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Master of Science in  
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STRATEGIES AND TOOLS FOR BRANDING  
LUXURY DESTINATIONS

—

THE CASE OF DUBAI

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## Abstract

The use of branding techniques and principles in corporations has been around for a long time and it has proven to be useful in creating images for products and services that people hold in their minds and can instantly recognize. The same can be said about the concept of luxury. However, the application of branding to places, such as cities, is an idea that has been fascinating scholars throughout the world only in recent times. Place branding has been applied to different geographical scales, such as countries, regions, cross-border regions and cities and with different purposes, for instance to attract investors, new residents and visitors. However, and despite the recent theoretical developments on place branding, as well as methodological contributions, little theoretical refinement seems to have occurred. Furthermore, the gap between academic commentators and those in public or private sector place management actually engaging in branding applied to luxury destinations, such as Dubai, seems to be as wide and as unbridgeable as ever. This master thesis aims to contribute to bridge that gap in the literature and practice of place branding for luxury destinations. The theoretical exploration of this thesis is developed by detailing relevant findings from an example of luxury destination, the emirate city of Dubai. The use of a case study is helpful in the sense that it serves a role in paving the way towards an understanding of how branding strategies can be applied to luxury destinations, even in those cases where spatial (urban) planning is also arguably required. Starting from the acknowledgement of the existence of luxury destination, this thesis aims at shedding some light on what strategies and tools can be applied to the branding process of luxury destinations. It also aims to debate whether or not it is possible to create a brand for a luxury destination that is at the same time socially responsible and environmentally sustainable.

Keywords: Environmental sustainability, Luxury destinations, Place branding, Social responsibility, Spatial planning

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## List of Abbreviations

EIA – Environmental Impact Assessment

DFFSD – Dubai Forum for Sustainable Development

DMOs – Destination Management Organizations

FDIFSL – First Dubai International Forum for Sustainable Development

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

PPP – Public-Private Partnership

QTS – Quality Tourism Strategy

SIA – Social Impact Assessment

SOM – Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill

SP – Structural (Strategic) Plan

TMP – Tourism Master Plan

UT – Ultimate Threshold

## 1 – Introduction

Place branding aims to make a country, a region, a city or a tourism destination stand out in the complex and changing marketplace, enhance the place reputation, improve the image to the outside and inside worlds alike, and contribute to social and economic development (Oliveira, 2014; 2015). This master thesis focuses on place branding applied to the enhancement of luxury tourism destination. In line with Buhalis (2000), a tourism destination is a geographical unit which is understood by its visitors as a unique entity, with a political and legislative framework for tourism planning, marketing and branding initiatives.

The application of branding techniques and principles to cities, regions and countries, and in a lesser extent, to regions has proven to be an “increasingly appealing topic for academic research” (Ashworth *et al.*, 2015, p. 1) as demonstrated by the many books and journal articles published since the year 2000 on the topic (see for example, Lucarelli and Berg, 2011). In addition, it has proved a popular practice all around the world and has become a central part of the contemporary place management agenda (Boisen *et al.*, 2011; Kavaraztis *et al.*, 2015). However, and despite the recent theoretical developments on place branding (see for example, Berg & Björner, 2014; Eshuis *et al.*, 2014; Zavattaro *et al.*, 2015) as well as methodological contributions (see for example, Gertner, 2011; Chan and Marafa, 2013), “little theoretical refinement seems to have occurred” (Ashworth *et al.*, 2015, p. 2) and less attention has been given to the branding process of luxury destinations. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is twofold. First, it aims to contribute to the existing literature by investigating what strategies and tools of place branding could be deemed successful in the branding of a luxury destination. A luxury destination is understood here as a tourism destination characterised by exclusivity, high quality, superiority to alternatives, and unique designs (Park *et al.*, 2010). Secondly, it aims to understand to what extent the branding process of a luxury destination can be simultaneously socially responsible and environmentally sustainable (or not).

This thesis’s theoretical exploration is developed by detailing relevant findings from a case study. The emirate city of Dubai has been chosen as the empirical case

because, in the past fifty years, it has gone through a series of changes, from an urban planning point of view (Pacione, 2005). These changes have transformed the city into one of the world's major destinations for tourists, business and international events. The globalisation process has been playing a key role in contributing to these changes. As a matter of fact, the city's development has been, and still is, oriented towards a worldwide market, with the intent of making it a globally appealing destination (Newman and Thornley, 2005). The effects of globalization can be seen in the city's replication of famous mega-projects in a more dramatic way like in the building of the Burj al Arab skyscraper or in the creation of "cities within the city", each with its own individual theme (information technology /media; mixed-use real estate communities; financial centres; office/hotel complex; retail sector).

Dubai's desire to become a globally appealing city has influenced the reimagining process of Dubai that has become known as the City of Gold (Kelly, 2002) or again as the Instant City due to its fast-paced growth (Bagaeen, 2007). During this reimagining process, urban planning practice has been controlled by a top-down city branding intervention which has favoured the development of the luxurious side of the city, while leaving behind the needs of the local population as argued by Rifki and Moustafa (2007). Such an operation has meant that social sustainability accompanied by environmental sustainability had been left aside in favour of tourism-oriented purposes. It is only from 2009 that the city tried to employ a strategic spatial planning approach. According to Oliveira (2015) in line with Albrechts (2015) strategic spatial planning is a selective spatial planning process oriented to issues that really matter in day to day life, this contribute to envisioning, desirably, better futures for places.

This master thesis is structured as follows. First, an in-depth review of the existing literature on place branding, specifically at the city scale, was conducted in order to better understand the concept of branding when it comes to promoting an image for a city. Secondly, the thesis will focus on discussing the theme of luxury and luxury destinations, thus, shedding light over the case of Dubai. Thirdly, this thesis debates what luxury destinations actually are and what their social and environmental impacts are. Finally, a critique on the urban development of the city of Dubai since the

year 2000 will follow. The theoretical review and the case study will support the debate on the role of city branding strategies in changing place images, perceptions and discuss what are the most effective strategies and tools that can be employed in the branding of luxury destinations. This thesis will end with a conclusion summarizing the findings from the case study and providing managerial recommendations for branding luxury destinations in a more social and environmental sustainable-oriented way.

## 1.1 Research Topic

According to Bagaeeen (2007), the city of Dubai spent more than US \$100 billion in order to position itself as a key modern city featuring luxurious developments ultimately aimed at the creation of a solid tourism market targeting a specific group of visitors – those looking for luxury, sophistication, eccentricity, grandiosity. On the acknowledgement of this situation lays my motivation to conduct this research, thus discussing the role city branding can play in the shaping of a city's identity and image. As a matter of fact, in Dubai, city branding has been leading spatial planning interventions in the creation of the city's identity as the City of Gold (Kirchner and Rab, 2007). According to Rifki and Moustafa (2007), in Dubai, place branding has been dictating the rules of spatial planning interventions. In the vein of Oliveira (2014), place branding would be better developed in close dialectic with spatial planning strategies, instead of a full control from marketing departments over the branding process.

Dubai is taken here as a case study for three main reasons. First, because of my familiarity with the city, which I have visited several times. Secondly, because of the high-end offer the city possesses making it a luxury destination (Govers, 2012). Thirdly, and finally, because of the geography of the city – that lies in a desert – which causes difficulties to urban development, more so a fast-paced one like Dubai's.

After this introduction, this study will focus on what are to be understood as its three central topics:

- i) Place branding, specifically at the city scale;
- ii) Place branding for luxury destinations;



iii) Place branding in the city of Dubai.

The literature on place branding, specifically at the city scale, will be analysed in Chapter two. I will also focus on the idea of luxury destinations per se and their allure to the contemporary wealthy pleasure travellers. This is an important step in my research, as it highlights the emergence of a sort of urban ghettoization. The examples of the Al Maha resort in Dubai and the state of the Maldives is going to help me concretize the theoretical ideas that have thus far been presented allowing for an understanding of the social and environmental impacts of luxury destinations. The use of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and Social Impact Assessment (SIA) are taken into consideration when it comes to coping with environmental and social negative impacts. This is important in order to understand the feasibility of creating a brand for a luxury destination, without generating negative impacts upon communities and without risking to promote a top-down approach to urban planning. Arguably, the fact that this is possible does not go without a doubt.

Some other examples will be interspersed throughout the thesis. Chapter three will be useful in understanding what research has been done to help the writing of this thesis and why. Chapter three also introduces the case study. In Chapter four, the thesis debates the different phases of urban planning and development that have interested the city of Dubai since the year 2000 and what impacts they have had on its desert environment. I will then discuss Dubai's current city branding efforts and their link to the luxury sector – hotels, resorts, and boutiques among others (Ryan and Stewart, 2009).

## 1.2 Research Questions

Four research questions have been raised – two primary ones and two secondary ones. This thesis aims to provide some answers for the following questions.

The first focus of the main questions is on place branding of luxury destinations and its strategies and tools in order to better understand how it works. The second

focus lies on the understanding of a connection between social responsibility and environmental sustainability and branding strategies for luxury destinations.

### **Primary Questions**

1. What strategies and tools can be employed for successful place branding in luxury destinations?
2. How can social and environmental sustainable development be achieved in the light of the application of branding strategies and tools to luxury destinations?

Secondary questions, focus on how sustainability can be achieved without losing the luxury sides of a destination and on how luxury destinations can continue their pace and employ branding principles as such in the future without compromising the local system.

### **Secondary Questions**

1. How luxury destinations can maintain their “luxury-oriented activities” while at the same time contribute to fair, socially inclusive, and environmentally friendly solutions?
2. How can luxury destinations be promoted and branded in the longer range by respecting the local communities, the inhabitants, and the local assets (tangible and intangible)?

## 2 – Literature Review

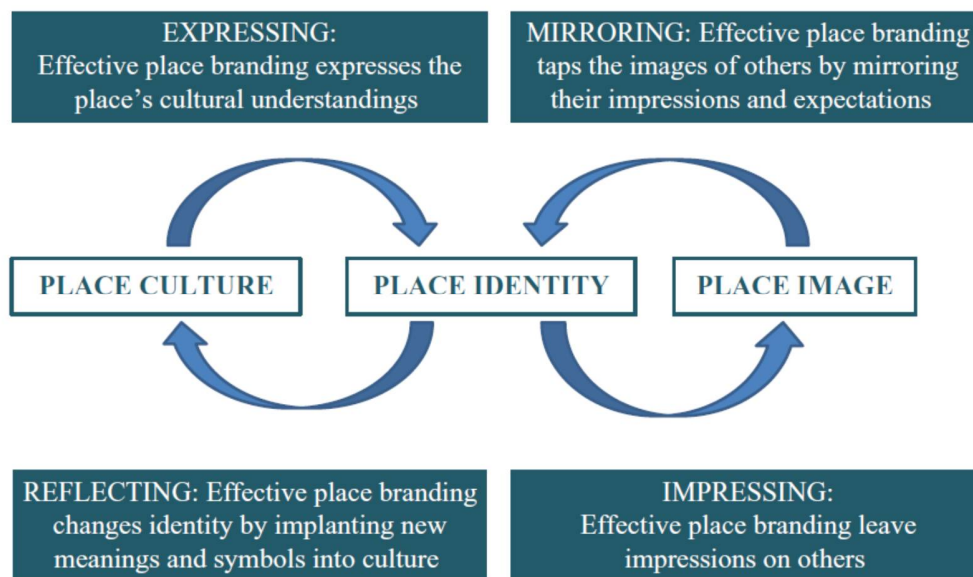
### 2.1 What is Place Branding?

In order to better understand what place branding is, it is important to explain what the word brand means. According to the American Heritage Dictionary (2011, p. 224), a brand is “a trademark or distinctive name identifying a product, service, or organization”. But it also signifies an impression that is left on those that experience it mirroring what is mutating outside on the brand itself and reflecting changes in images of identity (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). In the last 40 years the aim of branding has been to increase the value of either a product or service; in this way it has been noted that brand preference and loyalty for that particular product or service could be set up (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008). It is observable how brands can thus influence consumers' behavior and thinking while at the same time impacting culture through the reinforcement of meanings in people's lives (Aitken and Campelo, 2011). Moreover, it is important to understand that consumers are not passive recipients, but, as Aitken and Campelo argue (2011) they are allowed to control brand meanings thus changing their message. However, branding a place, such as a city, is a complex matter when compared to the branding process of products or services. Citizens and communities are not exactly like consumers and corporations not exactly like places.

According to Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) there is no single definition of place branding. Aitken and Campelo (2011, p. 913) convincingly state that “the influence of local culture and the enhancement of community identity [...] are of fundamental importance when attempting to define, represent, and understand [...] a place brand”., The authors go on (Aitken and Campelo, 2011)) and clarify that place branding is capable of enhancing both identity and culture; the latter being, together with the people that experience and produce it, the foundation of a brand. Several scholars (e.g. Ashworth, 2011; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013) underline the importance of identity and culture in the shaping of a place brand that can then serve as a promoter of a destination (Aitken and Campelo, 2011). For the purpose of this thesis – and to help the reader to better understand the approach postulated here – place branding can be

defined as the creation of a unique, universally-recognizable image for a place, by tapping into its context, culture, and environment (Ashworth, 2009). Its ultimate goal is to assert both the existence and the individuality of a place to insiders and outsiders alike (Ashworth, 2009). Place branding roots can be traced back to the 1990s. Oliveira (2014) writes that, at this time, city marketing was used to meet the requests of 'target markets' while at the same time collaborating with urban planning.

It is important to recognize place identity as the key idea lying behind a place brand and the management of it (Aitken and Campelo, 2011). Branding becomes then the promoter of identity instructing both the character and the quality of the brand experience itself (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). It does so, by intertwining four sub-processes of identity conversation – i) expressing, ii) mirroring, iii) reflecting, and iv) impressing – as represented in Figure 1:



Source: Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013)  
 Figure 1 – Branding influence on identity

In Figure 1, Aitken and Campelo (2011) suggest that place branding would be more effective when it is recognized as an instrument that allow the inhabitants of a place to express their cultural traits: traits or roots they recognize as part of the identity of the place. Figure 1 attempts to show the effectiveness of place branding:

1. Expresses a place's cultural understanding, thus incorporating culture into its mechanisms. This is particularly important because when a community's culture is acknowledged, the people can recognize themselves, ultimately acquiring confidence in the process;
2. Mirrors the changes that occur in external images by incorporating them in the brand. This is important because in this way people can easily recognize their own expectations and impressions;
3. Reflects new meanings and symbols into the local culture. In this way the production of new cultural understandings could help in the shaping of identity within the local community;
4. Impresses in the people its own content, relevance, and truthfulness. To do so the landscape is regarded as being the provider of impressions which will generate, in the people, images that they grow accustomed to recognizing as part of their own place identity (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013).

In line with Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) place branding would ideally keep on revisiting the image it is giving off in order to avoid becoming a linear process, thus promulgating the importance of being adaptable to the different situations that might occur. This image is ever evolving because what people perceive as part of their own culture and identity changes over time (Ashworth, 2009). Examples of this process can be found in the city of Groningen (see Ashworth, 2009) and its association with the artistic movement *De Ploeg* which has now been replaced by the *Groninger Museum*. Or in the city of Barcelona which was, in the 1980s associated to Gaudí and its art. Or, finally, in the Lake District, in Northwest England which has, since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, been associated with the poets William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Robert Southey (Spiazzi and Tavella, 1997). Personality association in place branding is debated further in this chapter and later explored through the case study.

As expressed in the previous paragraph it is very important to highlight the necessity of place branding to be taught as a nonlinear process but an ever developing one with no single path to follow (Ashworth, 2009). This is more true when we take into account the fact that, through time, images, perceptions, and tastes change (Aitken and

Campelo, 2011) and so place branding should evolve with them while at the same time be accompanied by changes in spatial planning (Ashworth, 2009) as we will see later.

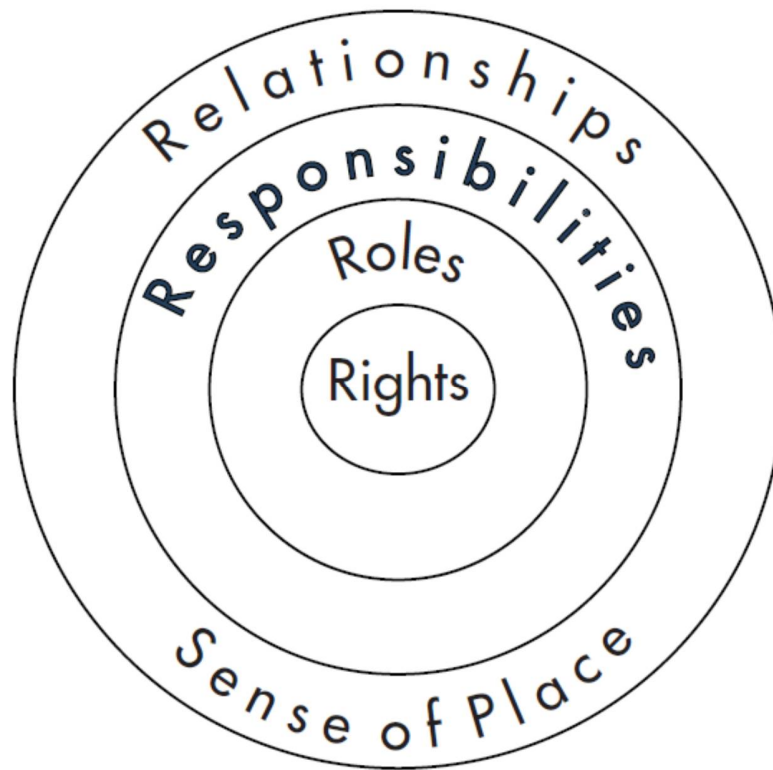
Despite the literature on the topic as well as case studies on the field, place branding is still being interpreted, wrongly, as simply the creation of logos and slogans and the use of advertisement campaigns, as argued by Kavaratzis (2012). Bearing in mind the excessive reliance on place promotion, Kavaratzis (2012) argues on three main problems of the current application of place branding:

1. It is often developed as a linear process, when it is rather non-linear as it does not happen from one day to another and must contemplate changes and uncertainty;
2. It defines a single uniform identity for a place. It states why this is important to a community and why it is reflecting of its essence, and it catechizes them on why the place they live in is of importance to them;
3. It does not clarify what role the local community play, making it less important than it should be.

Several authors (Aitken and Campelo, 2011; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008; Kavaratzis, 2012; Oliveira, 2015) stress the importance of stakeholders participation in place branding as well as the engagement of citizens in the process. By taking Katendrecht, a community in the south of Rotterdam, as case study, Eshuis *et al.* (2014) conclude that "citizen participation in branding processes is possible, and that place branding can influence wider urban policies, such as spatial planning and urban restructuring" (2014, p. 166). What emerges from the literature is the fact that there is a need for greater public involvement so that the local community's desires, needs, and views are expressed in the brand (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). Kavaratzis (2012) sustains the fact that place branding is to be regarded as a public management activity and therefore it has to have the support of the local community who has to actively participate in the shaping of their brand. Local inhabitants' involvement is highly important when considering the fact that they are the ones which have, due to their living in the place, the emotional ownership of the brand itself (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008). What has emerged in the literature is that there is little involvement

of the locals which, by osmosis, grow to lack a sense of belonging (Aitken and Campelo, 2011).

Place branding must be taught as a democratic process which involves both the community and the government as well as spatial planners, place managers and place branding experts (Oliveira, 2014). By lacking civic and institutional involvement, there is the risk of compromising the sustainability of a place brand in the longer range (Aitken and Campelo, 2011). This democratization process is useful in order to avoid any bias that might emerge. To sustain such a course of events is important to enlist the help of external consultants who are bias-free and who are thus able to assess the strengths and weaknesses of a place when considered as in competition with others (Ashworth, 2011). According to Oliveira (2014; 2015), the involvement of different stakeholders in place branding can become useful in creating a collaborative link at the different levels of authorities and at different scales. By redefining the identification of people with places, communities and social groups, place branding represents a relationship between governments and those they govern, as well as a relationship between people and places. These relations become then useful in the formation of a true sense of identity and belonging. To facilitate this process, Aitken and Campelo (2011) have identified what they call the 4 Rs – 1) rights, 2) roles, 3) responsibilities, and 4) relationships — as key elements. Aitken and Campelo (2011) clarify how these four elements, which interact infinitely, are of vital need in the (re)creation, (re)establishment, and reinforcement of both engagement and relationships across the community. Figure 2, on the next page, shows their idea of infinite interaction in the creation of sense of place.



Source: Aitken and Campelo, 2011  
Figure 2 – The four Rs of place branding

Despite some recent theoretical developments on participatory place branding, the practices of place branding and place brand management still neglect citizen and community participation in place branding strategies. However, it is of utmost importance to understand how there is a need to acknowledge that place branding would be effective when linked with collaborative, communicative, and consensus planning (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008) or even taken as an instrument in strategic spatial planning (Oliveira, 2015). Context sensitive approaches, as opposite to one strategy fits all, are required to achieve effective, sustainable and long-term success branding places. What is actually important is valuing the idea of cooperation and combination of the communicative aspects of a brand, by engaging in the process policy-makers, special planners and place branding experts (Ashworth, 2011; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008). Ashworth (2011) convincingly argues that “place branding appears to offer a highly flexible instrument of place management” providing “collaborative links



between [...] disparate activities and departments" (2011, p. 8). Therefore, it is advisable to use it as it can prove useful in "bridging the different ethos, working practices and approaches of public service providers and commercial entrepreneurs" (Ashworth, 2011, p. 8).

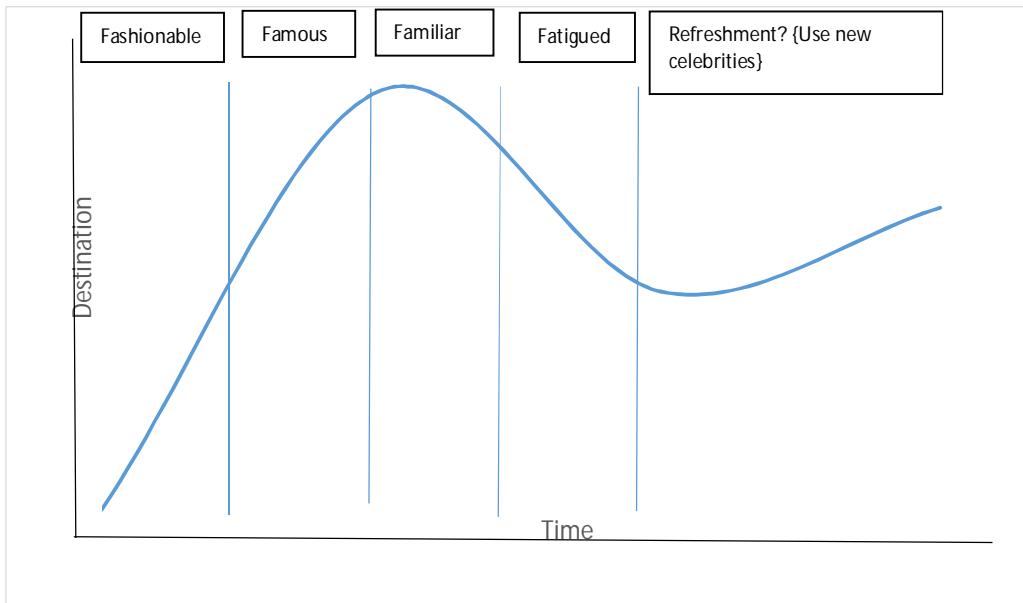
What further emerges from the literature is how place branding can be used as a tool to alleviate, among other problems, a place's physical dereliction (Oliveira, 2014). Oliveira (2015) debates place branding as a strategic spatial planning<sup>1</sup> which open a window for change in government agendas in order to work towards the creation of improved places so that they could become more resilient both in the short and long term. As said before place branding can be used in spatial planning and vice versa. Oliveira (2015) argues that strong place branding allows for strong spatial intervention. In this case place branding is the leader (the author provides the example of Tuscany, Italy). On the contrary, strong spatial development allows for strong place branding. Here the leader is spatial planning (the example the author provides is in the area of North Minnesota, USA). Therefore, it is understandable how place branding requires spatial planning and vice versa in a collaborative way where consensus building is prioritized.

When creating a brand it is important to have a specific understanding of what problem this brand is trying to solve (Ashworth, 2011). In this way it will be possible to avoid creating a brand that is not understood by the people it caters to and to avoid dangerously developing a brand in which citizens don't see themselves represented. Ashworth (2009) suggest three instruments as being of valuable importance when doing place branding. These three instruments could be used individually or simultaneously in order to produce effective results:

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<sup>1</sup> Strategic spatial planning evolved in the 1950s to respond to the need of growing corporates to manage the future. In the 1970s it has grown to include the problem of climate change. Strategic spatial planning focuses on a limited number of strategic key issues, on place-specific qualities and involves relevant place actors and concrete activities of citizens, politicians and spatial planners (see e.g. Albrechts, 2013).

1. Personality association: association of an individual with the hope that its unique qualities might be transferred to the place (see the lake poets and the Lake District example above). However, as already observed, with time many changes occur and so individuals might lose their attraction losing their recognizable attraction power. This process is known to academics as the destination brand fashion curve that is represented here:



Source: Author work based on Ashworth, 2009  
 Figure 3 – Destination brand fashion curve

2. Signature building, design, and district: associate a place to either a flagship building, given design elements in the public environment, or purposely shaped distinctive districts. The flagship building needs to harbour public functions and be notable and noticeable, preferably designed by famous architects. Examples of such buildings are the Centre Pompidou in Paris by famous architects Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano or the Burj Khalifa in Dubai (as debated in chapter five) designed by Adrian Smith. However, Ashworth (2009) highlights that the dangerous of the edification of such flagship buildings is the creation of “cathedral in the desert” making it alienated from its own place. This calls for integrated approaches considering the inclusion and sponsorship of more factors of image creation. A signature design has to make the place unique to both insiders

and outsiders like the “bolognaization” of Groningen through the creation of Italianate buildings designed by Italian architects. Even in this case there is a danger regarding the possible creation of a kind of catalogue used by image providers that can be copied around the world. Finally, we have the creation of signature districts, like the Rijksmuseum neighbourhood in Amsterdam, which can have both public and commercial functions. The creation of a specific district can prove interesting as it can, in a way, contribute to design a brand for the entire city.

3. Event hallmarking: use a planned event to brand an entire city. To make it most effective event hallmarking could be combined with personality association (Ashworth, 2009). It is also important to mention the fact that large events have the power to prompt urban renovation, like in the case of ‘Milano EXPO 2015’ and the conversion of an unused greenfield into the expo grounds (see e.g. Musico’, 2014). Two issues emerge when considering this tool for place branding: first, hallmarking events alone are not likely to be of great impact on place brand. Secondly, brands have, in some cases, increased brand recognition, but inadequately, like the case of the ‘European cities of culture’ showing how poorly managed a city could be (Ashworth, 2009).

As stated earlier it is important to mix these three tools in the process of place branding but also it is to be remembered that spatial planning management measures should be part of the branding process itself.

After the above review we can summarize what has been said thus far by stating that place branding is a valuable tool in the sense that it can be employed as part of wider spatial planning strategies – e.g. by repositioning and restructuring (Oliveira, 2015) – in addition to providing a distinctive identity to a place. What it is important to do is to avoid fossilizing on the idea that the process of branding is linear and top-down as highlighted by Aitken and Campelo (2011). A top-down approach is understood as the government dictating a place brand to the community and the outsiders through agencies for economic and tourism development (Aitken and Campelo, 2011). The prioritizing of government stakeholders and corporate interests in the process of brand

designing (known as brand architecture) as a strategy for economic development is stressed by several authors, among which we can cite Aitken and Campelo (2011) and more recently Oliveira (2015). Therefore, a need for avoidance of top-down approaches is understood as necessary if we want to apply strategic – instead of single-headed – thinking in place branding processes (Oliveira, 2015). Successful place branding requires the use of collaborative and communicative approaches that see different departments and stakeholders working together in order to realize a brand that is valid for the local community and the place itself and not for those that are branding it with biases or even without place emotions/sense of belonging. The fact that the spatial planning department is involved in the branding efforts of a place is of vital importance as it can help in the shaping of an identity that is true to the local community and place, thus avoiding any disassociation and alienation of people and place.

## 2.2 What are Luxury Destinations?

Literature about luxury tourism destinations is limited (Attwal and Williams, 2009; de-Miguel-Molina *et al.*, 2014). Therefore it is not easy to discern a luxury tourism destination from a “mainstream” tourism destination. For the purpose of this thesis, the focus on luxury will be stressed with an analysis of what pertains to luxury destinations. Nonetheless, the reader should know that suggestions that might arise either here or later on in the thesis could be applied to tourism destinations in general.

In order to understand what makes a tourism destination become recognized as a luxury one it is important to understand what luxury means. Park *et al.*, (2010) argue that “the English word *luxury* derives from the Latin term *luxus* and means sensuality, splendor and pomp. Its derivative, *luxuria*, means extravagance, riot, etc. The major characteristics of luxury are exclusivity, high quality, unique design, superb performance or durability, and extraordinary superiority to the comparable substitutes, all of which justify the high price” (p. 165).” Destination is defined in the American Heritage Dictionary (2011) as “the place to which one is going or directed” (p. 497). Therefore the definition postulated in this thesis comprehends a luxury destination as a place to which people travel and is essentially characterized by high quality facilities and services,

exclusivity of benefits provided to the visitors and uniqueness compared to other destinations.

Tourism destination branding is a recent phenomenon (Blain *et al.*, 2005). In 1998, at the Travel and Tourism Research Association's Annual Conference, destination branding for tourism proposes became a key topic of study (Blain *et al.*, 2005). The opinions on destination branding are discordant. On the one hand, Parkerson and Saunders (2005) argue that there is little evidence of its efficiency while Marzano and Scott (2009) state that it is difficult but not inefficient. On the other hand, Oliveira (2014) states that destination branding can be successful if there is a provision of a different image from that provided by the place's competitors and if the city is positively perceived by consumers. Other scholars, for instance Ashworth (2011), debate that branding is not always good for all tourism destinations. What ultimately emerges is that the branding process of tourism destinations should be adaptive and proactive (Ashworth, 2011) perpetuating a consistent branding strategy that creates, manages, communicates, and applies a distinct image (Oliveira, 2014) while at the same time improve a destination's economy and promulgate competitively (Rehan, 2014).

Visitors of luxury destinations have specific purposes, therefore they are influenced by the different aspects of a city differently (Sahin and Baloglu, 2014). In general it has been observed that they expect high-quality customer service and facilities at an upscale level which differ from the needs of mass market destination tourists (Blain *et al.*, 2015). As a matter of fact, luxury destination seekers are interested in what the place has to provide in terms of its quality, authenticity<sup>2</sup>, performance, and privacy (Atwal and Williams, 2009; Brenner and Aguilar, 2002; Park *et al.*, 2010). These four themes are highly important in the creation of an image for a luxury tourism destination. What emerges from the article of Blain *et al.* (2005) is that people who choose a luxury destination are more prone to paying higher amounts for higher services. This helps them in associating the brand they are willing to pay more for with their social status of luxury consumers (Atwal and Williams, 2009).

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, chapter 4 and the creation of the 'West meets East' philosophy.

The luxury goods market has a constant annual growth rate of about 7 percent (Park *et al.*, 2010) helped by international travel and the use of digital technologies when choosing a destination (Oliveira and Panyik, 2015). Seekers of luxury buy four categories of products (Park *et al.*, 2010): substance, shelter, clothing, and leisure. Luxury tourism destinations encompass all these four categories that are almost in all instances, as the following table shows, intertwined with what Atwal and Williams (2009) identify as the four dimensions of luxury experience.

4 dimensions  4 categories	Sustenance	Shelter	Clothing	Leisure
Entertainment: Creation of greater social interaction	Restaurants, bars, clubs	Lounge bars, private clubs	Malls, boutiques	Luxury cruises
Education: Provision of information to tourists	Guides on where to eat	Concierge service	Guides on where to shop	Lectures
Escapism: Offer of specialized holidays	Restaurants, bars, clubs	Resorts, hotels, private villas and islands	Boutiques in hotels or private resorts	Private yacht rentals, adventure experiences, private jets
Aestheticism: Guarantee visitors' pleasure of admiring (most luxury activities fall in this dimension of high intensity)	Décor of restaurants, bars, and clubs, etc.	Décor of hotels, resorts, yachts, etc.	X	Special-interest travel

Source: Author work based on Atwal and Williams, 2009; Park *et al.*, 2010  
Table 1 – Luxury tourism dimensions and categories intertwined

According to Blain *et al.*, (2005) and Pike (2005), destinations are more complex entities when compared to products or services, therefore a place name itself and a strategy that sees the creation of a logo and a slogan are not sufficient (Pike, 2005). Distinguishing between luxury destinations and destinations with different purposes is of importance in order to carefully prepare destination brands that are specifically catering to the luxury sector (Atwal and Williams, 2009). Phau and Prendergast (2001) write that luxury brands should “evoke exclusivity, have a well-known identity, enjoy high brand awareness and perceived quality, and retain sales levels and customer loyalty”. Moreover it is important in a luxury destination for a brand to be functional, emotional, and symbolic (Sahin and Baloglu, 2014), thus embracing customers’ needs and money at all levels. Therefore, some authors have argued (see Blain *et al.*, 2005) on the value of logos and slogans when these two are used as providers of an overall idea to future visitors, helping in creating a sense of anticipation. Nonetheless, Blain *et al.* (2005) and Pike (2005), opposite to what is thought by Destination Management Organizations (DMOs)<sup>3</sup>, argue that effective destination branding first and foremost needs to take into consideration:

1. Sustainability: social and environmental as will be discussed later;
2. Believability: what a logo shows is important in presenting the overall idea of a place, therefore it must be true to reality;
3. Relevance: make sure that a place is of importance;
4. Exclusivity: provide a brand to a place that is better than the emulating competition.

The following section will focus on the impacts that are caused by specifically, but not necessarily only, luxury destinations.

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<sup>3</sup> DMOs are very important in the marketing of a tourism destination to visitors. Members of DMOs include hotels, restaurants, resorts, tour operators, and government bodies among others. However, they perceive branding as simply the creation of a logo and a tagline (Blain *et al.*, 2010), which goes against what this chapter says. There is, therefore, a perceived need of changing the ideas of these major players when it comes to (luxury) destination branding.

## 2.3 Social and Environmental Impacts of Luxury Destinations

In the previous sections destination branding for luxury places has transpired to be a useful tool. In this section, I am going to analyse the positive and negative impacts that are caused by luxury destinations. Luxury tourism tends to be isolated from the social and environmental realities, thus resulting in the failure of the economic development of a destination (Brenner and Aguilar, 2002). However, it is important to understand that the development of luxury destinations is bound to cause different impacts, especially if urban planning is done exclusively for economic development purposes (Brenner and Aguilar, 2002). For this thesis, environmental and social impacts will be taken into account. The examples of the Al Maha resort in Dubai and the state of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean will help understand environmental impacts better.

Arguably, some urban planning policies generate negative environmental impacts. Furthermore, tourism destination planning as well as destination branding, when not enough attention is paid to the environment, could also be called responsible for some environmental impacts. In the literature two major negative environmental impacts have been observed (see e.g. Kirtgens, 2002). First, there is the problem caused to the natural environment that is transformed through zoning, construction, and other planning procedures that emerge from the desire of creating an identity for the destination that is to being branded. This impact often emerges during the stage of planning a destination for the flux of visitors. Secondly, there is the issue of environmental degradation that is, instead, caused a posteriori, when a destination is already receiving a large number of visitors. In fact, it is observable how, as a consequence of bad habits, there might arise pollution (e.g. waste production, use of fuel-burning vehicles), waste of water in a desert environment, as in the case of Dubai (see chapter four), and disturbance of the local fauna and flora.

Al Maha is a luxury fenced resort in Dubai where a night stay cost from US \$1000 to US \$2500 US dollars (Ryan and Stewart, 2009). The resort itself comprises 42 single-story suites each with a private pool and unbroken view of Dubai's desert, restaurants, and a spa center. The staff (ratio of 3:1 for 96 total guests that can be



accommodated) also organizes several activities to enhance the authenticity experience of the desert with camel rides. The environmental impact of the resort is high as it is a high consumer of resources and energy, among others, for torches and lights that create an idea of entering into the paradisiac resort from the darkness of the outside; and of 1.2 to 1.7 million liters of water consumption daily (Ryan and Stewart, 2009).

An example of negative environmental impacts might be useful here. The Maldives, a tropical country in the Indian Ocean composed of twenty six coral atolls, which are made up of hundreds of islands, have seen their tourism sector grow rapidly from the 1970s (Scheyvens, 2011), registering around one million visitors a year since 2012 (Scheyvens, 2011). In 1978 there was the adoption of Quality Tourism Strategy (QTS) that provided strategies for sustainability, while a new Tourism Master Plan (TMP) was drafted for the period 2007-2011 (Scheyvens, 2011, p. 152). Nonetheless, these are not respected in their entirety as the intentions of DMOs are more directed to 'window dressing' rather than sustainable development<sup>4</sup>, be it environmental or social (Scheyvens, 2011). This has caused erosion of beaches and threats to the coral reef among other problems (de-Miguel-Molina *et al.*, 2014).

Positive environmental impacts have been observed in the case of the Al Maha resort in Dubai. In fact, Ryan and Stewart (2009) state that through the use of efficient tourism management<sup>5</sup> it is possible to obtain two positive results. First, there is the creation of conservation zones, like those inside the resorts that have allowed the DMOs to reintegrate fauna and flora that was previously extinct in the area due to the harsh condition of the desert environment of the location. Secondly, spatial zoning inside the resort has allowed for the creation of areas that are either accessible to people or not, the latter being reserved for the conservation of animal and plant species alike. Even in the case of the Maldives positive environmental impacts have been reported from the observation of several deluxe venues (de-Miguel-Molina *et al.*, 2014). If on one side,

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<sup>4</sup> Sustainable development has been defined in the Brundtland Commission's paper *Our Common Future* as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Efficient tourism management is very important from the part of DMOs as it can assure – next to the negative solutions coming from the raising of profits from the spoiling of the environment – natural zone regeneration.

luxury resorts with a high sustainable image are less prone to sacrificing their activities and services, those with high management have been observed to be more willing when it comes to sacrificing environmentally impacting activities and services. What has emerged from the research is that sustainability is possible in those cases where luxury resorts with a high management. The authors (de-Miguel-Molina *et al.*, 2014) stated that it all depends on the willingness of a place to sacrifice its activities and resources and invest funds in favour of environmental protection. The inclusion of different stakeholders at different levels seems to be the best path to follow. In this way, regulations, policies, and legislation could be drafted, thus setting the rules for the best practice in favour of sustainable development of the tourism – and therefore economic – sector (de-Miguel-Molina *et al.*, 2014, p. 92).

Tourism planning and destination branding processes could also generate social impacts. Kirstgens (2002) and Brenner *et al.* (2002) identify four major social impacts. First of all, they illustrate the problem young people faces when confronted with the search for a job in such a luxury-oriented environment. More and more youngsters tend to avoid a job in a certain sector to fulfil another in the hostelry one, thus causing a diversification of the economy. Secondly, the destination starts to attract highly-skilled workers penalizing the less fortunate locals that then go through a process of marginalization. Thirdly, there could be an increase in the rate of begging, crime, and prostitution due to the social exclusion witnessed by some less fortunate locals. Fourthly, prejudices arise towards the local population of the visited destination which is also emphasized by the fact that luxury venues tend to seclude themselves from the outside world. It is not difficult to find situations where locals are forced to sleep on the streets right outside the walls of a private villa as figure 4 on the next page shows.



*Source: Author own picture, 2014.*

*Figure 4: Social reality on the streets of one of Dubai's Private Resorts*

However, social impacts could and should be minimised through social policies targeting integration. Scheyvens (2011) underlines that social responsibility/sustainability in the Maldives has increased in the past years thanks to the creation of a pro-poor tourism. This means that luxury tourism has been allowed to grow but without forgetting the more unfortunate individuals of the country (socially constructed as a luxury destination). The Maldives government's Tourism Master Plan 2007-2011 was a great tool because it fostered the idea of the need for public consultation in order to create benefits for all residents of the site (Scheyvens, 2011, p. 152).

What has emerged thus far from the readings is that luxury development has negative environmental and social impacts. However, some of these impacts could be minimized and even avoided if:

1. best practices of management and regeneration principles – the union of both environmental sciences knowhow and the positive roles humans can play – are applied;
2. social inclusion together with the use of collaborative approaches are fostered by the government with specific regulations;
3. and holiday makers continue their offer of luxury activities and services with due sacrifices;

If the aforementioned points were to be integrated in both tourism destination planning and destination branding of luxury destinations, sustainable development could be viable.

Given the literature and the figures above, the author, on the next page, provides his proposed conceptual framework for this thesis.



Source: Author own work.  
Figure 5: Conceptual Framework of the Study

## 3 – Methodology

### 3.1 Qualitative Analysis

For the purpose of this thesis a qualitative analysis has been employed. Qualitative analysis or qualitative research is to be understood as flexible research aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of a topic with the decoding of its structure and patterns (California State University, n/d).

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the existing link between the use of place branding strategies for luxury destinations and social responsibility and environmental sustainability, the use of observation and document analysis has been used. Observation was carried out by the author of this thesis in the month of January 2014 while visiting the city of Dubai. Several documents (written and visual) have been gathered through the fieldwork. Unfortunately, the planned in-depth interviews have not been possible as the representatives of the planning department were not available, despite several attempts.

### 3.2 Case Study

According to Yin (1984), the use of case studies is one of the several ways in which qualitative research can be carried out. Yin (1984, p. 1) goes on saying that case studies can help researchers focus on a specific situation in order to gain in-depth knowledge about how a research with a wider outlook can benefit from applying its theoretical point of view. Collecting local knowledge and reading the appropriate literature has helped the author in the compiling of the case study on Dubai. If, on the one hand, the analysis of available literature is of help to the researcher in understanding the theory lying behind their work, on the other hand, fieldwork and the creation of a case study provide the necessary means for the creation of a more tangible reality (Yin, 1984, p. 2).

The documental analysis attempted to highlight the urban development of the city in its environmental and social context and the use of place branding and marketing strategies that have recently been employed to create its image as the City of Gold.



Source: [kids.britannica.com](http://kids.britannica.com)

Figure 6: The UAE and its neighbours

Located on the coast of the gulf country United Arab Emirates, Dubai or Dubai's geography is characterized by white, sandy desert patterns with the presence of ever-growing dunes. Towards the west, the desert gives way to the Hajar Mountains, consisting of an arid and rugged landscape.

Starting in 1968, the population has grown steadily reaching 370,788 individuals in 1985, 689,420 in 1995, 961,000 in 2002 (Newman and Thornley, 2005), and 2,106,177 in 2013 (CIA, 2014). This rapid growth in population is the result of two main aspects. First, the expansion due to immigration fuelled by economic growth in the oil industry.

Secondly, the expansion due to natural increase, a consequence of improved health conditions and higher fertility rates combined with decreased infant mortality.

Dubai's economy blossomed out of the oil industry during the latter part of the twentieth century. However already by the 1990s, a process of economic activities diversification had started and, in fact, today the oil industry accounts for just 7 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It was with the drafting of the 1996-2010 Strategic Plan that the emirate decided to move towards a more tourism-based development and ever since the proliferation of this sector has been possible also thanks to the great investments made by foreign countries, attracted by the ever-growing presence of tax-free zones (with the first commencing operations already back in 1985). Today, the tourism industry accounts for 31 percent of the emirate's GDP (Emirates247, 2014). Another important sector in Dubai's GDP is retail, which has seen the growth, among others, of prestigious estates, luxurious vacation retreats and condominiums, extensive golf resorts, and gigantic shopping malls, with one of them, the Dubai Mall, being the largest one in the world. This shift from an oil-based industry to a luxury tourism-based economic development has caused a true change for the city that is now considered as a major destination.

### 3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

In January 2014 I visited Dubai in order to collect information on the stages of urban planning development and branding initiatives already in place as well as the environmental and social impacts that have stemmed from them. Taking pictures and discussing with the locals has helped me to better understand how the emirate city of Dubai had taken on the process of branding itself for the creation of an image of luxury that I had the opportunity to familiarize with during my previous visits to the city.

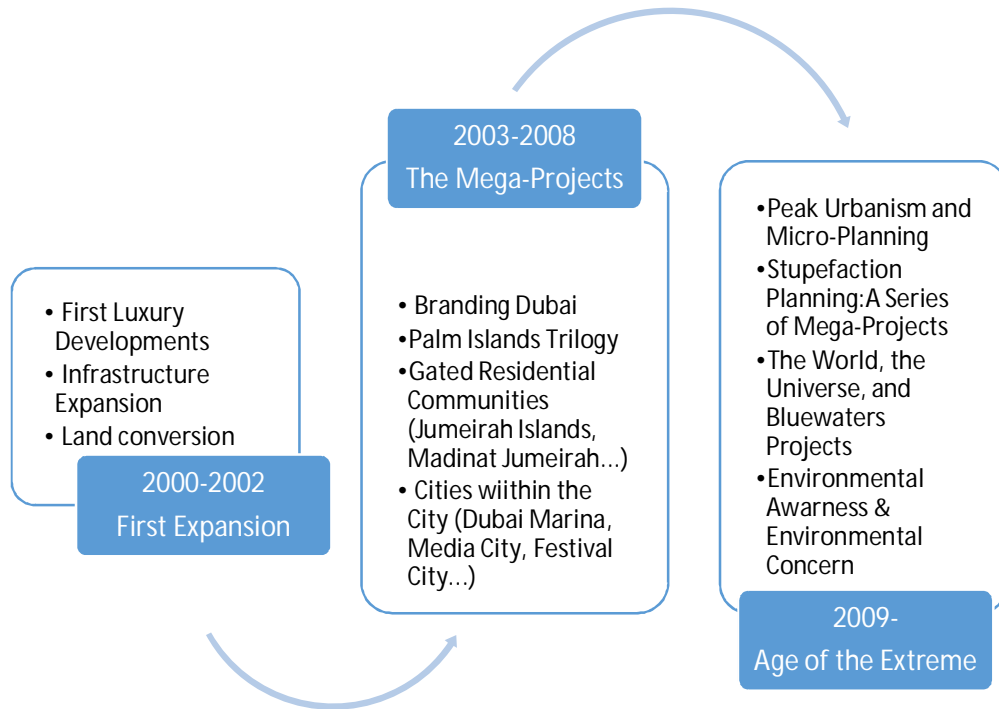
An analysis of various documents on branding practices, luxury tourism, and urban planning of Dubai was conducted to support the rationale and develop key concepts to be used in the testing of the theoretical framework above presented. This has been necessary so that the readers can better understand how the research has



tried to answer the questions in chapter one focusing on the city of Dubai as the case study.

In addition, the author of this thesis has found necessary to observe the use of branding strategies in other cities together with the study of strategies for the creation of a sustainable tourism destination. This has been possible especially thanks to the cases of the state of the Maldives and the luxury Al Maha resort in Dubai. By comparing and contrasting these last two case studies it has been possible to realize how luxury destination branding (at a national and local level) has been utilized with the creation of a luxurious image while at the same time promoting a sustainable development. Moreover, the case on the Maldives is useful because the tourism sector represented 30 percent of the GDP in 2011 (de-Miguel-Molina et al., 2014), which is similar to values registered in Dubai (the tourism sector correspond to 31 percent of the GDP). Therefore, both destinations can be considered as comparable. Finally, the cases of the Maldives and Al Maha are two important means of comparison has they have proved how sustainability of these luxury destinations, with a strong place brand focused on their luscious environment, can function if there is collaboration of different stakeholders together with the willingness to actually renounce some activities and services (de-Miguel-Molina *et al.*, 2014, p. 93). The question is if this can be done for the entire city of Dubai as well as for other places around the world.

## 4 – Empirical Case - Dubai



Source: Author

Figure 7 – Timeline of Dubai Urban Development

### 4.1 From Past to Present: Origins to 2008

With the 1996-2010 Strategic Plan (SP), the city of Dubai decided to attain the status of developed economy and in order to do this there was a need for a diversified economic growth to be achieved through the creation of a city image, the modernization of production, and attraction of foreign firms that would provide the desired investment. In turn, this allowed for the planning of a high-end tourism industry which eventually started the building-spree that was to change the city-state's landscape for good (Pacione, 2005).

Dubai's atypical development is that of a developing country, with massive state involvement and unbridled planning policy (Hvidt, 2009). In fact, since the beginning of

the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Dubai has observed incomparable land conversion becoming recognizable as “the largest architectural experiment ever” (Katodrytis, 2007, p. 38). Behind Dubai’s 21<sup>st</sup>-century accelerated urban development is the figure of sheikh Maktoum bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who envisioned the enlargement of Dubai blending the city’s rich heritage and Middle Eastern history and culture together with Western ideals of development and luxury in order to provide an image instantly recognizable worldwide (Mitchell, 2007, p. 31).

In the year 2000, the city of Dubai west of the Creek, was just an immense stretch of desert; however, by 2002 it began witnessing an extensive change in its form with the creation of the first mega-projects and the expansion of its infrastructure. This marked a break from the traditional past made of souks and desert land. What the city administration purported to do was the promotion of mixed-use urban developments oriented towards the luxury goods sector (Bagaeen, 2007). What emerged was the creation of top-quality luxurious developments which include gigantic malls, extravagant hotels, spacious residences, and invaluable services (Berbić, 2008).

From 2003 to the 2008 global financial crisis, Dubai reached stardom as a fast-moving, unstoppable, almighty new city. Its major milestones are represented by the creation of the notorious “cities within the city” (Pacione, 2005), mega-projects among which we can find Internet City, Media City, Festival City, International City, and Dubai Marina. Next to the development of these communities, took place the building of great skyscrapers accompanied by terraforming in the gulf waters reaching extremes with the creation of the famous Palm Jumeirah (figure 8) and the incomplete Palm Deira (figure 9) and Palm Jebel Ali (figure 10) islands trilogy. All these mega-projects represent some of the most spectacular developments in the modern world. They all concur in the creation of the luxurious Dubai image that has allowed for the thriving of a solid tourism industry based on the idea of Dubai as a sun-and-sea exclusive retreat where urban marketing shouts Disneyland revisited.



Source: [www.psu.edu](http://www.psu.edu)  
Figure 8 – Palm Jumeirah



Source: [www.eikongraphia.com](http://www.eikongraphia.com)  
Figure 9 – Project for Palm Deira



Source: [www.eikongraphia.com](http://www.eikongraphia.com)  
Figure 10 – Project for Palm Jebel Ali

Dubai is place to some peculiar spatial developments which give to the city a distinctive character when compared to major European cities as well as when compared to other cities located in the same geographical area, such as Abu Dhabi. First, its rapid development saw the city expanded to about 140 square kilometres by 2005 (compared to the 2 square kilometres in 1950). This expansion, however, was not unplanned because it was justified by the forecasting of the increase in the demand for tourism from 3 million a year to 15 million (Bagaeen, 2007). Nonetheless, it is important to consider the fact that Dubai is situated in a natural desert environment, thus resulting in vast gaps found among its developments which, by 2005, gave the city the general feeling of being a work in progress (Elsheshtawy, 2010) or a city under construction. Secondly, it has been observed how a sort of gentrification took place when the government decided to create separate gated communities for expatriates and for locals. The Madinat Jumeirah gated community can be taken as a striking example of such a phenomenon. The community, promoted through heavy urban marketing, is filled with summer houses, boutiques, hotels, and other luxurious facilities, among which a state-of-the-art Spa (Rifki and Moustafa, 2007). What transpires is that images – and therefore urban branding strategies to create them – are used to manipulate both

the urban space and its consumption so that those fortunate enough wouldn't be bothered by the outside reality made of underpaid, exploited Asian construction workers, therefore cancelling all kinds of social interaction among the city's various groups. This is in contrast with the idea that has been earlier touched that when branding there is the need for union of local culture and identity.

Theming is the first keyword that Dubai used for its branding strategies in the period 2003-2005. It consisted in slapping an exotic form on buildings and elevating them above everything else while at the same time providing a solid westernized image of luxury (Kanna, 2011). Again here we can observe the duality of the sheik's family desire to create a city with a "Western-oriented look" and to the future while preserving its Eastern heritage (e.g. the Ibn Battuta mall, where 13<sup>th</sup>-century arabesque architectural style meets western consumerism) (Kanna, 2011, p. 106). A second keyword adopted by the city in its branding efforts was Starchitecture. Among them we can name Jean Nouvel designer of the Dubai Opera House, Carl Ott and his National Bank of Dubai, and Hazel Wong and his Emirates Towers. All these iconic buildings saw the emergence of a proposal of the ridicule with three striking examples being an underwater hotel, the underground Cavern Hotel, and the rotating Dynamic Tower designed by architect David Fisher.

Before 2002, the concept of real estate in Dubai was non-existent (Elsheshtawy, 2010), however by 2005, it accounted for 24.2 percent of the emirate's GDP (*ibidem*). Starting in 2003, three major developers (Nakheel, Emaar, and Dubai Properties), controlled at various levels by the government, were responsible for the creation of aggressive outstanding iconic developments. These served the purposes of a planned marketing campaign promoting an image for Dubai as a hub of dynamism and progress (Bagaeen, 2007). Its ultimate goal was of attracting affluent visitors and investors. Indifferent to every kind of warning, the government kept on piling cement on cement up until 2006 when it became visible that there was a need for sustainable planning.

In fact, Dubai's has been heavily criticized by organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) for being the country with the highest ecological footprint per

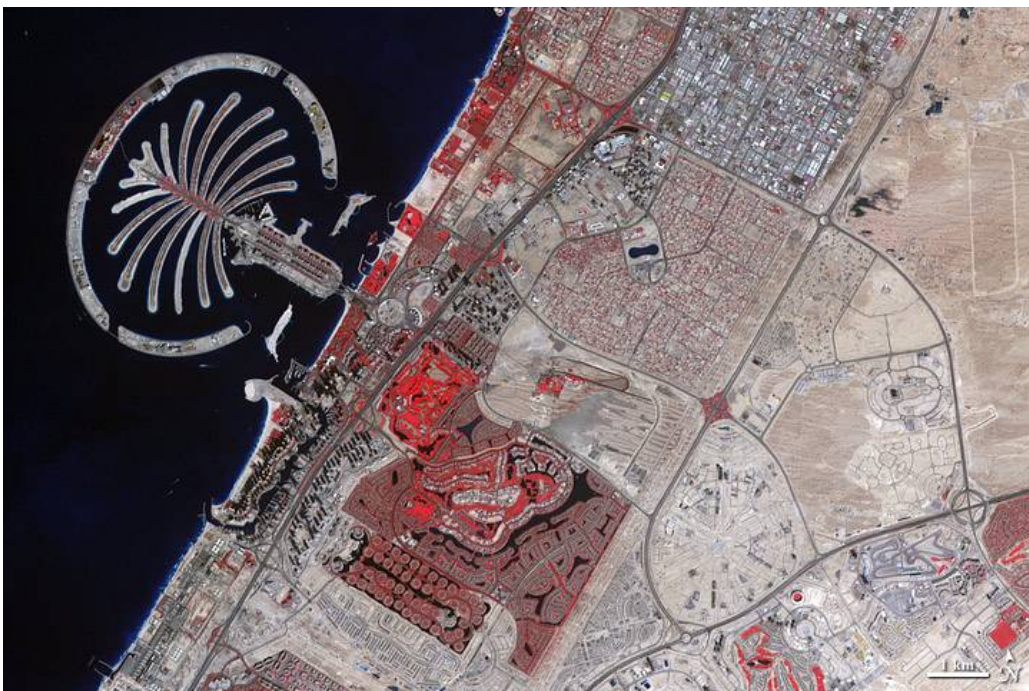
capita (Hvidt, 2009). The WWF's Living Planet Report of 2004 cited the emirate's footprint to be 9.9 hectares per person, an extremely high number compared to the world's median of 2.2. This number reached 11.9 hectares per person in 2006 (Mitchell, 2007) and has become a major problem for the city's sustainable development. Some solutions were proposed at the 2006 Dubai Forum For Sustainable Development (DFFSDD) (Bagaen, 2007) and in 2007 the Municipality started to search the world for plausible solutions connected to green-building practices without, however, the desire to stop the development machine (O'Sullivan, 2009). Yet, the 2008 economic meltdown canceled or put many new projects on hold. Figures 11, 12, and 13 show the fast-paced development of Dubai in 2000, 2003, and 2008 respectively.



Source: [www.earthobservatory.nasa.gov](http://www.earthobservatory.nasa.gov)  
Figure 11 – Satellite Image of Dubai in November 2000



Source: [www.earthobservatory.nasa.gov](http://www.earthobservatory.nasa.gov)  
Figure 12 – Satellite Image of Dubai in November 2003



Source: [www.earthobservatory.nasa.gov](http://www.earthobservatory.nasa.gov)  
Figure 13 – Satellite Image of Dubai in November 2008



## 4.2 Toward the Future: 2009 and Onward

In 2007 the municipality of Dubai introduced its 2015 Strategic Plan. The city proposed solutions for economic, environmental, social, and urban development. Concerning the urban development of the city, the emirate's major goal was that of ensuring the creation of sustainable developments through 4 main key points (City of Dubai, 2007):

1. Urban Planning: optimize land use and distribution to balance economic, infrastructure, and social development needs while preserving natural resources;
2. Energy, Electricity, and Water: provide efficient energy, electricity, and water supplies to meet Dubai's growing needs;
3. Roads and Transport: provide an integrated roads and transportation system to facilitate people and goods movement while improving safety levels for all system users;
4. Environment: maintain Dubai as a safe, clean, attractive, and sustainable environment.

The strategic thrusts adopted for point 1 of the Strategic Plan (SP) included the consideration of the poor and the exploited construction workers together with the integration of appropriate planning policies (almost non-existent in Dubai). For point 3, the city proposed and built a diversified public transport system in 2009 and reviewed and improved roads and traffic safety levels. Finally, point 4 proposed to update and align environmental regulations with better enforcement mechanisms, to adopt a sustainable development approach by integrating environmental outcomes within development policies, and to raise much-needed environmental awareness in an arena, as Dubai is, where it was non-existent throughout its 5-year unbridled planning-spree. The First Dubai International Forum on Sustainable Lifestyle (FDIFSL) of February 2015 (UNEP, 2015) can be regarded as the first step towards reaching the SP goals.

In the period from 2009 to today, Dubai – even if heavily bruised and forced to borrow money from Abu Dhabi (Coker, 2009) – didn't stop dreaming and kept on building in what became known as "a laboratory of the extreme" (Mueller and Quednau, 2012). Extreme here emerges as a metaphor to characterize the territorial

expansion of the city. The city didn't grow because of a real need for extra room for an increasing population (there was already enough unused space), but because urbanism became a tool of exaggeration where nothing is real and all is just a spectacle (Elsheshtawy, 2010). Dubai's focus shifted from integration (i.e. mixing the West with the East) to stupefaction where superlatives (the biggest, the greatest, the most luxurious, the tallest, etc.) were to be praised and worshipped. In 2009 Dubai started to rely massively on vision and theming and created a plethora of the overly dense, overly planned, and overly themed (Andraos and Wood, 2013). Peak urbanism<sup>6</sup>, with its communities, created a sort of micro-planning that debased the master-planning ideals of pre-crisis Dubai dating back to the 1960s and 70s. This micro-planning of single peaks further enhanced the vision of cities within the city each connected to the others by how long it takes to drive among them, hence promoting traffic and pollution.

With theming, Dubai managed to create an image for the world which is quite different from the reality of its harsh physical and social environment; in fact, the many projects built and proposed did not take into account realistic population growth curves and the desert environment; instead, they were used just to market the city and to date they have actually managed to do so. Branding and marketing strategies have been heavily involved in the years from 2009 to today. This has been achieved through the creation of images promoting luxurious vegetation, blue skies, and state-of-the-art architecture, showing new developments in Dubai in a seductive way. Examples of Dubai branding, and consequently marketing, strategies can be seen in Figures 14 and 15.



Source: Author's photograph, 2014

Figure 14 – Advertisement for Downtown Dubai

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<sup>6</sup> According to Andraos and Wood, "peak urbanism concentrates zones of intense activity, usually in the form of private, clearly bounded, and themed developments, and leaves the space in between to be filled with a low-rise combination of residential villas, dirt roads, and small-scale commercial activities."



Source: [www.pbase.com](http://www.pbase.com)  
 Figure 15 – Advertisement for Burj Dubai, now Burj Khalifa.

Next to peak urbanism, we also find in Dubai stupefaction planning idealizing the impossible made possible (Elsheshtawy, 2010). The Burj Khalifa (Figure 16), completed in 2010, is the tallest man-made structure in the world at 829.9 meters. The skyscraper can be seen as the symbol of Dubai's stupefaction planning. The project's developer was Emaar Properties and the tower was designed by the Chicago-based Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill (SOM) studio. Started in 2004, the inspiration for its base was a desert flower of this region to underline, once again, the connection with the Arab peninsula making, in the meantime, Dubai a globally-accepted city. In a way, we can recognize the building as the maximum point of Dubai's sheik's branding effort in the creation of an image of a luxurious destination where West meets East. In Dubai,



Source: Author's photograph, 2014  
 Figure 16 – Burj Khalifa

architecture serves a double purpose: that of expressing the city's economic development and progress and that of perpetually projecting into the world the image of thriving luxurious heavenly destination (Katodrytis, 2007).

It's not rare to find extents of green grass facing desert sand. Why has this happened? Imposed greenery was forecasted to cover 8 percent of the city by the end of 2009 in order to follow, once again, western cultural and aesthetic patterns (Doherty, 2013). However this green rush costs money due to the scarcity of freshwater; so, in order to maintain these standards, Dubai spends an excessive amount of money on water desalinization and extraction causing serious damages to the ecology of the environment. With this and other anti-sustainable practices – waterparks, terraforming, etc. – (Sorkin, 2009) Dubai managed to create many issues at the environmental level. For example, according to 2009 figures (Trotter, 2010), the average Dubai hotel produced twice as much carbon emissions when compared to its European counterpart. This laissez-faire trend caused serious alarm and it is just in the last 5 years that the city has started to really consider the environment with the development of sustainable projects like the use of solar power for heating or the regulation of recycling of waste. Nonetheless, Dubai, the city of excesses with its impossible skyscrapers and incomprehensible gated communities, is far behind when considering its almost total lack of eco-friendly activity.

Four kilometres off the coast of Dubai lies the artificial island complex known as The World (figure 17). Nakheel, after a concept by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, started realizing this project in 2003 and by 2008 (year when the archipelago was completed), 60 percent of the islands had already been sold on an invitation-only basis with prices starting at US \$30 million. Advertised as the most exclusive development ever, The World is a replica of our planet made up of 300 islands divided into four zones each served by one hub, thus fostering the idea of differentiated communities. The archipelago comprises islands with different areas for a total area of 6 by 9 kilometres, included the surrounding breakwater islands. As of the end of 2012, only two islands had some sort of development on them due to the 2008 financial crisis,

while the remaining 298 were still uninhabited and allegedly sinking back into the sea (Bates, 2010).



Source: [www.theempressofdress.com](http://www.theempressofdress.com)  
Figure 17 – The World

The newest (announced February 2013) offshore development project approved by Dubai's sheikh was the island Bluwaters designed to face the Jumeirah Beach Residence. Construction commenced in May 2013 and is expected to be completed by 2018 (Gulf News, 2014). The island will be highly touristic and will include exclusive mixed-use facilities to boost the city's economy starting by the end of this decade. One of its major landmarks will be the projected Dubai Eye (echoing the London's Eye), a 210-meter Ferris wheel offering panoramic views on Dubai Marina and many of the city's landmarks.

#### 4.3 Current Branding Efforts of Dubai as a Luxury Destination

In section 4.1 and 4.2 we have discussed how branding has been used in Dubai as a way to promote urban planning. What has emerged is that Dubai has had a vertiginous change in its urban form as shown by figures 11, 12, and 13. City branding, together with city marketing, have been used to create an image that is not strictly related to the

local culture and identity. This is somewhat in contrast with the desires of the city's sheik. This section debates the current branding efforts of Dubai.

Observation and analysis of documents have shown that Dubai's branding strategy is definitely interested in the promotion of an image of the city as a luxury destination where people would want to spend time. The city branding strategy has seen a diversification of the available services and activities in order to respond to the different needs of luxury-seeking visitors. Moreover, it is possible to observe that the development of the Dubai brand has also had the double function of attracting foreign investors as well as contribute to the expansion of the city. In the following table a summary of Dubai's tool in branding is provided together with some examples so that the reader is facilitated in immediately grasp the branding reality of the city.

Tools	Examples
Personality Association	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tiger Woods Dubai: a private residential community with a golf course designed by the famous golfer Tiger Woods (Atwal and Williams, 2009).</li> </ol>
Signature Buildings	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Burj al Arab</li> <li>2. Burj Khalifa</li> <li>3. Mall of the Emirates</li> </ol>
Signature Districts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Dubai Marina</li> <li>2. Dubai Festival City</li> <li>3. Dubai Media City</li> </ol>
Signature Designs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Palm Trilogy</li> <li>2. Sheik Zayed Road (its bridges are decorated with arabesques)</li> </ol>
Event Hallmarking	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Bid to host the Expo 2020 (waiting further results of the biding)</li> </ol>

*Source: Author work based on Ashworth, 2009  
Table 2 – Dubai branding tools and some examples*

Findings show that branding in Dubai has had several negative impacts. The real estate boom that has interested Dubai, especially in the period 2003-2008, has signified a high increase of the living costs (Bagaeen, 2007) which has then meant that the worse off section of the local population has been forced to relocate to the margins of the new developments. As shown, the branding strategy of creating a sort of heavenly city on earth forcing urban planning in a desert area – we might also read a sense of desire for utopia – has resulted in the creation of social and environmental impacts.

Social impacts can be seen in the alienation of people from the city centre, in the creation of underpaid labour, and in the ghettoization of urban zones. Environmental impacts have to do with traffic, increase in energy demand and consumption, changes in water currents, desalination of gulf waters for irrigation, and threats to the marine biodiversity. All these impacts taken together collide with the image promoted by Dubai. The question rises spontaneously, is this branding strategy sustainable in the longer run? Govers (2012) shed some light on a possible answer as he acknowledges that the image of luxury desired by Dubai has suffered from the 2008 economic crisis. In fact, the crisis has helped in realizing that unbridled development is not the right solution in the longer run.

I can summarize that, in Dubai, branding has played a prominent role in urban planning and development of the city in the past fifteen years, but it has also meant that the creation of a luxury image on one side has created negative social and impacts on the other side. Even if those impacts are hidden from the view of visitors, spending a month doing research in the city has allowed me to spot them as the following pictures show.



Source: Author, 2014  
Figure 18: Air pollution in Dubai



Source: Author, 2014  
Figure 19: One of the many 'for sale' signs



Source: Author, 2014  
Figure 20: Street sign indicating one of the many private luxury communities of Dubai





*Source: Author, 2014*  
*Figure 21: The luscious manmade fantasy..*



*Source: Author, 2014*  
*Figure 22: ...and the harsh desert reality.*

The problem in Dubai is that, even though several key stakeholders are aware of the situation of Dubai, they are not doing anything to avoid promoting a city image that is not sustainable socially and environmentally. In the following chapter, I will provide what I think are viable strategies and tools that can be used for creating a sustainable destination branding in luxurious developments like Dubai.

## 5 – Strategies and Tools for Branding Luxury Destinations

What has emerged both through the literature review and through the analysis of the case study is that applying branding strategies to luxury destinations is a complex matter when compared to the branding process of corporations, products and services. There are six major reasons that make this process more difficult when it comes to tourism destinations (Pike, 2005):

1. They are, compared to products, more multidimensional as they involve different dimensions of the society, such as economy, politics, and spatial planning. Therefore they are a complex entity to brand;
2. A multiplicity of stakeholders hold different interests over the destinations that request the right balance among them;
3. Brand loyalty is fallacious as people might decide not to visit a same place again even if they have enjoyed their stay (Pike, 2005);
4. Weak decision-making capacity, and therefore the problem of who has the power of deciding, is not clear and can be often found lying in the hands of the government and its agencies for development;
5. Funding is a serious issue; there is a need to combine different sources of funding, public and private. Public-private partnership could generate positive impacts on the management of the brand;
6. A top-down approach has to be seen as non-viable as it tends to exclude communities which are part of the brand that visitors interact with; consensus-building would be more effective.

Luxury destinations, such as the case of Dubai, are too complex entities where place branding has been implemented. Top-down approaches to place branding and urban planning, lack of willingness, unfair power distribution, scarcity of specific regulations, and geographical conditions all concur in the slowing down of a branding approach that has to be as sustainable as possible. Creating an image of luxury and communicate a city as a luxury destinations when social values and the wellbeing of communities are not taken into consideration during the process reveals fruitless in producing change and generate social, environmental and economic benefits. This

chapter tries to explore what tools and strategies could be employed during the branding process of luxury destinations.

In line with Ashworth (2009) the combination of the three instruments of place branding mentioned above could work a starting point for more social responsible destination branding process. Findings from the case study on the city of Dubai, a mix of personality association, together with event hallmarking, and signature building/district/design could be useful in the provision of a desired image of luxury. However, I find that these three instruments, applied alone, are not enough as I will further justify. If on the one hand they are useful in creating an image for a place, often that image does not mirror the local culture, assets and needs. Findings from the field work in Dubai shape my thinking and the argument that the ongoing branding process in Dubai does not reflect the culture or authenticity of the city. This is an important statement that I will elaborate further.

Arriving in Dubai, through its major airport, one immediately feels the West meets East idea that the city government and the Sheik planned to create for the city. For example, famous western boutiques and bar chains lie under the luxurious Arabian-style architecture in Dubai International Airport. However, immediately outside of the airport – which lies on the outskirts of the city – the idea of social exclusion is striking as it was immediately visible to me that the richness of the interior was nowhere to be found on that strip of land which was not the object of any new development. Asian people are everywhere serving the rich western visitors. Moreover, the desert makes itself present while driving towards the city of Dubai itself. One has to arrive to one's resort or hotel before starting to envision the image that the city provides to the outside world. I cannot say that this image is perceived in the same way by all of the city's insiders, especially so in the case of the poorer ones. Yes, in Dubai one is stricken and left in stupor by the grandness of the whole experience, but to a more trained eye the bits and pieces of the harsh reality emerges almost immediately.

Therefore, I think that mixing the three instruments of place branding provided by Ashworth (2009) is not sufficient. What I think would be more useful is the

integration of these instruments with other tools as follow. Firstly, I think that the use of policies pertaining to urban planning and sustainable development could be useful in helping pave the way for a sustainable brand. Secondly, I find that the creation of regulations on how to proceed in the branding process would be of help in guiding the involved stakeholders through the process itself. Thirdly, legislation providing a framework for power sharing and decision-making could help in the fair division of responsibilities. I think that these six tools can be useful, if employed in the following strategies, in order to deliver a successful brand.

I have come up with the creation of six strategies that, if followed by those in charge of the branding process of destinations, might prove successful brands for luxury destinations. Even if destination branding, as observed earlier in the thesis, is not supposed to follow a linear process with a beginning and an end due to the complexity of the places that have to be branded, I think that successful branding could result from following a list of strategies, it being understood that adaptation could be seen as a valuable resource in order to avoid creating a distorted image and, therefore, a fallacious brand.

- **The first strategy** consists in the creation of a link between the already existing built environment of the luxury destination and all its cultural, environmental, and social aspects that make up its heritage. It is of utmost importance to preserve the true identity of a destination that is being branded in order to provide the authenticity that luxury seekers are looking for. In order to do so, the professionals involved in the branding process could create an image that is appropriate and pertaining to the reality of the location so that expectations are met when arriving at the site and maintained throughout one's stay. Once the destination has been left, the image that the consumers had in mind before arriving could in this way still be with them. At this step, it is also important that funds for the sustainable development of the brand (and the city when urban planning is required) are provided. Both public and

private funds should be sought in order to create, from the very beginning of the branding process, a Public-Private Partnership (PPP).

- **The second strategy** requires the identification of what Atwal and Williams (2009) call “key customer segment”. In my thesis the segment that the development of the brand is catering to is the luxury one. The reason for it is the provision of tourism services. This step might seem a simple one, but market analyses should be carried out in order to make sure that the desired market segment is targeted. Moreover, in this step the provision of tourism facilities – e.g . hotels, resorts, restaurants – should be effectuated by constructing a network of DMOs that is willing to sacrifice certain services and activities for the sake of a sustainable brand.
- **The third strategy** is crucial in the city branding process. This strategy suggests the need to carefully link the brand with the desired target group. In order to provide this link, two double steps could be followed. Firstly, marketing managers would develop an attractive offer. This means that the image they want to show the targeted segment could be able to entice a desire for visiting the destination. It must be made clear here that this image should be, as per strategy number one, as true as possible to the reality of the location. Luxury does not have to mean constructed fantasy, but it has to mean reality rather than utopia. New luxury consumers tend to be more interested in the natural than in the artificial (Pforr, 2001), so this is what should be provided. Moreover, diversifying the offer can help in creating an even closer to reality image. Secondly, at this level an image communication strategy through appropriate marketing should be developed. DMOs and branders should work in cooperation to provide the honest marketing that is true to the luxury destination that visitors will visit. It is to be bore in mind that this step should involve adaptability. Only by being adaptable can the correct image be purported. City brand managers must adapt to their location. Each destination is different and has its own and unique assets, therefore a one-size-fits-all approach must be avoided.

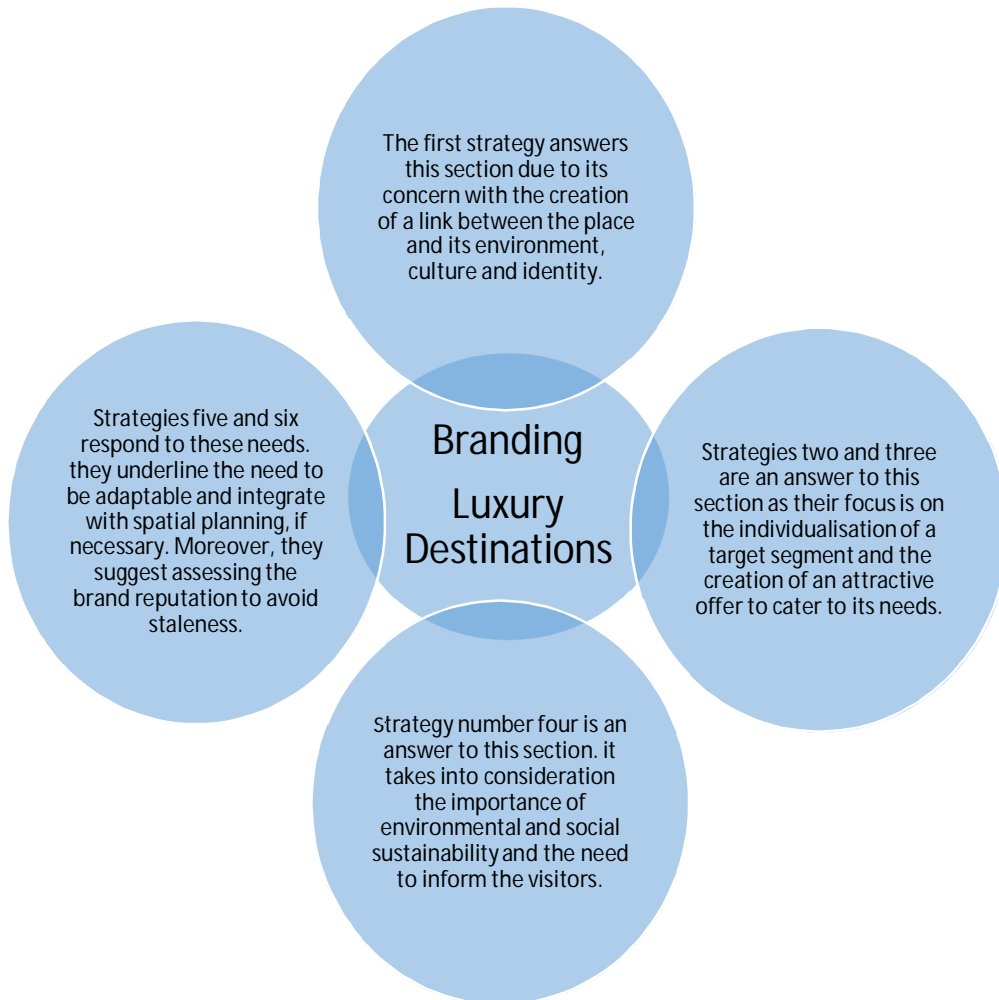
- **The fourth strategy** for branding luxury destinations this thesis brings forward is city branding open to cooperation. Cooperation among city actors, local inhabitants, communities and organisations (the government and the various industries involved in the creation and furnishing of the tourism experience) aimed at bringing to the list of top priorities in any city branding process social inclusion and environmental protection. Top-down approaches should be reproached. In fact, for a brand to deliver a successful image, it must be true to its origins. If we assist to social exclusion and environmental degradation, the brand has to be considered as a failure. In fact, in this way it does not express any longer the true identity of the place. Nor does it mirror, reflect, and impress the true image of it. Through collaboration it is possible to build coalition so that the brand can become stronger and furnish a deeper image of city's reality. Finally, during this strategy, it is required of place branding experts, place marketers or spatial planners to elaborate detailed information targeting current and potential city users. Only through awareness and participation can luxury destination visitors be more responsible towards their behaviour, thus taking themselves part in the creation of a sustainable city brand.
- **The fifth strategy** that I want to propose is about implementation. Implementation here is to be understood as the meeting of environmental and social needs, urban planning, and city branding per se. In city branding initiatives, Social Impact Assessment (SIA) and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) could be implemented to help create a sustainable brand for a place, such as a city, as suggested by Kozlowski (1993) and Esteves and Vanclay (2009). In this way it is possible to create a brand that is actually sustainable in its nature. It is important to highlight that EIA and SIA are not to be understood as a step to go through before designing a place brand, but they must be perceived as part of the proactive approach of branding experts that allow them to continue adapting where they see weak points and obstacles. In those instances where the (re)branding of a luxury

destination requires urban planning projects, EIA and SIA become of vital importance and they should be done a priori, during, as well as a posteriori. Sustainability should always be a priority, more so when branding is a driver for urban planning. Kozłowski (1993) proposes the use of the Ultimate Threshold (UT) as a way to assuring that planning activities stemming out of branding are as green as possible. Planners should not go beyond the UT in order to avoid irreversible problems. However, what this threshold lies is still disputed. Further research might help in its establishment.

- **The sixth and last strategy** debated here is about the monitoring process. Once a brand for a luxury destination has been launched it has to be closely monitored in order to assess its reputation. In fact, with time, consumer perceptions and attitudes towards a place, such as a city, change and the image that a brand aims to provide might become obsolete. To avoid falling into a state where the luxury destination has to suffer due to a lack of visitors, monitoring has to be constant. Govers (2012) proposes to monitor a place brand even through the monitoring of news and social media. I think this is a very useful way of knowing at what point on the curve of visitor interest the brand is, especially so in times of accelerated digital developments of information and communication, on which individuals rely for the evaluation of a place's reputation.

These six strategies could be applied to the branding of Dubai as luxury destination and beyond it. Up to now little has been done in terms of sustainability in Dubai especially when environmental and social issues are at stake. However, if stronger cooperation ties are established between the government and the other city stakeholders involved in the branding process, a participatory branding process could be effective in providing solutions for sustainability, thus increasing Dubai's reputation as a luxury destination that cares for environmental protection.

It is now possible to take the six proposed strategies and place them in the conceptual framework that was presented at the end of the second chapter.



Source: Author own work.

Figure 23: Conceptual Framework in Connection to Findings



## 6 – Reflections and Future Research

Findings from the case study reveal that the current branding process of Dubai as a luxury destination has been neglecting environmental and social conditions. Recently, the city has been implementing more environmental sustainable solutions, which could contribute to change the urban planning policies of the last decades. However, they have proved insufficient, but this does not mean that new solutions could not be implemented. Document analysis has allowed me to come up with the six strategies proposed in the previous chapter.

The first research question that this thesis aimed to reply was: what strategies and tools could be employed for successful place branding in luxury destinations? The six strategies debated above aim to provide some answers to the first research question. However, these six strategies would be more efficient if applied together and in combination with other place branding instruments. In addition, the three tools presented could also be employed in the creation of a brand for luxury destinations, in particular to pursue sustainable development goals, while at the same time supporting decision-making and the power relations among city actors.

The second question concerned itself with social and environmental sustainability. The strategies presented have provided the answer to the question. By applying EIA and SIA, as suggested in the introduction, and by ensuring that DMOs follow certain regulations together with the adoption of a lenient behaviour it is possible to achieve social and environmental sustainability. What more, the cases of the Al Maha resort and the Maldives have demonstrated that this is possible even in practice.

Secondary questions were more concerned with the maintaining of a luxury image and the long-term vision of sustainability. This thesis has demonstrated that luxury can be maintained if sacrifices are made by DMOs. Moreover, I have demonstrated how destination brands can be monitored for adaptation in the longer run to different tastes as well as the identity of the local communities and assets.

This research alone, however, cannot be considered sufficient in the affirmation that my findings are true for all luxury destinations. In the case of Dubai the possibility of following the strategies is not immediate as the top-down approach plays a major role. For my proposed strategies to be implemented there should be a change in power balance. The tools and strategies that I have provided can only be considered as a framework for stakeholders. Implementing these suggestions should be the next reasoned step to test whether they could be effective. As future research I would suggest that practitioners could collaborate more with scholars. This proximity between scholars and practitioners would allow, for example, a test on the applicability of the six strategies debated in this master thesis or any other theoretical models debated in the literature. Further research will also be important to understand to what extent the strategies presented here could be multiplied to other places rather than luxury destinations. As a final remark, city branding strategies must be developed through context sensitive approaches instead of one-size-fits-all approaches. In addition, place branding would greatly contribute to environmental and social sustainability if articulated with spatial planning strategies, thus envisioning better, realistic and social responsible futures for places such as cities as luxury destinations.

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