

## Virtual Tourism as an option for City Marketing during of the Coronavirus Pandemic -Dubai case study-

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### Abstract:

#### Virtual Tourism as an option for City Marketing during of the Coronavirus Pandemic

Due to the emerging Coronavirus pandemic, global travel restrictions and closures forced cities and even states. Most of the world's population is switching to at home lifestyle, which has become the only safe solution to preserve an individual's life. This is what negatively affected the tourism sector, which represents one tenth of global GDP. This has made the world's tourism councils use virtual reality and their modern technological technologies by adopting a virtual tourism approach to marketing their tourist cities. This research paper aims to highlight Dubai's experience, which is one of the most prominent cities that have used this approach in order of city marketing during of the Corona pandemic and to stay within the map of global tourist cities.

**Key words:** Virtual Reality, Virtual tourism, City marketing, Coronavirus pandemic, Dubai .

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The tourism sector is the most affected economic sector as a result of the outbreak of the Corona pandemic, which posed a great challenge for countries. There is a joint statement on tourism and the emerging Coronavirus issued by the World Tourism Organization and the World Health Organization (WHO), that international cooperation is vital to ensure the sector's ability to contribute effectively to containing the virus Covid-19, and taking health measures to minimize the impact on unnecessary travel. In light of the growing Corona epidemic and the continuing period of the application of the curfew, the extent to which the trend for virtual tourism creates and with the help of advanced information technology out of the boredom that most of the world's population suffers from is difficult as it is difficult to travel and move from one country to another because of the epidemic, as «virtual tourism» is The Internet opens the doors to roam in many areas of the world with sound and image, enjoying seeing natural, archaeological and religious tourist places, and holy places can be visited during the times of special visits (which are provided by some TV channels in their simple form as there was an experience of sacred thresholds on three-dimensional

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cell phones to roam in the hallways Threshold) and move spiritually to physical places without traveling to it in the traditional form, using the latest technologies that modern science has come up with, which is called virtual reality, which depends on a group of technological technologies .

One of the first Arab cities that started to follow the idea of virtual tourism in during of Corona is the city of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, which started operating tourism destinations across the virtual world, taking advantage of technology and development that the world is witnessing to promote and revive the tourism sector, even a little. As the tourism sector in Dubai seeks early to take advantage of virtual reality technologies to promote the tourist and entertainment landmarks in the emirate, taking advantage of the development of its infrastructure and technology by providing unique experiences using virtual reality technologies to provide users with an aesthetic trip in addition to providing detailed information on the tourist destination, which contributes to consolidate the tourist destination in the minds of visitors, so that they become among their future tourism programs.

From what is said above, we can ask the following question: **How the adoption of the virtual tourism approach contributed to Dubai city marketing in light of the Coronavirus pandemic?**

## 2. Theoretical framework

In this aspect, we will try to address the theoretical concept of both virtual tourism and the city marketing approach.

### Virtual tourism

Virtual tourism in a new type of unconventional tourism whose slogan is no tickets, no bags and no hassles. It relies on information technology technologies to provide its services.

Virtual tourism is it navigation on the streets and areas of virtual reality environments with the aim of physically moving to physical places and a moment of time without traveling there in its traditional form.(123 صفحة 2011، مجبل عبد الله، Or is defined as an activity to visit sites of interest online without personally traveling to these places. A virtual tour is a simulation of an existing location, usually consisting of a series of video images. Other multimedia elements such as sound effects, music, storytelling and written texts can also be used.

The application of virtual tourism technologies achieves a set of tangible direct and indirect economic benefits, which can be summed up in the following points:

- Commercial advertising
- Marketing offers of tourist establishments
- Encourage visits to domestic and foreign tourists, and thus increase the tourist movement.
- Obtaining the support of officials, decision makers, and various members of society.

The importance of virtual tourism is highlighted in the following:(91 صفحة 2017، بظاظو)

- Virtual tourist paths can be considered an alternative to visiting tourist sites subject to deterioration and destruction, which contributes to the preservation and sustainability of these sites in order to provide the unique capabilities of virtual reality in embodying and simulating tourist sites as if they were real;

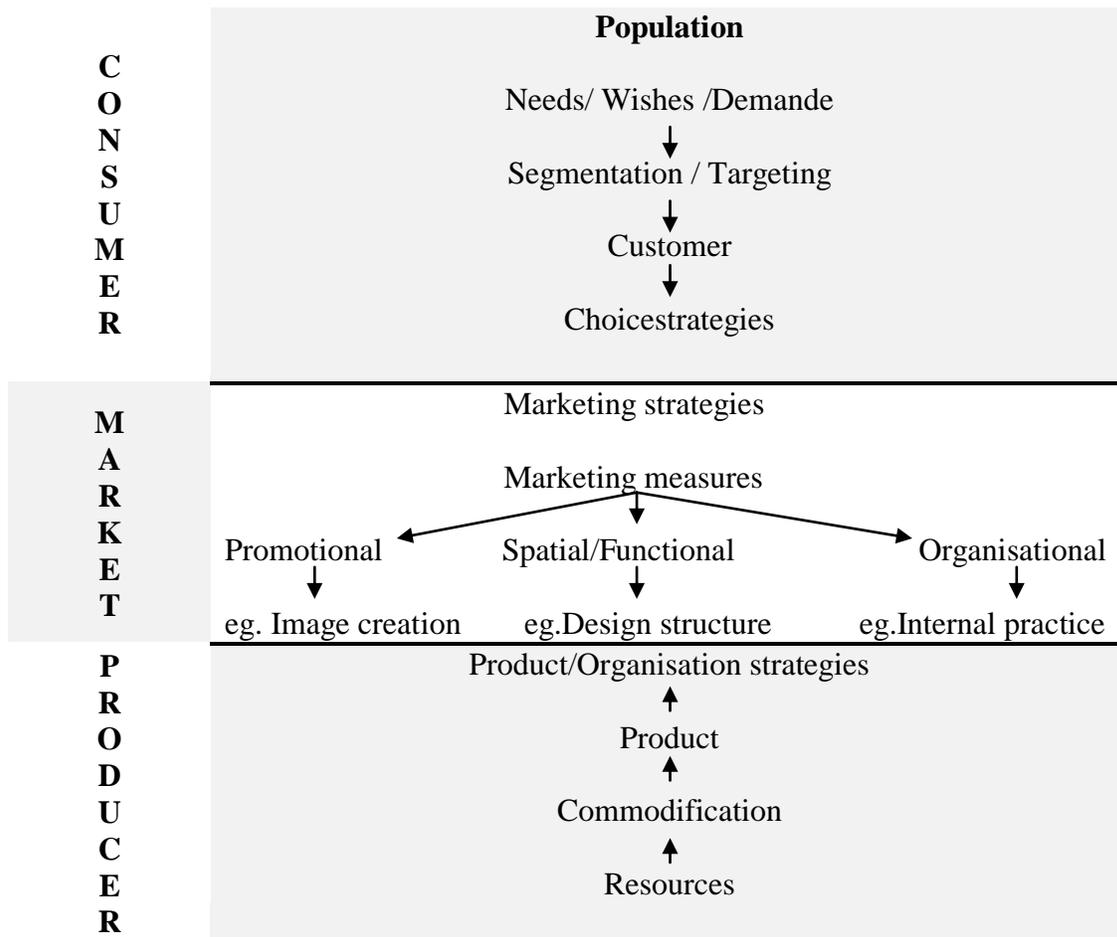
- The virtual tourism marketing is used to increase the global market share, and contributes to placing tourism sites on the global tourist map, through the innovation of technology, and the addition of 3 high comparative and competitive advantages using these technological means;
- Reducing costs compared to traditional marketing methods;
- Interactive virtual reality technologies contribute to increased learning and recognition of tourist sites;
- The widespread use of technology based on virtual reality technologies, which contributes to the ease of browsing through the Internet;
- Providing the element of protection and preservation of historical sites and architectural and artistic works of human and cultural heritage.

### **The nature of the city marketing**

The city's marketing role has been strengthened globally through, inter alia global competition between cities, tourism and urban management. For the exchange with the place marketing, (Deffner & Metaxas, 2006, p. 03) defined the marketing of the city as: the adaptation of the traditional model of Marketing's 4p's (product, price, place and promotion) and its performance in the procedure of city marketing. But many concepts cannot be easily transferred from products and services, and in addition, advocates are still assessing their suitability. Therefore, the city's marketing is still in an experimental stage and the process has evolved gradually. The purpose of marketing a city is to create strategies to promote an area or the entire city for certain activities and in some cases to 'sell' parts of the city for living, consuming and productive activities.(Hedley, 2005, p. 02)

The adopted city strategy is the next logical step, which in turn begins to raise issues about competing interests about what kind of city we want, and the form of urban renewal and development required. In other words, the city's marketing process raises the question of what kind of city we would like to see. What are the concepts, ideas, assumptions and processes that are brought together in marketing strategies? Assuming it can be implemented, how will these strategies shape our cities, and are they part of a vision we want to share? The negotiation process has already begun in practice where concepts are temporarily tested, the results of which will be filtered by our thinking and practice in the next century.

**Fig.1. The city marketing process**



**Source:** (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990, p. 28).

The city marketing procedures include: First, analyzing the current conditions of the city through available supplies and opportunities and available people, and secondly, identifying and selecting the appropriate vision, thirdly, planning the project to achieve the objectives, the last implementing measures that can be spatial, organizational, promotional or economic measures.

### 3. Dubai case study

Dubai is one of the cities that drew its own mark and installed it in the map of the international tourist cities. In this section, we will talk about the importance of tourism to the city, the impact of the corona pandemic on it, and how the relevant authorities work in it to market and cope with this crisis.

#### Dubai tourism and the impact of the pandemic on it

Dubai was able to become one of the most popular tourist destinations not only at the local or regional level, but also at the global level. She created for itself tourist attractions from nothing, she was able to transform a desert into a city where the mixture of authentic Arab culture and western modernization. Thus, it gives its residents and visitors a rich cultural experience, and provides varied

and exceptional options and entertainment and recreation outlets with high quality that suit all groups and tastes, making it a destination for tourists from different countries of the world.

The tourism sector is one of the most vital sectors and the main driver in achieving the economic development of the Emirate of Dubai. The diversification of the tourism product in it has contributed effectively to the Emirate's GDP, and its promotion locally, regionally and internationally. It also greatly affected other sectors such as the commercial, real estate, health and cultural sectors, in addition to its contribution to the development of public sectors, whether governmental or non-governmental, and on various facilities such as transportation (air, sea and land), public transportation, water, electricity, and even communications, as it contributed In the urban development that the emirate has witnessed in all fields during the past years, and also has a great impact on the investment climate and directing it towards economically feasible activities such as hotel and leisure facilities, retail trade, events and festivals, which resulted in attracting tourists from all over the world, until the Emirate of Dubai became Among the most attractive cities for tourists globally. From 2016 to the present day, Dubai maintained the fourth place for the most visited international tourist destinations. According to the MasterCard for International Destinations, the number of visitors from 2016 to 2019 was estimated at 15.27, 15.79, 15.93 and 16.73 million visitors respectively, and it was expected to receive 20 million visitors, (حكومة دبي، 2019، صفحة 142) especially with the Dubai Expo 2020 event, while Dubai has been the leader in international visitor spending globally since 2016 as well.

Therefore, this year is considered the beginning of the renaissance of tourism and its repercussions for the rest of the sectors within the emirate.

The World Travel and Tourism Council announced in 2019 that Dubai ranked third as the most attractive city in the world for direct international tourism spending of 28 billion dollar. And the Dubai government announced in its annual reports that the number of visitors of the same year was estimated at more than 16 million tourists who visited the city. While Emirates Airlines owned by the Emirate, commented that it made a profit of 862 million Dirham's (234.70 \$) in the first half of 2019 year. (دبي تتأهب لضربة مالية بسبب تداعيات كورونا، 2020)

As tourism is a driving force of added value in the emirate's economy, it has made the impact of the Corona pandemic very significant on this city. Where experts described it as a painful blow to Dubai not only for the tourism sector but also for the various other economic sectors associated with it, such as trade, transport, real estate, investment ... etc. As it is called the capital of money and investment in the Emirates and the Middle East. Thus, we can say that Dubai has suffered unprecedented losses in its history, which led to a sharp contraction in GDP. James Swanston, economist specializing in the Middle East and North Africa at Capital Economics at the beginning of the pandemic, stated that "if these measures (aimed at combating the virus) continue for about three or four months, they will be deducted from 5% to 6% of Dubai's GDP". (اليقوي و باربوشيا، 2020). However, all the expected scenarios did not describe the situation that resulted in this pandemic.

Among the repercussions and effects of the Corona epidemic on the level of the city's tourism sector in particular, we mention:

- **Aviation losses:** A poll conducted by the Dubai Chamber of Commerce, which surveyed 1228 executives across a group of sectors out of 245,000 companies in Dubai during the period from 16 to 22 April during the period of the total closure of the emirate, where three quarters of those surveyed were small companies With less than 20 employees. Through the final report of the study,

the Chamber of Commerce stated that it expects 74% of travel and tourism companies to end their closure at that time. (Turak, 2020)

During this period, Emirates Airlines profits were boosted by lower oil prices, which caused fuel costs to decrease by 15 percent to \$ 7.2 billion, about 31 percent of operating costs. However, the company saw a significant drop in its annual revenue by 6% to \$ 25 billion due to the coronary virus pandemic and the closure of the runway at Dubai airport in May.

The Emirates Airlines said that it transported more than 56 million passengers in the fiscal year, a decrease of 4% on an annual basis, while shipments decreased by ten to 2.4 million tons. The appreciation of the dollar also eroded its earnings by \$ 272 million, while intense competition also affected net profits. Even before the coronavirus pandemic crippled the aviation industry, the Emirati airline eased its flights aboard Airbus and Boeing, resulting in the loss of tens of millions of dollars in usual profits. (Staff Writer , 2020)

Emirates Airlines Group Chairman Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum said in a press interview that Covid 19 virus caused a sudden and massive decrease in the demand for international air travel. Also, it will take at least 18 months for the travel request to revert to a "normal life".

- **Postpone Dubai Expo 2020:** Dubai was ready to launch the upcoming global event, Dubai Expo 2020. It is well known that the International Expo is held every five years and lasts for a maximum period of 6 months, in the most famous international cities, which attract millions of visitors. It was scheduled to start from October 2020, and this event is intended to attract 20 million foreign tourists (without counting the Emiratis and their residents) according to the Dubai Vision 2021 plan. In addition to its presentation of various fields of culture, business and technology, it will include pavilions from 192 countries as well as concerts. And other events.

Dubai's spending on infrastructure set to organize Expo 2020 reached 30 billion dirhams (\$ 8.17 billion), according to Emirati reports. (أزمة كورونا تعصف بقطاع السياحة في دبي وتحطمه، 2020)

- **Closing hotels:** figures from "STR", which are specialized in data analysis, indicated that the hotel occupancy rate in the UAE decreased by 28.2% on the first week of March, while available room revenues declined 43%, while the occupancy rate fell to less 10% in most hotels. (أزمة كورونا تعصف بقطاع السياحة في دبي وتحطمه، 2020)

While Dubai real estate company Emaar stopped receiving reservations in three of its hotels for the period from March 15 to August 31, 2020. Al Habtoor City, a group of 3 hotels, was hit by 60% occupancy, according to the General Manager. For the group, "Friedrich Reinich", who stated: "Our occupancy rate should have been 90% at the moment and instead we only have 60%." The hotel put 300 employees on unpaid leave and closed the pool bar and beach club. (Al Yaakoubi & Barbuscia, 2020)

- **Canceling and postponing international exhibitions and events:** Dubai greatly benefits from tourism for exhibitions and events, which in turn attracts many visitors and stakeholders from all over the world, and its revenues are very important for the city. Perhaps the most prominent international exhibitions and events affected by the Corona pandemic include:

- Exhibitions related to the travel market: The most famous of which is the Arab Travel Market Expo, which was scheduled to be held from 19 to 22 April 2020 at the Dubai World Trade Center, is the largest tourism exhibition in the Middle East. The exhibition represents a meeting place for 40,000 professionals in the hospitality, travel and tourism industry, and

representatives from 150 countries, and it was scheduled that 2,500 exhibitors from all over the world would participate. (the official website of the Arabian Travel Market Expo, 2019) The exhibition allows senior executives and professionals in the travel sector to conclude and conclude billions of dollars in deals, thus reviving the tourism market in the Middle East in general, and Dubai in particular. However, due to the epidemic, it was postponed to the next year, and this news was announced in a statement issued by the organizers of the exhibition, saying: "Our decision came at this time to give the stakeholders as much time as possible so that they can make all the necessary arrangements and reschedule their plans and programs on this basis so that We guarantee a stronger attendance at the exhibition on its new date in May 2021. (دبي تتكبد خسائر إقتصادية فادحة جراء كورونا، 2020) Following this decision, the World Trade Center exhibition halls were transformed into a field hospital for the treatment of patients with the new coronavirus. (Reuters News Agency, 2020)

- Sports Events: It was decided to postpone the fourth edition of the Dubai International Equestrian Conference scheduled from 12 to 14 March 2020, (The official website of Dubai International Boat Show, 2020) and the Dubai International Horse Championship and the Dubai International Horse Fair were also postponed. Not forgetting the Dubai International Boat Show, which is the largest gathering of its recreational boats in the Middle East and North Africa, was postponed from November 24 to 28, 2020 instead of March 10 to 14, and the organizers said in a statement, "We are fully aware of the difficulty of traveling to the majority of the main stakeholders affecting the program." The activities of the exhibition due to the great restrictions imposed on them to leave their countries under the current circumstances.
- Close the commercial centers and markets: Dubai is an iconic city in shopping, as it has the largest mall in the world (Dubai Mall) in addition to a large group of shopping and shopping centers that have the most famous international brands, closed due to a pandemic. Also the markets in the Deira region such as the Naif market, the well-known gold market, the perfume and spices market are also affected by the total stone decision imposed by the government of the emirate, and thus stopped an important source of income for these last.

## Dubai Virtual Tourism

Dubai used the fourth industrial revolution, which is centered around online travel without the need for mobility. The rise of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR or Industry 4.0), and associated technological developments such as augmented and virtual reality, artificial intelligence, machine learning, as well as the Internet, have opened doors for virtual travel opportunities. This is what Dubai transformed in its favor, benefiting from virtual reality technologies and providing a highly efficient technical infrastructure in order to market its city in light of the current situation, as it worked to provide a package of virtual tourism and entertainment experiences, which meet the wishes of various individuals and acquaint them with the tourist attractions for later visit.

In this context, the efforts of the Culture and Arts Authority joined forces with "Dubai 360" to review some of the city's rich heritage and cultural sites and enhance its cultural image, through the "Dubai 360" website. This initiative also provides an opportunity for the target audience to see the museums of the emirate such as the Itihad Museum, Naif Museum, the Shindagha Museum, the Coffee Museum, the Crossing of Civilizations Museum, and the Coin Museum. (Venkataraman, 2020) In addition to historical sites such as Al Fahidi Historical Neighborhood, the famous Golden Frame, Heritage Village, Seef District, Hatta Heritage Village ... etc. As this website provides

interactive clips with slow photography, enjoyable tours rich with cultural and historical information provided by specialists.

Dubai has chosen the technology of direct and interactive broadcasting through social networking applications such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, for virtual tours of its most famous landmarks and the most loved among people such as Dubai Water Park, (Marino, 2020) which is known as Dubai Aquarium and one of the largest fish ponds in the world, also the Dubai Dancing Fountain, which is the largest dance fountain in The world is intended for everyone who visited Dubai, and we must not forget the interesting and purposeful offers that are displayed on the façade of the tallest tower in the world, Burj Khalifa, and other entertainment destinations. Dubai, through its cooperation with Snapchat International, managed to launch a campaign entitled "We meet soon" for two weeks. The latter managed to attract more than 9.2 million people from the United Kingdom and France who used Dubai Tourism lenses to make a virtual visit to its unique landmarks.

And because Dubai is a city known for its sporting activities, it launched a marathon competition directed to all segments around the world, where a video is being filmed to use the running machine and break records, an initiative aimed at encouraging staying at home. This is not the only initiative but rather launched many scientific competitions as the best writer, the Arab reader, the best educational content, also directed to the global audience and can participate from home without the need for mobility.

Business tourism has had a share in the city's marketing strategy, considering that attracting businessmen and encouraging investment is one of the main goals of the Dubai government as explained by "Dubai Vision 2021", and to make this city an attractive investment destination. It has used technologies that allow it to hold remote meetings, such as the use of the Zoom application, in order to limit the process of personal contact, and to highlight the importance of immediate adaptation to the rapid developments. The emirate's businessmen, whether from the ruling family or from individuals, have also benefited from such technologies, especially in the real estate field. This is what most of them said. (Disha, 2020) For example, Louis Alesop, CEO of Allsopp & Allsopp, one of the major real estate companies in Dubai, said: "Whether it's video calls to customers, video tours, or electronic signature of agreements, technology is the way our agents keep in touch with our customers [...], Buyers and Sellers were more receptive to our use of technology". Real estate portal portals like Property Finder and Bayut now also offer video tours to investors as part of their listings, "Our photographers are taking video tours of new properties, and this is a great way to showcase real estate these days. When it comes to scenes, we encourage customers to enter the property themselves and look around while customers wait outside to discuss comments on", said Dan Mc Geachy, sales director of Aqua Properties. A safe distance from each other. We also carry remote reviews on Zoom app and other online meeting applications". While Tregoning Property, another Dubai real estate company, devised a unique way of viewing homes even before they were closed 24 hours a day, investors were allowed to view the property without an escort after obtaining keys from an encrypted key box outside the apartments. "Clients were able to visit real estate as we shared a map pin on the WhatsApp app and told them how to get to the property", said Harry Turinging, managing director of Tregonin. Despite the decline in transactions and various activities in general in Dubai due to the pandemic, some sales and rentals are still ongoing.

Virtual reality technologies in the tourism sector are a good choice for individuals at the present time because of the implications imposed by the Corona pandemic, especially as the Dubai

has the capabilities that make it able to provide distinguished experiences in the use of the latest audio and visual technologies to create a qualitative shift in this type of tourism.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Virtual tourism has started moving from the stage of promotion to be an essential part of the tourism sector in Dubai and even in various cities of the world as a way to face the current challenges that the sector suffers from the consequences of the spread of the Coronavirus.

The virtual tourism is considered a golden opportunity in the future for the tourism sector in general and for the city marketing in particular, through:

- The low cost of virtual tourism compared to traditional real tourism;
- Knowing new tourist places and attractions without leaving home;
- Using virtual tourism to attract more visitors in the future after the end of the Corona pandemic;
- Ease of using virtual reality technologies and surfing the Internet almost completely for free;
- Using time to acquire new information and culture, with the possibility of obtaining information in an easy and immediate manner;
- Virtual tourism provides an opportunity to analyze visitor data, know what they are interested in, and determine the elements of tourist attraction to focus on when promoting the city as a tourist.

Despite the modest level of modern technology and the virtual reality of Algeria. Virtual tourism is an excellent idea and opportunity, especially in light of the blockade imposed by the Corona pandemic, in order to activate the strategy of marketing and promoting Algerian cities, and attracting local or foreign visitors in the future.

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