destinations within the emirate. In the Master/Sub-master relationship, there is a strong relationship between the brands. It applies to destinations like Central America, whereby all countries are nearby, sharing the same geographical denomination, and by visiting one of the countries (e.g. Costa Rica), a tourist may be tempted to know another one nearby. It is difficult to apply the concept in Abu Dhabi because the destinations are pretty distinct.

At present, neither Abu Dhabi nor the UAE, for that matter, seems to have a defined brand architecture. In Abu Dhabi, the branded house, the structure appears to be more closely related. Datzira-Massip and Poluzzi (2014, p. 50) suggested: "... proper market research



should demonstrate the effective application of these models and their perception by the customers". The authors also proposed a cohesive system of brands and gave the example of Spain, whereby the national brand coexisted alongside national brands, labels and tourism products.

Methodology

The authors consider that approaching research on destination branding requires a multi-faceted approach because of the complexity of the topic. This requires method triangulation. Method triangulation involves multiple methods of data collection (Polit and Beck, 2012). This adds depth to the data that is collected (Fusch, Fusch and Ness, 2018). Ethical approval was obtained from the organisation of the author's affiliation. In the case of the interviews, ethical consent was obtained orally before the interviews, and respondents were clear that they could withdraw at any time and that confidentiality and anonymity are guaranteed. Likewise, ethical consent was obtained in the introduction to the online questionnaire. Respondent anonymity assurance was enabled from the start as per the settings of the survey software of QuestionPro©.

The first research objective focuses on brand associations. For the purpose of not overlooking any perspective, combining qualitative methods may lead to an effective result (Morse, 2009). In the first place, it is necessary to consider what the attributes associated with Al Ain as a tourist destination are. This can be achieved through text summarisation from articles written in the press and/or the Internet about the destination. The purpose of summarisation is to produce a concise and fluent summary of key information in an input text (Nenkova and McKeown, 2012). Summarisation can be achieved through tag clouds (words from the text). The tag clouds process is a popular method for the representation of those variables that can be of interest to a researcher (Caldarola and Rinaldi, 2016). These tag clouds are considered to be a starting point for a profound analysis (Heimerl, Lohmann, Lange & Ertl, 2014). Since this approach may provide limited interaction, it is necessary to complement it with other qualitative methods. Firstly, these words can be grouped into categories. This category building exercise enables the researchers to interpret results from different abstraction viewpoints (Költringer and Dickinger, 2015). These authors employed this approach for determining associations for destination branding. Furthermore, these summaries of text from articles can be compared and contrasted with the results of in-depth interviews. This allows for increased validity of the data collected (Carter et al., 2014). In total, 19 articles related to tourism information were collected from an Internet search (see list after the list of academic references). This resulted in a total of 18,867 words. The word cloud method is also applied to the open question in the online survey.

Two in-depth semi-structured interviews (interview guide in appendix 1) were collected with two hotel managers who are or have been General Managers of hotels in Al Ain and who have lived in the city and/or Emirate of Abu Dhabi (see table 1 below). It should be noted that there are 7 major hotel brands in Al Ain, and these brands represent 28% of the total number of hotel brands in the city. It is to note that some brands have two or three hotels. In this case, one of the authors, resident in Al Ain can attest to this, and the information from search engines does not reveal the real offer of accommodation in the city. However, this was considered sufficient as the interviews generated a great deal of data. Those interviewed were analysed using Qualitative Data Analysis Software (NVivo© version 12).

Table 1. Demographic information of interviewees.

Demographic information	Interviewee 1	Interviewee 2
Number of years in the hospitality industry	32 years	31 years
Number of years as General Manager of 4-5 star hotels in Al Ain and/or Abu Dhabi	1 year but more than 10 years in Abu Dhabi; interviewee has known Al Ain while in Abu Dhabi (strong connections with the city)	15 years
Area of Origin	European	Middle East

The quantitative stage consisted of an online survey with 12 questions. Online surveys such as the one presented to respondents have the ability to take advantage of the rich visual capabilities of the Web. The survey used graphic elements, which “create a more engaging and interactive experience for survey-takers” (Roster, Lucianetti & Albaum, 2015, p. 2). This survey with all the questions was piloted and discussed with experts in the field. There are two filter questions for determining whether the respondents qualify as a respondent. The first question refers to being 18 years of age or older. The second question tests whether the respondent has visited Al Ain at least once. This was considered to be an important requirement. In addition, there were four demographic questions (Multiple choice) regarding gender, nationality and Emirate of Residence. In total, 357 respondents started the survey and of these 49 did not qualify. Out of the remaining 308 responses, 178 completed the whole survey (57.8%). The online survey took an average of 9 minutes to be completed. The general demographics of respondents are as follows:

- Gender: Male 57% Female 43%
- Nationality: Emirati: 41%, Other Gulf countries (GCC): 2%, Not Emirate, not GCC: 56%.
- UAE residents: 95%, Non-residents: 5%
- Emirate of residence: Abu Dhabi: 88%, Ras Al Khaima 7%, Dubai 3%, Fujairah 2%, Sharjah 1%.

The survey included a slider question to measure the degree of familiarity with different destinations in the UAE. For example, it aims to compare the popularity of Al Ain against other UAE destinations. In this type of question, a horizontal line with a bar on the line was displayed. Respondents had to click and drag the bar to the desired position on the line in order to register their answers (Liu, 2017). Slider questions are considered to be more engaging and fun, with enhanced discriminatory power (Puleston, 2011).

The survey has two Max-Diff questions regarding brand attributes and brand architecture. Louviere (1993), creator of the technique, explained that respondents evaluate all possible pairs of items within the displayed subset and choose the pair that reflects the maximum difference in preference. MaxDiff (also called Best-Worst Scaling) can be considered a more efficient extension of the Method of Paired Comparisons (Sawtooth Software, October 2020). McCullough explained that MaxDiff questions have better discrimination qualities than traditional scale questions and avoid scale usage bias. This is particularly important when Arabic speakers find a scale from left to right, as it appears to have an effect on the answers (Harpe, 2015). These questions are repeated twice, with different attributes to choose, presented in pairs (most preferred-least preferred). These MaxDiff tasks employed anchored



dual response best-worst scaling, which enhance internal validity (Lagerkvist, Okello, & Karanja, 2012).

The final question is the Discrete Choice Analysis question. The authors followed the checklist of factors for quality discrete choice experiments developed by Lancsar and Louviere (2008). First of all, the nature of the survey was clearly explained to respondents for content validity. On validity and reliability, several techniques suggested by Rakotonarivo, Schaasma and Hockley (2016) were followed. For reliability, the test-retest approach was observed, since attributes were also tested in the MaxDiff question and compared against the discrete choice results. Respondents looked at five features of the destination (five attributes). These attributes and their corresponding levels are:

- a. Key feature: Oasis City)/Garden City/Sheikh Zayed's birthplace
- b. Type of tourism to promote: Cultural/Historic/Adventure/Nature/Health
- c. Brand association (as part of): UAE nation brand/Abu Dhabi Emirate brand
- d. Image: Date trees/Al Ain Zoo/Jebel Hafeet (mountain)/Al Ain Palace/Fort (Al Jahili)/Hot Springs (Green Mubazzarah)
- e. Color: Purple/Green

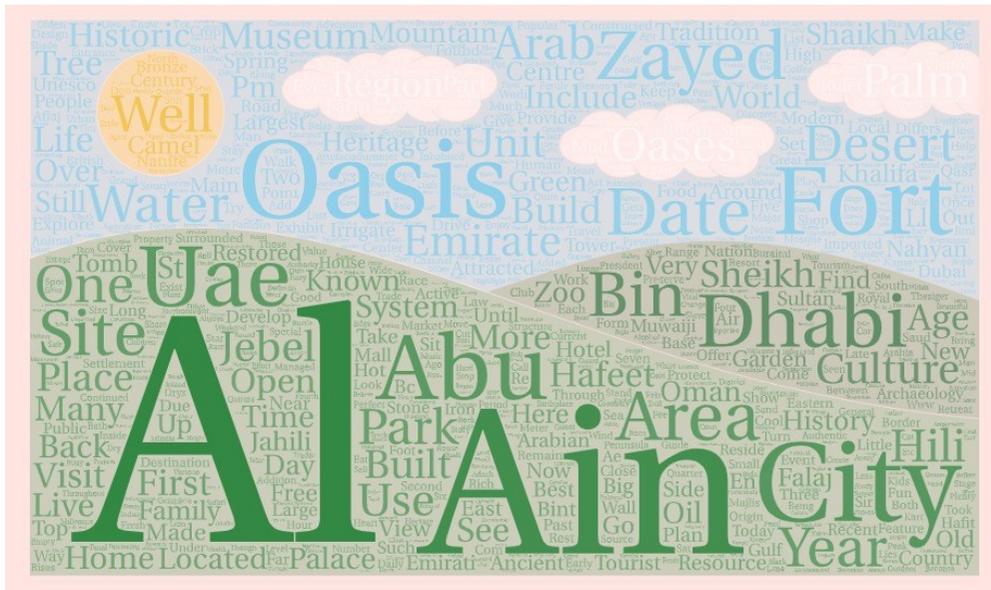
In total, the number of possible concepts are $3 \times 5 \times 2 \times 6 \times 2 = 360$ concepts. For this number of concepts an orthogonal full factorial design was chosen with two alternatives per task, in which respondents choose one of the two alternatives (displayed as two columns). The task is repeated 12 times (12 tasks). With regards to generalizability, the survey considered very carefully the various rules of thumb proposed by Orme (2019), according to the following equation: $N > 500c / (t \times a)$. In this case, c is equal to the largest number of attributes (6); t is the number of tasks (12) with a being the number of alternatives per task (2). Then: $N > 500 \times 6 / (12 \times 2)$, N should be greater than 125. By having 178 completed surveys, this minimum number is met. This research follows the advice from Orme (2019) in terms of increasing the number of tasks when, due to constraints, it is difficult to obtain larger samples. Task repetition has the effect of increasing survey drop-outs. There is a trade-off between avoiding drop-outs and collecting representative data. It was decided that accuracy should be pursued. This caused a drop-out rate of 42%. The number of alternatives was not increased to make selection simpler to respondents. Most of the respondents were recruited from a higher education institution in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi.

Results

Word Cloud

The results from the word cloud can be seen in Figure 2 below. The attributes in table 2 are the ones we tested in the questionnaire. It has to be noted that with regard to color of association, the word green appears the obvious choice. However, this needed testing as purple is the colour of Al Ain Football club, famous not only in the city but throughout the UAE.

Figure 2. Word Cloud analysis of 19 articles of tourism related to the city of Al Ain



The analysis of words of the word cloud is summarised in table 2 below:

CATEGORY/ITEM (Number of citations)							
Geography	Al Ain City (172)	Abu Dhabi (75)	UAE (69)	Emirate (57)	Region (48)	Oman (27)	
Nature	Oasis (87)	Mountain /Jebel Hafeet (38)	Water (64)	Desert (59)	Well (43)	Green (33)	Spring (25)
Cultural	History/Historic (76)	Arab/ Arabian (73)	Culture (56)	Heritage (41)	Tradition (31)	Archaeology (26)	Tomb (23)
Royal Family	Sheikh/ Shaikh (83)	Zayed (82)	Home (34)	Family (34)	Nahyan (33)	Khalifa (29)	
Manmade attractions	Fort (80)	Park (44)	Museum (44)	Palace (37)	Zoo (22)		
Icons	Date (66)	Palm (49)	Garden (28)	Camel (25)			

Table 2. Word Cloud analysis from 19 articles about Al Ain

FURTHER ANALYSIS AFTER INTERVIEWS:						
Branded as part of	UAE nation brand	Emirate of Abu Dhabi				
Key feature	Sheik’s Zayed birthplace	Oasis city	Garden city			
Type of tourism	Cultural	Adventure	Health	Nature (Desert)	Historic	
Icons	Fort	Date/Palm tree	Mountain	Zoo	Palace	Springs
Color of association	Green	Red	Blue	Purple	White	



In-depth interviews

A thematic analysis of the interviews was conducted. Figure 3 shows the five main themes and subthemes from the analysis conducted with Nvivo12 ©. These themes are discussed below.

Figure 3. Nvivo Screen Shot of Themes from the in-depth interviews



Brand Architecture

The interviewees pointed out that there is a complementarity between Abu Dhabi and Al Ain, and it is like a triangle (Western Region, Abu Dhabi City, and Al Ain). They also mention the official liaison between the Emirate of Abu Dhabi and the city. They put it like this: “I would love to have it as an independent brand, but it is part of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi” and “it has to go through Abu Dhabi”.

Visitors to Al Ain (tourist segmentation)

The interviewees discussed the following segments:

- Business people (mid-week)
- Week-end staycations, mainly families
- Meetings, Incentive, Convention, Events (MICE)
- Medical sector.
- Couples
- Tourists from nearby Oman

They affirmed that while there is potential to increase international tourism for filling the mid-week gap, business people were mostly of the international type.

Potential for tourism

It was pointed out that more can be done to promote the city: “... kind of a hidden secret” or “... it’s a little jewel that they should see”. They stated that it needs to be put in the tourism maps with much more promotion. As hoteliers, they have noticed that tourists are impressed

when they find something as beautiful as Al Ain, only one-and-a half hours from either Abu Dhabi or Dubai. They commend the efforts from tourism authorities but feel that more is needed to promote the city. Evidence of its potential is the fact that tourists visit the city and want to return. One of the hoteliers noticed that hotels can contribute towards this task, “anyone who is a newcomer to my hotel, we’ll attempt to give them something to make him/her come back again”. They discussed the many opportunities that can be explored. For example, there were classical music concerts in the past that used to attract many tourists.

It was asserted that the hotel infrastructure is really adequate to support tourism in the area, a sufficient number of hotels, with half-occupancy mid-week, and better occupancy during weekends, which seems to show evidence of being attractive mostly to domestic tourists. With regard to infrastructure to develop, an interviewee discussed the need to develop more manmade attractions, like the water park. The city in terms of cleanliness and road infrastructure is particularly good with some room for improvement in the desert areas, particularly environmental protection.

Reasons to visit Al Ain

It was very interesting to see recurring themes found in the analysis of articles. Culture was given as a reason as well as the visit to archaeological sites on the way to Dubai (Hili Archaeological Park), as well as the forts and palaces, and Al Ain’s vicinity with Oman. Another repeated motive is the visit to Al Ain Oasis, as Al Ain means “the spring” in Arabic, highlighting the greenness of the city connected to the Oasis and the springs. Naturally, reference was made to the second highest mountain in the UAE, Jebel Hafeet, described as a beautiful mountain. They also mentioned the farms that can be found on the way to the city. Another important attraction is Al Ain zoo, described as one of the best in the world. One interviewee stressed that it is more than a zoo, but perhaps the best in the GCC region as a conservational venue. There was also mention of manmade attractions such as Wadi Adventure, the Souk or Camel Market, unique in the region. Special allusion was made to the recently built religious building, Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Grand Mosque, which will be a huge attraction to the city.

Other interesting reasons also emerged from the interviews and some of these also appeared in the Word Cloud. In the first place, there is a strong connection with the UAE Royal family. They mentioned the birthplace of Sheikh Khalifa, possible birthplace of the founder of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed, and tourists often come to visit the old house of Sheikh Zayed. There was also a theme of affinity with the city, discussed in several guises. First, people from Al Ain or who have been in Al Ain, particularly students of Al Ain universities, are pulled back from the city. It is important to note that over 63,000 people have graduated in UAE University, with their main footprint in the city. This also applies to ex-pats. One interviewee asserted that for ex-pats, “Al Ain is a special place in their hearts”. Another fascinating aspect is its different character from the bigger cities. He described Al Ain as “not as modernised as Abu Dhabi” and “vaster desert and more beautiful and accessible”. Its tranquil character was also highlighted together with the nicer weather. A city that feels as tranquil as a little town, but that offers all the facilities, attractions and infrastructure of a city. It was noted that the city offers a lot of variety, which makes it a great value for money destination.



Types of tourism to promote

It was fascinating to discover that Al Ain is known to attract tourists of various types. In first place, cultural and historical tourism. They emphasised that the focus should be “something around culture”. Museums and the historical value of the city connected to the origins of the UAE are some of the reasons for positioning the city as a cultural/historical destination. They also mention nature and the need to get away from the city life, people who want to go outdoors more. Health tourism is also possible because of the natural springs (Green Mubazzarah). They stressed the advanced medical services in areas like oncology and diabetes. One put it as “a holistic feeling that you could recuperate quite easily here”.

Less known is the potential for sports tourism, particularly due to the importance of Al Ain Football Club, known globally. There are also huge sport schools in the area. One respondent thinks that much more can be developed in the area. And finally, there is wedding-based tourism. Both respondents noted that locals like to get married in Al Ain for various reasons, making it the venue of choice in the UAE.

Survey findings*Preference for Al Ain as a tourist destination*

With regard to the popularity of places in the UAE, in the slider question, the top place was Dubai with 8.98. It was followed by Abu Dhabi with 8.57. Interestingly, Al Ain was third in the list with 7.56. The other rankings were like this: Ras Al Khaimah 5.99, Fujairah 5.93, Khor Fakkan 5.51, Sharjah 5.20, Hatta 5.12, Liwa 4.79, Ajman 4.18, Umm Al Quwain 3.70, Madinat Zayed 3.57 and Ruwais 3.54.

Important attributes for Al Ain

In the Maxdiff question about the most important attributes of Al Ain as a tourist destination, the results are presented in Table 3:

Table 3. Best/Worst attributes in Maxdiff task

Worst/Best	Worst	Best
Nature (Mountain/Desert)	13%	38%
Historic/Cultural Attractions	15%	35%
Value for Money	32%	18%
Shopping Facilities	40%	9%

This does not indicate a definite preference between natural or historical attractions, as they are very close (38% and 35% for best choice).

Brand architecture

The MaxDiff exercise regarding brand architecture revealed the best and worst counts, see table 4:

Table 4. Best/Worst brand architecture in Maxdiff task

Worst/Best Brand Architecture	Worst	Best
As a distinctive destination, part of the UAE brand	14%	36%
Promoted as a location in Abu Dhabi city	35%	14%
As an international destination	28%	21%
As part of the Abu Dhabi Emirate brand	22%	29%

Discrete Choice analysis task

The discrete choice analysis enabled the determination of:

- a) What attributes had more importance for respondents.
- b) What the best and worst profile for Al Ain as a tourist destination is.

Attribute importance in this survey refers to the aspects of the destination that respondents paid more attention to. For calculating attribute importance, first it is necessary to calculate the part-worth utility value for that level of the attribute (Molin, Oppewal and Timmermans, 1996). Utility is a measure of satisfaction or preference for a particular characteristic (Osborn, Cagan and Boatwright, 2009). For example, for the attribute of image of Al Ain, the level with the highest part-worth was Jebel Hafeet Mountain with +0.29, whereas the lowest level was Date Trees (-0.24). In this case the attribute range is: $0.29 - (-0.24) = 0.53$. Secondly, we need to calculate the attribute ranges of the other attributes. These were as follows:

- Type of Tourism to promote: Cultural historic (+0.15); Health (-0.21). Attribute range: 0.36
- Key feature: Sheikh’s Zayed’s birthplace: 0.19 Garden City (-0.15). Attribute range= 0.34
- Brand association: As part of UAE nation brand: 0.04, As part of Abu Dhabi Emirate brand -0.04, Attribute range: 0.08
- Color you associate the city with: Purple (-0.03); Green (0.03), Attribute range: 0.06

Total utility range: 1.27=Attribute importance (image)= $0.42 / 1.27 = 39\%$

The second most important attribute was the type of tourism to promote (26%), followed by key feature (25%). Brand association and color had little importance, 6% and 4%, respectively. Obviously, the number of choices influenced the chance of a higher attribute range and thus attribute importance.

The best and worst profiles are found in table 5.

Table 5. Best/Worst Concepts in discrete choice task

Attribute	Best	Worst
Key feature	Sheikh Zayed’s birthplace	Garden City
Type of Tourism	Cultural/Historic	Health
Brand association	As part of UAE nation brand	As part of Abu Dhabi Emirate brand
Image	Jebel Hafeet Mountain	Date Trees
Color	Green	Purple

Interestingly, utility for Cultural/Historic showed a significantly higher preference to a Cultural/Historic type of tourism (0.15 v. 0.07).

Finally, there was a sound amount of data emerging from the open-ended question. The most repeated theme was the Jebel Hafeet Mountain (Hafeet, 5.34%; Jebel 3.56%, Jabal 1.09, Mountain 2.12%), a total of 12.11%. The second remarkable theme was Culture/Cultural, Historic/Historical/Fort/Palaces with 6.22%. The third mentioned was Oasis and Green, Greens, park or parks with 6.02%. Then there are mentions for nature and desert 4.86%. The



Type of tourism to promote in Al Ain

The Word Cloud from the revealed highlighted terms with reference to the Royal Family and Culture, heritage and history. There were also important mentions to nature, with terms like oasis, mountain and spring. The interviewees stressed the connections with the Royal Family and rich cultural traditions. The MaxDiff exercise was not conclusive in the survey, and the preference for natural tourism was slightly higher than cultural tourism. However, the discrete choice analysis task with the full profile showed a stronger preference for a cultural/historic type of tourism. References to nature were more important as images or landmarks of the city.

Images or key features of Al Ain

Curiously, the tagline of Al Ain the garden city did not resonate too much either with respondents or with the articles in the Word Cloud as the key feature. The interviews were less conclusive as there was mention of greenness, to natural attractions like the mountain (Jebel Hafeet) or manmade landmarks like Al Ain zoo. Respondents showed a strong preference for Jebel Hafeet as the icon or image to project of the city, but the tagline or the unique selling point was referred to Sheik Zayed's birthplace. The hoteliers underlined the connection to the origins of the UAE and the deep bond between the city and the Royal Family.

Conclusions

The main contribution of this paper is the innovative use of a mixed methods approach for analysing how a tourist destination can be positioned and branded. It combines word clouds with in-depth interviews and quantitative research. In addition, discrete choice analysis is a visual method to ascertain tourist preferences. Tradeoff techniques are better suited for focusing on the key elements of a destination so that it allows clear positioning. The way these techniques are implemented is novel, in the view of the authors. Furthermore, there is a paucity of research in Al Ain's context. This is the first paper that applies brand architecture frameworks to analyse how the Al Ain brand fits within "The Emirates" umbrella brand. This is only the second paper in the literature that explores Al Ain as a tourist destination.

It has been found that respondents have welcomed the development of the UAE national brand. There seems to be a strong preference for Al Ain to be branded as a separate brand within the UAE brand. The secondary and primary research has revealed the untapped potential that Al Ain offers, not only because of its multiple attractions but also its serene character and well-developed infrastructure. In short, it can be said that it offers the tranquility of the town with the facilities of a well-developed city. However, the multiplicity of attractions must not offer a confused message to travelers who do not know Al Ain or those who need to be reminded about Al Ain. It appears that focus must be concentrated around the cultural and heritage richness of Al Ain, the roots of the UAE and the Royal Family. That seems to indicate that it should be positioned as a cultural/historical destination. As the main image of the city, the imposing image of Jebel Hafeet Mountain over the city of Al Ain seems to be the main icon, to be made part of visual messages and advertisements. It is suggested that promotion and its potential must be enhanced through social media and official websites, for instance a separate webpage with a link to the Visit Abu Dhabi website could be created. There is no known tourism association of chamber that addresses the issues around the



promotion of city. There is untapped potential in many areas, to name one the sports facilities and the thermal waters. There are efforts to bring tourist to Al Ain, however much more can be done considering the influx of tourists to Dubai.

This research may be considered to be an exploratory study. A large sample, particularly with more tourists and residents from other emirates, would have given a clearer picture since almost 90% were Abu Dhabi residents. It would have been very beneficial to consider the views of actual tourists and policy makers from the Department and Culture and Al Ain municipality. However, tourism was very limited during Covid-19 times. In addition, there were also restrictions to access managers of these organisations. Nonetheless, being Al Ain in Abu Dhabi their views are considered very pertinent in elucidating how Al Ain can be branded. Further research on how to implement the strategy as an element of the brand and the interconnections among the elements that make up the brand identity of Al Ain as per the framework of Saraniemi and Komppula (2019) is needed. In addition, more research is needed to create virtual reality for iconic attractions and less known -but significant for the locals- attractions in Al Ain.

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