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## Greening the Desert: Emirati Youth's Perceptions of Green Branding

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Gergana Alzeer and Tilde Rosmer

# Greening the Desert: Emirati Youth's Perceptions of Green Branding

## 1 Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is becoming a successful example of governmental strategy of place branding in the Gulf and in the Middle East in general. Some claim that the UAE is the Middle East's most valuable brand, based largely on the country's strategic geographical location and function as a transit hub between global regions.<sup>1</sup> The branding efforts of the government include investments in modern infrastructure (including state-of-the-art ports; airports, airlines, office towers, and museums); hosting world events (including sports competitions and cultural and political meetings); and facilitating tourism, shopping, and entertainment.<sup>2</sup>

Of the seven United Emirates, Dubai has been described as the star of branding, with its international reputation as a travel hub, business centre, and tourist destination.<sup>3</sup> Dubai is therefore perceived as a model to be imitated by other Arab cities and nations.<sup>4</sup> Dubai has until recently been associated with business and the "world's tallest" skyscraper and "largest" shopping mall, as well as indoor skiing and hotel beaches. However, since Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum assumed rule in 2006, green branding has been added to the promotion of this city-emirate, aiming to enhance its attractiveness as a tourist destination and as one of the best places to live and to make investments.

As professors at a federal university in Dubai, we were intrigued by comments made by women students in discussions of the green shift in Dubai. It became clear to us that this group of Emirati youth had an understanding of "greening" that differed from that expressed by their country's leadership in strategies and policies, and we therefore set out to investigate their awareness of and reactions to the government's green branding efforts. In the current literature on branding, there is a lack of research on consumers' (citizens' or tourists') perceptions of green branding,<sup>5</sup> and there are no studies at all of this from the Gulf region. More-

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1 See Zeineddine, 2017.

2 See De Jong, Hoppe, and Noori, 2019.

3 See Govers, 2012.

4 See De Jong, Hoppe and Noori, 2019; Zeineddine, 2017; Freire, 2012.

5 See Chan and Marafa, 2016.

over; in the growing literature on the branding of Dubai, there is no mention or reference to green branding; the research conducted focuses on its reputation as a smart city, a shopping city, or a city of wonders with man-made islands and the world's tallest building. This research fills both of these gaps by analysing Emirati youth's awareness and perception of the green branding of Dubai. Moreover, this research adds a non-Western case to the analysis of the understanding of "greening" that introduces a different perspective on greening that focuses on *making* green rather than *preserving* green.

## 2 Green City Branding

Branding is a marketing strategy that creates an image of the brand in the consumer's mind.<sup>6</sup> Place branding has become one of the most powerful marketing tools for cities, regions, and nations.<sup>7</sup> City branding aims to establish cities as key global players, empowering them economically and politically.<sup>8</sup> Until now, much of the available research focuses on how cities have established a brand associated with the desired image of the city. "City images (...) represent a total set of place impressions or perceptions based on attributes, functional expectations and symbolic meanings."<sup>9</sup> These images are communicated to consumers with the goal of projecting "a positive, unique and desirable identity."<sup>10</sup>

Green branding has emerged as part of city (and nation) branding: "Green identity branding provides cities with an opportunity to market their strengths and distinct qualities both within and across national boundaries."<sup>11</sup> However, green branding is substantially less researched than city branding,<sup>12</sup> which has generated a huge amount of literature, and there is not even a consensus among scholars on a definition of green branding.<sup>13</sup>

Green branding involves positioning products or places, as in our case, in accordance with their environmental credentials, where environmental values con-

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6 See Kotler and Keller, 2015.

7 See Caldwell and Freire, 2004; Wang, 2019; DeJong, Hoppe, and Noori, 2019.

8 See Freire, 2012; DeJong, Hoppe, and Noori, 2019.

9 Chan and Marafa, 2016: 291.

10 Chan and Marafa, 2016: 291.

11 Wang, 2019: 377.

12 See Chan and Marafa, 2016.

13 See Boisen, Terlouw, and van Gorp, 2011; Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2009; Moilanen and Rainisto, 2009; Anholt, 2007.

stitute the brand's true essence.<sup>14</sup> Usually this involves promoting places based on their natural attractions, as well as their commitment to, action for, and support for environmental values.<sup>15</sup> To make the city more attractive to consumers, urban spaces are made physically green,<sup>16</sup> hence green branding coincides with the global green shift and resultant increased societal demands for and awareness of environmental protection and sustainability.<sup>17</sup> Research has shown that increasingly more people feel unable to admire or respect countries or governments that pollute the planet.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, especially small countries aspiring for global recognition adopt green branding strategies as a way of establishing themselves as green leaders in the global market.<sup>19</sup> This reasoning applies directly to Dubai (and the UAE).

### 3 Context: The Green Branding of Dubai

The concept of “greening the desert” is not new in the UAE and was a pillar of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan's modernisation approach from the 1970s onwards. Sheikh Zayed was the first President of the UAE Federation and is credited with unifying the Emirates. Planting trees and other concrete greening measures have been part of Emirati nationalism since the establishment of the federation and as such constitute part of the legitimisation of power for the ruling sheikhs and the political system of paternalism.<sup>20</sup> Sheikh Zayed is portrayed as the leader who loved nature and who devoted himself to greening the desert.<sup>21</sup> Since the 1970s, the government and other organisations have planted millions of trees, for example in Sheikh Mohammed's recent one million trees initiative<sup>22</sup> before the 2020 World Expo in Dubai, which had sustainability as one of its three major themes.<sup>23</sup> In addition, all over the Emirates, grass and flowers have been planted to beautify their urban areas.

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<sup>14</sup> See Insch, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> See The Place Brand Observer, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> See Chan and Marafa, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> See The Place Brand Observer, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> See Anholt, 2010: 70.

<sup>19</sup> See Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> See Ouis, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> See Ouis, 2002: 338.

<sup>22</sup> See Land Life, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> The Expo was deferred to 2021/22 due to the Covid 19 pandemic.

The UAE is trying to turn “green” for a combination of reasons: environmental concern over the harmful effects of climate change in the region;<sup>24</sup> the negative portrayal of the country in the international community as a result of high per capita emissions in a global comparison;<sup>25</sup> a need to achieve greater economic diversification and move away from its rentier economy that is based on unsustainable resources;<sup>26</sup> and the realisation that the region is rich in renewable solar energy resources and has large uninhabited areas available for solar plantations.<sup>27</sup>

To illustrate how Dubai is becoming a regional trendsetter in green branding, in December 2014, the Dubai Plan 2021 was launched, aiming to brand the city as “sustainable,” as a “city that uses its resources sustainably over the long-term and in line with international best practice levels in terms of consumption, efficiency, and management, and in its dependence on renewable energy sources.”<sup>28</sup> Sheikh Mohammed has declared two goals for Dubai for 2050: to have the lowest carbon footprint per capita globally (contrasted with Dubai having the highest prior to 2006)<sup>29</sup>, and to generate 75 per cent of Dubai’s power from clean energy.<sup>30</sup>

To realise these goals, Sheikh Mohammed launched the Dubai Clean Energy Strategy in 2015: “The strategy (also) aims to make Dubai a global centre of clean energy and green economy.”<sup>31</sup> An important component of these goals is the investment in the Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum Solar Park, described as “the largest single-site solar park in the world.”<sup>32</sup> In 2021, the Green Hydro Project at the solar plantation was inaugurated and described as a “First-of-its-kind project in the MENA region.”<sup>33</sup> Additionally, in March 2021, Sheikh Mohammed launched the Dubai 2040 Urban Master Plan that includes significant areas dedicated to green recreational spaces and public parks and states that 60 per cent of the emirate will be nature reserves and “rural natural areas.”<sup>34</sup>

With its investments in renewable energy sources, Dubai is branding itself as leading in clean energy development by showing that there is the political will to realise a green shift, which makes it attractive for foreign investments in renewable energy specifically, as well as investment generally in a city that is perceived

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24 See Günel, 2016.

25 See Zeineddine, 2017.

26 See Ferroukhi et al., 2017.

27 See Ferroukhi et al., 2017.

28 The Executive Council of Dubai, 2021: para. 3.

29 See Kunzig, 2017.

30 See DEWA, 2020.

31 U.AE, 2021: para. 1.

32 U.AE, 2020: para. 1.

33 DEWA, 2021: para. 1.

34 Godinho, 2021.

as modern, forward-thinking, and able to develop both technology and practices for a green shift.

## 4 Branding Theories and Methodological Approach

Scholars have developed several theories and models to study and discuss branding, especially within the field of business and marketing. These models include the “Brand Box Model”,<sup>35</sup> the “Nation Brand Hexagon”; the “City Brand Hexagon”;<sup>36</sup> “The European City Brand Barometer”,<sup>37</sup> and the “Green Brand Hexagon.”<sup>38</sup> Our main theoretical framework is based on the Brand Box Model that emphasises the consumers’ perception of branding, rather than manufacturers’ perception. This focus perfectly fits our study of Emirati women’s perceptions of green branding in Dubai, since, as mentioned in the introduction, the present chapter focuses on the receivers’ side of green branding, which is rather underexplored in branding studies, as most of them analyse the senders’ side or the message itself. Previous research on branding has established that branding is characterised by a functional (technical and utilitarian) dimension and a personal (emotional and symbolic) dimension,<sup>39</sup> both of which contributed to the Brand Box Model theory. Accordingly, in this model, the two dimensions that influence a brand’s strength with consumers are its functionality and its representationality.<sup>40</sup>

The functional dimension is primarily associated with the perception of the utilitarian aspect of the brand,<sup>41</sup> which captures the “consumer’s concern for the performance capabilities of the product.”<sup>42</sup> This dimension usually helps consumers with rapid decision-making about the brand’s primary utilitarian aspects, such as its speed, quality, taste, and so on. In terms of green branding, this dimension usually appeals to the rational mind of the consumers by stressing the product’s environmental benefits.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See Chernatony and McWilliam, 1989.

<sup>36</sup> See Anholt, 2006.

<sup>37</sup> See Hildreth, 2006.

<sup>38</sup> See Chan and Marafa, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Compare Hartman, Ibáñez, and Sainz, 2005; Lannon and Cooper, 1983; Munson and Spivey, 1981; Gardner and Levy, 1955.

<sup>40</sup> See Chernatony and McWilliam, 1989.

<sup>41</sup> See Chernatony and McWilliam, 1989.

<sup>42</sup> Chernatony and McWilliam, 1989: 164.

<sup>43</sup> See Hartmann, Ibáñez, and Sainz, 2005.

The representational or emotional dimension links to aspects of consumers' self-expression and other emotional needs, as the brand helps them express something about themselves, such as their values, beliefs, status, preferences, and so on.<sup>44</sup> Thus, there is "a set of consistent beliefs and meanings held by their purchasers and users which are associated with the product and service, but which exist over and above its obvious physical functioning."<sup>45</sup> In terms of green branding, the emotional dimension stresses benefits related to people's emotional needs, such as a sense of satisfaction from contributing to the improvement or protection of the environment or from exhibiting one's environmental consciousness.<sup>46</sup> It is important to note that all brands include a combination of both dimensions, with various degrees of functionality or representationality.<sup>47</sup>

In order to apply the Brand Box Model with its two dimensions to green branding, we built our approach on Cladwell and Feire's initial adaption of this model in their study of consumers' choices of destinations related to the branding of cities, regions, and countries.<sup>48</sup> In our research on Emirati women students' perceptions of green branding, the *functionality dimension* links to the *perceived* benefits and/or disadvantages of green branding in Dubai; and the *representationality dimension* links to their awareness and association(s) of greening, its meaning(s) and value(s) to them, and how green branding relates to their identity, culture, and traditional values.

We have also used elements from Simon Anholt's Nation Brand Hexagon that he adapted to city branding in the form of the City Brand Hexagon, constituting an index that allows global ranking of city brands of major global cities along six dimensions.<sup>49</sup> This model has been further adapted by many scholars, including Chan and Marafa,<sup>50</sup> who modified it to investigate consumers' perceptions of green branding in Hong Kong by creating the Green Brand Hexagon, which expands Anholt's "place" dimension to include ecological and environmental qualities. The Green Brand Hexagon helped us crystallise our focus group and interview questions, while also explaining some of the findings in relation to one or more of the hexagon's six dimensions (namely, green status, green space, green potential, green pulse, green citizenship, and green prerequisites).

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44 See Hartmann, Ibáñez, and Sainz, 2005.

45 Chernatony and McWilliam, 1989: 165.

46 See Hartmann, Ibáñez, and Sainz, 2005.

47 See Cladwell and Feire, 2004; Chernatony and McWilliam, 1989.

48 See Cladwell and Feire 2004.

49 See Papp-Váry, 2011.

50 See Chan and Marafa, 2016.

Methodologically, to investigate the perceptions held by Emirati women students on green branding, we applied a constructivist paradigm using an exploratory approach. Since perceptions are linked to human experience that is constructed in myriad ways, including daily activities and socio-cultural values, this study requires a contextualised analysis.<sup>51</sup> Our participants, aged 19–23, were chosen using an incidental and convenient sampling method from students at the federal university where we work. Our study applied multiple levels of data gathering, including two focus groups each involving a group discussion among seven people, as well as 12 in-depth interviews with individual group participants. Following the focus groups, we asked the participants to write their reflections on greening and green branding based on their participation in the focus group. The focus groups were conducted in December 2020 and April 2021, and each lasted 120 minutes. The first group focused on environment and sustainability with green branding as one component, while the second focused entirely on green branding.

## 5 Discussion and Analysis: Emerging Themes

“Innovative,” “entrepreneurship,” “creativity hub with focus on the future: we are tomorrow,” “diversified place, anyone is welcome,” “anything is possible,” and “Oasis, like a metropolis, in the middle of the desert”: these are some of the expressions participants used to describe the brand, their city Dubai. It became very evident that the green branding of the city seemed to be last on their list. According to them, it is not as obvious as other aspects of the city branding that Dubai is well known for, such as its luxurious and elite lifestyle and its pioneer projects that attract tourists from all over the world (e.g. *Burj Khalifa*, the man-made islands, etc.). While the participants could easily speak of Dubai as a role model in branding, they struggled to think of examples of the “green branding” of the city. This confirms the impression of both Ouis<sup>52</sup> and Luomi that there is “... no profound environmental awareness among most UAE citizens”<sup>53</sup> and that green branding takes a secondary role in the UAE. To explore this point, the following analysis is organised in accordance with the themes that emerged when the participants expressed their perceptions and understanding of green branding. These themes are closely related in focus and content, and they thus naturally sometimes overlap.

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<sup>51</sup> See Scott, 1991.

<sup>52</sup> See Ouis, 2002.

<sup>53</sup> Luomi, 2012: 342.



## 5.1 Heritage and Modernity

As mentioned above, one of the focus group participants described Dubai as an “oasis.” An oasis is “a fertile or green area in an arid region (such as a desert)” and “something that provides refuge, relief, or pleasant contrast.”<sup>54</sup> The description of Dubai as a city oasis/haven captures visions of and realities created by the leaders that connect the past and the future. As such, this description relates to the natural environment of this desert country with its natural oases, as well as to the modernisation process it has gone through since the 1970s, a process that included greening as an important component. The positive notion of greening and living in an oasis correlates with the “green space” dimension of the Green Brand Model and the “place” dimension of the City Brand Hexagon models that link to the physical environment around us. Our study shows how participants express their level of understanding of the green branding of Dubai, based on their perceptions of and satisfaction with the city’s material green physical spaces, which allows them to enjoy living in this place.

The “oasis” reference also relates directly to the idea of paradise that was part of Sheikh Zayed’s greening-the-desert approach, in which he was bringing modernity to his nation not just by building schools, hospitals, and infrastructure, but also by planting trees and greenery using modern systems of irrigation.<sup>55</sup> The new city’s parks provided shaded spaces for people to meet, play, and relax, inspired by the parks in European cities. Likewise, there is the religious aspect related to the green oasis/paradise vision – the colour of Islam is green, as are the images and ideas of paradise. Relating the development and greening of the Emirates to Islam simultaneously justifies and promotes green as both culture and modernisation – greening connects tradition with the future.

When asked how green branding relates to the local culture, several participants spoke about religion. The main focus was on the notion that, according to Islam, it is not permissible to waste resources. They provided examples, such as sharing leftovers from Ramadan *iftār* meals, not wasting water when performing ablution, and other instances. This led to a discussion about the differences between the older generations and their own, wherein the participants stated that, for older generations, not wasting (anything) came naturally, since they had less when growing up and did not take anything for granted, compared with their own generation. They then went on to discuss the idea or understanding of waste, and said that whilst their grandparents do not waste water or other natural

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<sup>54</sup> Merriam-Webster, 2021.

<sup>55</sup> See Ouis, 2002; Al Fahim, 1995.

resources, they were not concerned about recycling plastic or other material waste. The participants interpreted this as a sign that the older generation did not fully understand the implications of plastic and other waste and recycling, since they lacked education about pollution, climate change, and renewable versus non-renewable resources.

From the field work, and as supported by the above discussion, two main emerging culturally and contextually based forces seemed to highly influence the participants' approach to and understanding of green branding. The first is their leaders as role models. In the close-knit Emirati society, tribal organisation that constitutes the basis of the political system offers the members a strong sense of security and belonging to a collective.<sup>56</sup> The leaders are highly respected, loved, and imitated as role models by their citizens, thus playing a major role in influencing their practices and decisions. In university classes, our Emirati women students often referred to the greening initiatives of their beloved leader Sheikh Zayed and how he engaged in planting trees and greening the desert, which became to be considered a national duty of each citizen and a symbol of their love for their country and its nature. They discussed how they had all participated in tree planting and cleaning-up events while in school, and they remembered that every year the government gave each family a tree to plant. One participant mentioned the connection between this heritage and preservation of nature with the recent attention paid to the indigenous *ghaf* tree that was declared the national tree in 2008.<sup>57</sup> In the last decade, there have been many campaigns to plant this and other local trees and plant species, instead of planting imported species that demand more water and can harm the local fauna.

Many participants mentioned how effective it is when a leader shares on social media his experiences of harmful effects on the environment. One example is when a sheikh posted photos of animals that had died from consuming plastic that campers left behind in the desert: "This was a wakeup call for me," one participant exclaimed. This example also connects to the second force influencing the participants' appreciation of green branding – namely the role of social media. The power of social media and its influence on youth has been discussed by many scholars.<sup>58</sup> Studies focused on the impact of social media on the Emirati youth describe the positive effects, such as providing information, expanding their networks, and exposing them to realities they would not have heard of outside of social media.<sup>59</sup> Many participants referred to social media with examples of how it

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<sup>56</sup> See Pinto, 2012; Heard-Bey, 2011.

<sup>57</sup> See Connect with Nature, 2021.

<sup>58</sup> See Omar and Dequan, 2020.

<sup>59</sup> See Gjylbegaj and Abdi, 2019; Gjylbegaj and Jararaa, 2018.

informs their decisions and enhances their environmental awareness. This force becomes even more effective when used by their leaders.

Furthermore, the “metropolis” reference in connection with the branding of Dubai implies associations with high-rise buildings and six-lane highways, but it also directly relates to the modernisation process of the country and how greening was and is an integral and important component of this process, both in terms of the leaders’ visions and city’s actual development. Dubai’s metropolis is the outcome of taking control of the natural habitat by making the harsh desert liveable and enjoyable for inhabitants, and the greening of this habitat is a visible side of this progress. Hence, in this context, greening is making and changing nature, not preserving it as in the Western perspective. This relates directly to the response by another participant who associated branding Dubai with the history of the development of the city and its “fast change(s).” She illustrated her comment with the speedy and continuous construction of buildings and infrastructure in Dubai. Indeed, since the 1970s, “New Dubai” has been built along a main road connecting Dubai and Abu Dhabi: “New Dubai consists to a large extent of lucrative cities within the city – from mega-projects providing particular services (...) to mixed-use developments for living, shopping, dining, and entertainment.”<sup>60</sup>

The participant’s reference to fast changes connects the past, present, and future and relates to the local cultural and economic context of Dubai as an “oilasis” where oil revenues are used to invest in business and tourism for a near future without oil, by transforming the city into a business and tourist “paradise.”<sup>61</sup> The construction of this human environment from the empty sand dunes is a perfect example of a city built from *tabula rasa* – a place that was in an “empty state” before human involvement, a city built from scratch and branded as a new urban destination with labels chosen by the leadership.<sup>62</sup> “We are tomorrow,” a participant commented, further adding her perception of the image of the city as new with endless potential and the ability to defy its ecological environment. Here again, we see the connotation of greening as making rather than preserving, which is unlike the Western perspective. This student shared her perception of a city where human imagination is the limit, resonating with another observer’s description of Dubai’s recent development as “a story of an ecological transformation that has accompanied its global image.”<sup>63</sup> Other participants described Dubai using adjectives such as “luxurious,” “futuristic,” “innovative,” and “a city that never sleeps,” again confirming the perception of Dubai as a new, modern, futur-

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<sup>60</sup> Reichenbach, 2015: 128.

<sup>61</sup> See Choudhary and Paul, 2018.

<sup>62</sup> See Kanna, 2007: 24.

<sup>63</sup> Choudhary and Paul, 2018: 4.

istic city. Thus, we can see here how consumers' perceptions reflect Dubai's already existing and evolving branding.

## 5.2 Awareness

The participants also exhibited awareness of the abstract concept of green branding that they associated with the “shift towards sustainability,” “being eco-friendly,” and “going green.” One example provided was how certain fashion companies have “a green line” based on sustainably sourced material and/or production that is branded as environmentally friendly. The participants' perceived benefits of green city branding can be explained with the functional dimension of the brand.<sup>64</sup> This is clearly associated with the perceived utilitarian benefits and functions,<sup>65</sup> which will increase the consumers' level of satisfaction and positive attitude towards their city.<sup>66</sup> However, it became obvious that the participants' level of awareness of green branding in Dubai was mainly associated with concrete tangible green initiatives that they could see, experience, and benefit from in their daily lives as citizens. Thus, their lived experiences are associated with the lived space that, according to Lefebvre, involves the use of our hands, bodies, and senses interacting with the material world around us.<sup>67</sup> These concrete examples that the participants spoke of as contributing to the green branding of their city included: the Emirati Sustainability Pavilion at the Expo site that opened for visitors in 2021; the metro project that offers a green transportation option, despite the dominant car culture of the city (discussed in more detail below); the use of vending machines to return plastic bottles for money; the use of recycling bins; and the subsidised installation of solar panels on houses owned by locals. Interestingly, they never referred to Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum's Solar Park, or any of the aforementioned initiatives or projects.

While the participants lacked knowledge of the major projects, policies, and initiatives of Dubai's leadership in green branding and sustainability, they individually spoke of the need for more marketing and reinforcement of green policies to reach grass-roots society. They wanted the government to enforce stricter measures on the local population, including themselves, whom they described as too “indifferent” and “lazy” to go (more) green and to become (more) environmentally responsible: as one of the participants remarked, “Let us admit it, we are lazy...”

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<sup>64</sup> See again Chernatony and McWilliam, 1989.

<sup>65</sup> See again Hartmann, Ibáñez, and Sainz, 2005.

<sup>66</sup> See again Chan and Marafa, 2016.

<sup>67</sup> See Lefebvre, 1991.

As for the generational gap, the participants discussed the need for more environmental awareness campaigns to reach the elderly population, as they feel that education has helped them become more aware than their parents and grandparents. While the elderly constantly remind the younger generation not to throw out food or wastewater, the youth expressed frustration that the older generations pollute and harm the environment due to their lack of awareness and knowledge. The participants used the example of plastic bags or plastic bottles: “My mom just hates using reusable bags, she says it is too much hassle, she says they are not handy or convenient, and she forgets to take them to the store.” This expressed frustration indicates the participants’ level of awareness of causes of climate change and pollution and thus an openness towards green branding, as well as how this needs to be modified to reach the different generations of the Emirati population.

### 5.3 Green Desert and Consumerism: A Paradox

From the perspective of climate change and the environment, two main paradoxes regarding greening as part of the modernisation and development of this country became evident in these students’ understanding of greening. First, the funding for the physical greening of this place comes from oil revenues, which in turn contribute negatively to climate change. Second, the Emirati positive view of consumerism is not compatible with the common view of a green shift that advocates recycling and moderation; in the UAE, consumerism and sustainability are promoted side by side.<sup>68</sup>

The UAE’s experience is unique, as its green shift is initiated by the government in a top-down approach, which is not comparable to the combined process of pressures from bottom-up activism in combination with top-down policies seen in most Western nations. To illustrate, the participants are aware that the process of desalination needed to realise the greening project is harmful to the environment. Nevertheless, they still had positive feelings and thoughts about greening this arid land, as they are “following the footsteps of their ruler,” which is a common statement. They are also aware of the costs of their convenient and luxurious lifestyle, but they cannot envision Emirati society changing its consumerist habits in favour of a more sustainable way of life.

They all acknowledged the benefits of and need for the green branding of the city, stating how this will position Dubai globally as a sustainable place, thus add-

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<sup>68</sup> See Ouis, 2002.

ing more dimensions to its brand and status. Such perceived benefit embodies the “Green status” dimension of the Green Brand Hexagon, representing the global status and reputation of the city in relation to green resources. The participants also acknowledged that green branding can contribute to the economy and bring more tourists, but did not reflect on how this presumably would lead to further strain on the already depleted water resources and add to carbon emissions.

Most importantly to our participants, further greening will improve the quality of living in the city for them and their children, who will grow up in a greener environment. One aspect that contributes to the emotional dimension of green branding includes “nature-related benefits” that involve affinity with nature and the positive feelings related to and associated with being in direct contact with nature.<sup>69</sup> The fact that this green nature is not the natural local nature and has to be created was not perceived as a problem in this logic. When we asked the participants to describe “nature” in one or a few words, most responded by describing scenes from green nature in Europe and North America. Only a very few immediately thought of the sea and the desert.

Another participant spoke of how the electric Tesla car became popular locally not because of its environmental qualities, but mainly because of its expensive price and luxurious style. This was supported by other participants. For example, one stated: “They drive Tesla and throw garbage from the window.” Such statements emphasise the need for more educational campaigns and the need to enforce more regulations to increase awareness of a green shift in order for such values to become innate and fully accepted by the city’s consumers.

To our participants, lush green areas brand the city as green and improve the city’s image, although they themselves admit that greenness is not native to their desert habitat. They acknowledge the environmental paradox of needing more water to create a greener environment in a place that lacks water resources and is dependent on a desalination process that contributes to pollution and climate change. Yet, to them, greening is positive and desirable as per their culture and religion. These findings make it evident how the Emirati idea of greening is different from the environmental perspectives in the West.

Several participants generally see that the green branding of their city has a very positive environmental impact beyond the city and the country. They suggested that by better marketing and emphasising the green branding of Dubai, which is already an established role-model city regionally, might encourage other cities to follow, and thus will spread the green shift. One of the participants suggested that to achieve a greener branding of Dubai, it should come somehow embedded within

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<sup>69</sup> See Hartmann, Ibáñez, and Sainz, 2005: 21.

the city's trendy and established brands: "Maybe Burj Khalifa could be known as the tallest building running on sustainable energy."

## 6 Conclusion

Emirati young women's understanding of Dubai's green branding is highly intertwined with religious values, cultural practices, and tribal hierarchies, all of which in various ways inform their level of awareness and care. Hence, the representationality dimension of their perceptions relates to their heritage and as such connects the past with the future. The functionality dimension of their perception is directly based on their actual experiences in this modern young city with its fast-paced changes, never-ending construction, consumerism, and comfortable lifestyle, all which are generally not understood as compatible with environmental values and a green shift. For many of the participants, greening is very often intertwined with modernity and advancement, meaning that greening means modernity through the ability to desalinate water and to populate and green the desert, thereby improving the status of the city, as well as their lives. Green branding to them literally means the visible and concrete oasis in the middle of the desert; one that is not only green, but also modern, advanced, happy, luxurious, and innovative. Seemingly, this understanding reflects their sense of national identity and pride in their country's achievements and modernisation, which began with their founding father, Sheikh Zayed.

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