

CULTURE AND HERITAGE: THEORETICAL DILEMMAS

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PURPOSE AND IMPORTANCE OF STUDY FOR THE UAE

One of the challenges a young country like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) faces is that preserving heritage and culture is complex with rapid modernization, globalization, and the dilution of its indigenous population. Though culture and heritage are closely related and often used interchangeably, they are not the same thing, and very few papers explore the boundary conditions for each. While several tools exist to measure culture, few (or none) exist to measure heritage. UNESCO (2019) highlights that culture is acknowledged as the cornerstone of identity, providing a sense of belonging and communities' social and economic cohesion. The UN's Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11, Target 11.4) aims to "strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage." This research aims to identify the difference between culture and heritage from a theoretical framework and identify the perception of the Emiratis of these terms.

STUDY KEY POINTS

Heritage as a concept is an aggregation of meanings attached in the present to the past and is regarded as a knowledge defined within a social, political, and cultural context (Graham, 2002), that is a cultural practice where it is not inherent in physical objects or places, but rather that these objects and places are used to give tangibility to the values that underpin different communities and to assert and affirm these values (Smith, 1991; Smith, 2006). Studies on heritage have been called "unsystematized" and "heterogeneous," suggesting it is complex (Terry-Chandler, 1999; Harvey, 2001), and there is more synthesis required. The scope of the term 'heritage,' in general, internationally includes 'tangible' and 'intangible' and 'environments,' though the finer terminology of 'heritage' is neither streamlined nor standardized between countries (Ahmad, 2006). Further, the definitions of culture and heritage are not evident in theory (Harvey, 2001). The challenges lie in that culture and heritage are often considered resources of a country (vital for identity). Yet, authenticity can be staged, and tradition must be constantly reconstructed (Handler and Linnekin, 1984). This has implications from a practical point of view on policies and tourism initiatives as culture is a substantial part of the soft power countries want to project (Johnson and Thomas, 1995; Nye, 2008; Otmazgin, 2008; Chua, 2012).

The rapid growth and modernization of infrastructure have led to highly significant changes in the Emirati way of life. Preserving heritage is a crucial focus in the UAE Vision 2021 plan, which states that it strives to maintain a cohesive society proud of its identity and sense of belonging, and in the UAE Centennial 2071 plan (building Emirati values and ethics for the future generations) (see UAE Vision 2021; UAE Centennial 2071). With more than 85% of the population hailing from foreign countries and over 200 nationalities co-existing, the challenge is to preserve cultural values and heritage important to the Emirati identity. Anwar and Sohail (2004) find that tourists to the UAE prefer to visit museums and galleries or entertainment activities rather than cultural festivals or historical places.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper uses a mixed methodology: interviews and photo-elicitation method to understand the similarities and differences between the two terms from an intergenerational perspective, building on the methods of previous research (Kotsi, Balakrishnan Stephens, Michael and Stephens, Al Nahyan, Panz and Kotsi, 2019). A convenience Emirati sample consisted of family members such as grandparents, parents, and close relatives, such as aunts, uncles, and cousins. Interviews were conducted in a mix of English and Arabic, between youth and their elders: between two generations on their interpretation of pictures representing various cultural topics, such as family, women, men, festivals, cooking, clothes, travel, education, business, heritage, culture, art, artifacts. The basis of each interview for each selected topic evolved around the following four questions:

1. How are the pictures (old and new) linked to your (Emirati) culture and heritage?
2. How has culture evolved to adapt from your heritage, looking at the older generation to your generation?
3. Is there something the older generation regrets losing from the old way of life?
4. What do you think is positive now and why?

EXPECTED CONTRIBUTION AND FINDINGS

The final study will contribute to existing academic discourses on the theoretical differences between heritage and culture. The findings raise interesting questions for policymakers and have implications for tourism and cultural authorities in the UAE as they balance the fragile world between preserving cultural elements necessary to reflect the heritage and the need for economic contributions.

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