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Explore Like a Local: Student Generated Websites as Representation of Emirati Perspectives on Dubai Tourism

Visitors to Dubai typically get their information from a Google search or consulting *TripAdvisor* when seeking recommendations on what to see and do. Thus, the "tourism message" tends to shift to user-generated content from a visitor's, rather than a local's, perspective. *Visit Dubai,* the official enterprise website for Dubai tourism wishes to promote Dubai as a cultural heritage destination. Taking this as the "brief," two media production classes at Zayed University built unique interactive web experiences from Emirati student perspectives. What emerged were "local" perspectives on popular tourist destinations and activities as well as some recommendations that do not make it onto tourism websites. By tying the brief to a societal need, students envisioned the work they could do upon graduation and their roles as professionals. Also, as "proof of concept," the student websites provide an alternative and legitimate voice to the spectrum of visitor information available on the web and one that could be harnessed to promote Dubai's tourism attractions internationally, but with a "local" flare.

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Introduction

Most first-time visitors to Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, would not know about the cultural and historical sites available to them without doing some research. A typical tourist would probably do a Google search with something like "first time visiting Dubai" which could yield nearly a million "hits"! As a result, they would likely not look beyond the first page of results. Unfortunately, the first site may cause the potential tourist to think twice since it is a travel blog warning about the laws they should be aware of to avoid heavy fines or jail time! This could be followed by other travel blogs offering advice and recommendations, such as the popular travel site/app *TripAdvisor.* The search could also provide multiple versions of expatriate visitor recommendations of what to do in Dubai, several Google Ads promoting tourist services, and near the bottom of the first page (or, even pushed to the second page) the curious tourist could find *Visit Dubai* (http://www.visitdubai.com/en/), the official enterprise website of the Dubai Department of Tourism & Commerce Marketing (DTCM).

The top responses reflect architecture and shopping: the Burj Kalifa; the Burj Al Arab; the Palm, the World Islands; Dubai Mall; and the Mall of the Emirates. Too far down on the list is the view of Dubai as a cultural heritage destination; despite recent efforts by the DTCM to restore and promote heritage sites and encourage visitors to experience the rich history and culture of Dubai along with popular attractions of the modern vibrant city. National tourism websites were introduced and became more sophisticated in parallel with the dawn and maturation of the internet itself. Yet, with the increasing ubiquity and complexity of web-based social media, collectively referred to as Web 2.0, the role and impact of user-generated content on tourism destinations has seen an eroding of the influence of tourism enterprise websites (Schegg, Liebrich, Scaglione & Ahmad, 2008). Control of the message has also shifted since user-generated content in Web 2.0 platforms

that focus on tourism or tourist activities tends to be from the perspective of the "visitor" rather than from the point-of-view of local inhabitants.

This study is derived from a *post-hoc* analysis of student media projects in relation to the experiential learning objectives of the respective courses and assignments as well as the employment of cognitive learning theory (Malone, 1981) in challenging students to present tourism information that informs, supports or refutes that which is presented in official enterprise tourism websites or offered by external tourist reviews of the same via social media. The aim is to encourage Emirati students to provide "local voice" to descriptions of local tourism destinations that are more meaningful, culturally nuanced &/or alternative iterations to those provided by expatriate visitors to the UAE.

Literature Review

According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (2015) the total contribution of travel and tourism to the world GDP was approximately US$7.6bn (9.8 percent of world GDP) in 2014, and is forecast to rise by 3.8 percent per annum to reach approximately US$11.4bn (10.5 percent of world GDP) by 2025. Tourism in the UAE also has seen a steady growth with international tourists' numbers growing at approximately seven percent annually, and this is expected to increase (Sahoo, 2016). With the restoration of Dubai's Historical District to be completed before the Dubai World Expo in 2020, "The revamped area is expected to attract an estimated 12 million visitors" (Hanif, 2015).

Since independence in 1971, the UAE's economic modernization, financial development (Stephenson, 2015) and industrialization founded on oil was accompanied by accelerated urbanization (Elsheshtawy, 2008) most prominently exemplified by Dubai's "monuments of modernity, progress and national prestige" (Khalaf 2006, p. 257). Dubai boasts megaprojects and showcases architecture (Marchal 2005; Ponzini 2011) in an

attempt to "ascend the world urban hierarchy" (Acuto 2010, p. 272). With a seemingly single-minded emphasis on modernity, the inhabitants of Dubai recently noticed that the indigenous and traditional-based resources are not significantly featured as part of Dubai's unofficial tourist-generated "brand" as represented in most social media sites— much to the chagrin of the DTCM.

Despite all the modernization, remnants of "Old Dubai" still persist and "more emphasis needs to be given to promoting Old Dubai to tourists, instead of beach developments or super malls, to give [visitors] a taste of the Emirate's real heritage" (Swan, 2015). According to Nasif Kayed, director of the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding, "Visiting a museum, to stand in front of a sculpture and read information, it isn't enough anymore. People want to know why we dress this way, why we eat this way. They want to learn and interact" (Swan, 2015).

The heritage and culture of a destination, in combination with other leisure aspects, is often considered as one of the most significant and fastest growing components of the tourism phenomena worldwide (Herbert, 1995). The terms "cultural tourism" and "heritage tourism" describe not only the consumption of art, monuments, and folklore—in other words, built heritage and cultural manifestations—but also to describe experiences pursued and motivations of travelers at destinations (Alzua, O'Leary and Morrison, 1998). The growing curiosity and interest to know the world along with the increasing mobility and accessibility of travel, the demand to visit new places, and personally experiencing other societies is on the rise. The question is, how to encourage tourism that represents a local voice through mutually beneficial cross-cultural experiences, while simultaneously avoiding what has been described as the "commodification" of indigenous identity and values or even a "reconstruction of ethnicity" to suit tourist expectations (UNEP, n.d.).

In recent years, the tourism industry has adopted digital tools in recreating and understanding the heritage and historical past of a destination, this includes its archaeological and cultural sites and museums (Brizard, Derde, Silberman, n.d.). Studying a destination's cultural assets and heritage through interactive learning—incorporating the use of technology—makes learning less "bookish" and more "hands-on", giving meaning to learning (Mendes, 2009). Tourism education—in particular, education in a destination's culture and heritage—plays an important role in assisting students in acquiring the skills and knowledge of the specific culture, but it also encourages a sense of inclusion in the tourism community (Schott and Sutherland, 2009). To show possible ways for fostering this shared repertoire, this article describes an interactive media-based teaching technique used at Zayed University's Dubai campus as part of two media courses. The technique was designed to provide pathways for students to develop an increased understanding, knowledge and skills, through student engagement and active learning.

Studies in tourism education have incorporated different technologies in student learning (*e.g.* Venkayesh, Croteau and Rabah, 2014; Zhao, Perreault, Waldman and Truell, 2009; as well as Vazquez-Cano, 2012 and 2014). The challenge for universities offering programs of study in tourism and cultural communication, or hospitality management, is to provide avenues for learning which are reflective of the needs of industry and incorporate the technology now available. A study by Lee, Sun, Law and Lee (2016), showed that the top three advantages of educational technology as recognized by students are: flexibility, unlimited availability, and personalized learning. Hsu (2012) investigated the popularity and functionalities of 3D virtual reality technologies within a tourism education program designed on the popular *Second Life* (*SL*) platform. Hsu's work presents a case study describing how and why *SL* provided learners with simulated "real world" experiences in a novel application of technology. The results found that students were supportive of using *SL*

because it allowed them to gain tourism knowledge and to improve communicational and interpersonal skills. Further, experiential learning approaches have also been found to be valuable methods of bridging the divide between academic knowledge and practical skills— a problem often cited in tourism and hospitality management education (Ruthann, 2005). Such approaches have been found to contribute towards deeper learning by enhancing students' interest, motivation, participation, knowledge and skill development.

Methodology

Media production and/or design classes are often constructed around elements of Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism (*i.e.*, students learning from each other), and Malone's (1981) cognitive learning theory of motivation where students are challenged to find information to support or refute previous knowledge. Media/design assignments frequently depend on the student finding some element in the process to be "fun," "challenging," or "exciting," which supports Malone & Lepper's (1987) theory of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators to learning. Whereas the student is always conscious of the external motivation (*e.g.*, grade) s/he is encouraged to move toward intrinsic motivation (*i.e.*, personally rewarding, naturally derived satisfaction). By setting experiential assignment "briefs" instructors anticipate that students will move beyond the "*what do I have to do to get an A?*" approach to working individually or in a team to identify the "problem" and in these assignments to use multimedia as a 'solution' to that problem.

Sensitive to national desires to promote cultural and heritage sites for both international visitors and local Emirati so that both "will be able to fully immerse themselves in the history and explore the authentic culture of Dubai" (Hanif, 2015), two media production classes at Zayed University in Dubai used different aspects of tourism marketing as their "brief" in building interactive web experiences from an Emirati

perspective. Both classes incorporated aspects of multimedia production and used experiential learning to deepen the learning experience and to provide students with both an opportunity to enhance practical skills as well as gain a "real world" experience in media products for simulated clients. One of the courses focused on enhancing the tourist experience at a specific destination, the *Dubai Museum* [http://www.com312.info/2016], while the other class took the perspective of "advising" a visitor in Dubai on a 48-hour layover of recommended sites and restaurants from a local Emirati perspective, *Dubai In 48-Hours* [http://dxbin48.wixsite.com/dubain48].

To briefly set the context for the practical and experiential course projects, it should be highlighted that it is common knowledge among Zayed University Students that Dubai will be the host of *Expo 2020* and the city is awash in construction sites in preparation. Such large-scale projects as the Dubai Water Canal, and the Museum of the Future are expected to be completed in time for the 25 million visitors expected to converge on Dubai for *Expo 2020*. The DTCM has also embarked on a project to transform the historic area around Dubai Creek into a leading culture and heritage center. "Khor Dubai and the Historical District are the soul of the city, and define our cultural legacy and Emirati heritage," said Abdul Rahman Al Owais, the Health Minister and chairman of Dubai Culture and Arts Authority." (Hanif, 2015).

To contribute to these plans, students enrolled in COM 312 at Zayed University's College of Communication and Media Science were set the following brief:

The DTCM is hard at work getting ready for *Expo 2020*. One of the target areas is raising the profile of the rich cultural heritage in the UAE. They would like for us to use our media skills in designing additional information for exhibits at the museums. We are going to help them by designing web information that is displayed on a mobile phone.

The brief acknowledges the fact that smartphones are ubiquitous, and modern museums have developed applications for download to enhance the visitor experience. These apps can be used as a museum/exhibit guide or even to allow the user to experience an exhibit from far away. As virtual reality becomes more common the user will also be able to visit through their iPhone or Android device. The brief is also centered on BYOD (bring your own device) for cultural enhancement which allows venues to offer content through either a free WiFi network or 3G connectivity.

Zayed University's COM 312 is a ten week, one credit class required of all students in the College of Communication & Media Sciences and was designed to introduce students to designing for mobile devices. When the class was written "mobile devices" were tablets. By 2015, when this brief was introduced, the most commonly used mobile devices by tourists were "smartphones." The students, aged 18-22, automatically understood that "mobile" meant mobile phone as they are the demographic that does 20% of their web browsing only on a mobile phone. (Chaffey, D. 2016). All students were majoring in either Integrated Strategic Communication or Tourism and had a limited knowledge of web design or application development. With limited time (10 weeks) and limited technology skills, the approach was to create mini one-page scrollable websites. At the museum, each exhibit would have a QR code displayed so visitors could download further information on a smartphone. A QR code is a matrix barcode that is often used in advertising, and with an installed QR reader on their smartphone the user points the phone's camera at the QR code and the web page that is stored in the code loads in the phone's browser.

The web authoring software chosen for the project was *Adobe Muse* which allows the designer to create responsive pages (*i.e*., they display appropriately on any size screen) without mastering web authoring languages such as HTML, Javascript, and CSS. Students did not yet have access to the software through the university, so they downloaded a four-

week trial version. This time limit was beneficial in that students were required to get their photographs and write their "copy" prior to learning a new piece of software.

The other course, COM 421, is a 16-week, three credit advanced media production class composed of both film and video communication students as well as students in the interdisciplinary multimedia design program. Like students in COM 312, the COM 421 students are from roughly the same age demographic, technologically savvy and highly literate in social media platforms. For their final project, the COM 421 students were introduced to a converged media project brief that utilized their skills-set to produce a more "participatory" mediated user experience—otherwise referred to as "transmedia." Jenkins, Ford and Green refined and expanded on notions of media convergence with the introduction of the idea of "spreadable media" as a "shift from distribution to circulation [and signaling]… a movement toward a more participatory model of culture, one which see the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined" (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013, p. 2). When combined with the powerful human impulse of storytelling, "[transmedia] represents a process where integral elements of a [story] get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story" (Jenkins, 2011).

The COM 421 course instructor set the "ground rules" for the brief; everyone will contribute individually to the design and "story" (content), as well as work on the multi-channel delivery of the content as a transmedia story. Students initially pitched ideas for what should constitute the brief, then the class brainstormed on those deemed to be "do-able" and composed the following scenario that set their brief:

A first-time visitor, transiting through the UAE, has a 48-hour layover in Dubai. Wishing to avoid typical tourist activities, the visitor seeks recommendations from local Emiratis on where and how to spend their time... they turn to search the web and find: *Dubai in 48-Hours*!

Analysis, Results and Discussion

The instructional challenge in both media production courses was to encourage students to focus on "content" rather than "technology," but to also note that the mode of delivery of the content impacts how the content is received by the user of the technology.

In the first four weeks of the COM 312 class students individually visited the Dubai Museum and chose an exhibit. They took close-up pictures of the different items in their chosen exhibit and wrote a description of what that item was and how it was used. During the 'planning' stage students were given lectures about designing for optimal User Experience Design (UXD), the overall browsing satisfaction that a user has after, and while engaging with a website or application. Can the user find the information they are seeking? Is it easy to locate that information? User Experience Design has no reference to the actual technology of the site. Users don't browse with a view of "oh, that's a lovely bit of JavaScript." Additionally, students were given lectures on Information Architecture (IA), the organization of content within a website or a webpage; and writing content for the web. In online environments users do not read, they scan information to see if it's relevant to what they are seeking. One student tendency was to overwrite, with long introductions, before getting to the information a user would want. Constant reminders, exercises, and tutorials about the inverted pyramid (putting the most important information first) and copyediting were necessary.

Students were also encouraged to personalize the exhibit by inserting "color" into their text based on their own family's experience (see Figure 1). One unexpected

consequence was that students had to talk to their grandparents about the different items as they themselves didn't know much about these objects. One student discovered that her grandfather had been apprenticed to a tailor when he was fourteen. She used that knowledge in her description of what a tailor did and how he used a foot pedal sewing machine.

Figure 1: Examples of COM 312 student generated QR Codes and content.

Because the students in the COM 421 course had varying strengths and experiences in different modes of story production, and not all were at the same level in web site development and management, the students chose to utilize a free template from Wix.com, a cloud-based web development platform that allows users to create HTML5 web sites and mobile sites using Wix's online drag and drop tools. In hindsight, this was not an ideal scenario as it presented design and interactivity issues later in the project's development and resulted in one aspect of the planned transmedia story to not be fully implemented because of limitations inherent in the Wix template. Students were required to develop a minimum

of two postings per students (one on "modern" Dubai, the other on "traditional" Dubai). Each posting was to be a minimum of 500 words, include a minimum of two external links each, have two illustrative images (either a photo and a video, a photo and an interactive VR image, or two videos). Each student was to tweet a minimum of two times about things to do in Dubai using the hash-tag: "#dubaiN48." Videos were to be posted to the "Dubai IN 48" *YouTube* channel and all photographic images shared on *Pinterest*.

Dubai In 48-Hours [http://dxbin48.wixsite.com/dubain48] was the culminating experience in the COM 421 class and students each worked diligently and under increasing time pressure to produce a working site (see Figure 2). In the end, they successfully delivered the primary website interface that aggregated in one place all the content—videos, photographs, VR panoramas, and descriptive text. Student-generated material was also distributed via *YouTube*, *Twitter* ("@dubain48") and *Pinterest* and interlink to form a coherent storyworld without unnecessarily repeating content from the other platforms. Finally, a feedback loop was provided for those who visited the site to leave their own comments about what they discovered while engaging with the "#dubaiN48" tourist sites and the transmedia storyworld.
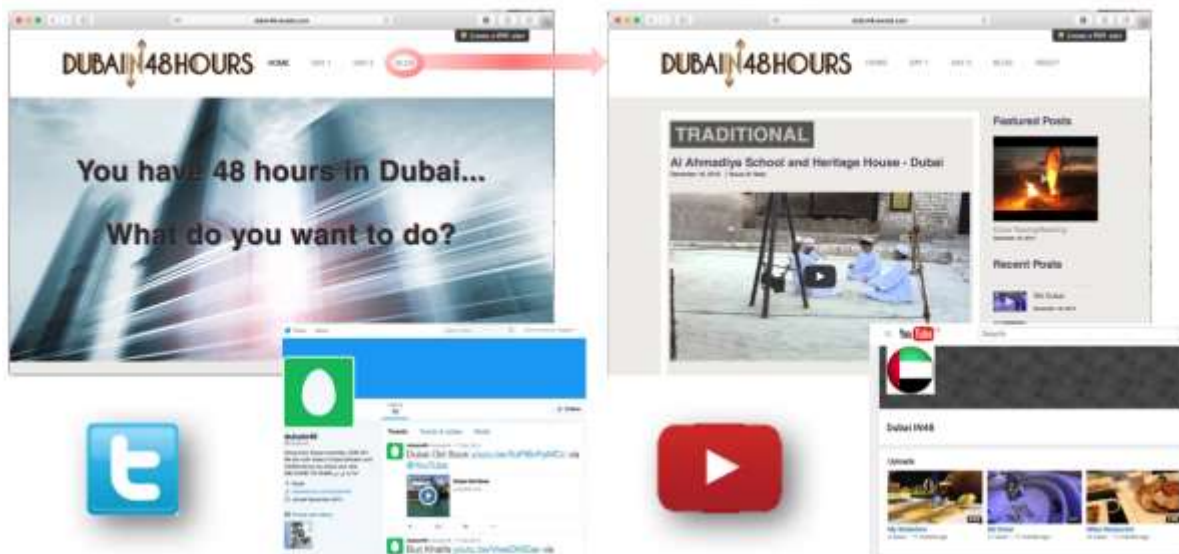
Figure 2: Screenshots of COM 421 website as well as *Twitter* feed and *YouTube* channel.

Part of the original build plan was to have an interactive Google Map of Dubai with various "pins" corresponding to the destinations and activities that comprised the 48-hour tourist adventure story. The "adventure" was intended to be a kind of scavenger hunt. Assuming a visitor accessed the *Dubai in 48-Hours* website and elected to visit one of the destinations, upon arrival, they would find a QR code and the hash-tag, "#dubaiN48". If they scanned the code, their mobile device would present them with a location sensitive indicator of where they were on the Dubai Google Map, and how to navigate to the next closest destination &/or activity. Unfortunately, the free Wix template lacked the sophistication to operationalize this aspect of the transmedia user experience. In the end, the QR codes became independent "gateways" to the *Dubai in 48-Hours* website's information about the location and Emirati recommendations on what to do (or eat!).

Conclusion

Both projects pushed students to engage with the material and subject before looking for a technological solution. They had to identify a "need" that the "user" had and then determine a solution to meet that user's need. For an 18-22-year-old female Emirati, it's difficult to look at their own city and culture through the eyes of a stranger, a visitor, someone who knows nothing of the culture and the people. Often, it's a story that's as simple as a cup of tea. In Arabic culture, a host continues to pour tea until the guest shakes his cup from side to side. In the American culture, the guest continues to drink what is poured. Without an understanding of cultural differences, both host and guest would think the other was rude. In the COM 312 class students also had to recognize that much of the life and culture of their grandparents is fast slipping away and if they don't incorporate some of it into their own lives, their Emirati heritage will only exist as a museum exhibit. While working on her project about the traditional Emirati kitchen one student announced in class that she just had her first cooking lesson from her grandmother.

Experiential learning provides a four-stage interconnecting learning process that creates the opportunity for the learner to grasp (experience), transform (reflect), reflective observation (think) and active experimentation (do) (Lei, Lam & Lourenco, 2015). Within the tourism field, education using technology such as having learners create an interactive website provide them a platform to become more active and reflective learners, moreover, such such experiences prepare them for the future needs of the tourism industry (Law, Leung & Buhalis (2009). Dopson (2005) points out research indicates that academic institutes fail to incorporate e-commerce experiences in their curricula. This is a valid point and suggests that classes in "front-end development" should work with students studying "back-end development" to create experiences that are more reflective of the "real world."

Moon (2004), states that using experiential learning in higher education reinforces the idea that universities are focusing on "employability skills" in the curriculum. The challenge to the instructor is to determine if the "experience" needs to be combined with assessed "'reflection" or is the experience something that can motivate the student to seek internal reflection.

Despite the limitations, the results of both classes yielded unique "local" perspectives on both popular tourist destinations and activities as well as those that do not typically make it onto the tourism enterprise websites. Additionally, using a "live" brief for student production encourages young adults to view themselves as "professionals" and not just "student." By tying the brief to a societal need, students are able to envision the work they can be doing upon graduation and to further understand their role as a professional within their own society. This approach follows Laurillard's (1993) much cited conversational framework where "…the interplay between theory and practice—that is, making the abstract concrete through a reflective practicum—is essential" (p.30).

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