



Tourism in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries as a Priority for Economic Prospects and Diversification

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an examination of the emergence of the tourism industry in some of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (limited to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman) as a potentially viable and profitable economic diversification alternative. Indeed, the tourism industry is a growing economic sector in some of the GCC countries, with different trends, specializations, comparative advantages, and comparative competitions. However, the industry has encountered various challenges in the context of the GCC region because of the distinctiveness of the political and socioeconomic structures of the GCC countries in terms of the rentierism system. How are most of these GCC countries succeeding in making tourism a viable and prioritized economic policy? Why are some of these GCC countries attracted to the tourism industry? How have some of them made tourism an economic diversification priority? To what extent are current tourism projects considered sustainable? What are the challenges facing the tourism industry in some of these countries? Providing answers to these research questions requires a thorough examination of the socioeconomic context shaping and influencing the emergence of tourism as a beneficial industry in the context of some of the GCC countries.

Keywords: Tourism; Gulf cooperation council; Rentierism; Economic diversification; Branding approach

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the argument that the tourism industry, as an element of economic diversification, is a priority policy and thriving industry in the context of some of the GCC countries (mainly Oman and United Arab Emirates (UAE)). The wealthy hydrocarbon exporters of the GCC countries are eager to diversify their economies by moving away from reliance on the export of hydrocarbon as their only source of revenue. Population growth, the failure of the oil and gas industry to create jobs, political instability in the region, and oil price fluctuations are some of the factors that make economic diversification an urgent issue [1-3]. The GCC countries have only two options: either diversify their economies to achieve sustainable economic development and growth, or maintain the existing situation as is with little modification [2]. Hence, real and tangible initiatives exist that serve as indicators of the sincere efforts of these countries to diversify their economies, such as in financial investments, Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWF), aviation, logistic zones, transport, knowledge-based sectors, and tourism [4-9]. However, the industry has encountered various challenges in the context of the GCC region because of the distinctiveness of the political and socioeconomic structures of the GCC countries in terms of the rentierism system. The rentierism system is the governing system in the GCC countries in which relations between

the rulers and the citizens are regulated by the distribution of the rent of hydrocarbon as largesse in exchange for political alignment [10,11]. Although the urgency for economic diversification of their economies has inspired a trend, that trend has not yet become the norm [12].

Tourism, as one of these initiatives, is defined as the commodification of the experiences of a place [13]. In other words, tourism provides revenue from the marketization of the experiences of a place. Why are some of these GCC countries attracted to the tourism industry? How have some of them made tourism an economic diversification priority? To what extent are current tourism projects considered sustainable? What are the challenges facing the tourism industry in these countries? Providing answers to these research questions requires a thorough examination of the socioeconomic context shaping and influencing the emergence of tourism as a beneficial industry in some of the GCC countries, as substantial indicators reflect large-scale growth of the tourism industry in terms of revenue and economic opportunities in the region.

This paper presents an examination of the emergence of the tourism industry in some of the GCC countries as a potentially viable and profitable economic diversification alternative based on three fundamental assumptions. The first assumption is that these countries are characterized by a common political and

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socioeconomic system (rentierism) in addition to the factors of a common language, religion, geography, and culture. Second, these countries heavily on the export of hydrocarbon as their main source of revenue; meanwhile, economic diversification has been viewed as an urgent necessity in order to reduce their susceptibility to hydrocarbon price fluctuations. Third, because of the competition between these countries related to tourism, the tourism industry in this region faces many challenges. According to these assumptions, this paper is organized as follows: the first section presents an investigation into the main factors encouraging some of the GCC countries to select tourism as a preferred economic diversification mechanism. In the second section, theoretical approaches to analyzing the political economy of the GCC countries' tourism strategies are explored. The third section highlights the differences between the tourism opportunities in Oman and those in the UAE via a comparative case study. Those two countries are chosen because of their persistence and familiarity with the tourism industry compared with the rest of the GCC countries. In addition, their experiences can be applied to other GCC countries. The fourth section examines the structural barriers and challenges facing the development of tourism in some of the GCC countries. The conclusion presents the main points of the analysis and the answers to the research questions of this paper.

It is noteworthy that, due to the uncertainties of the global situation since March 2020 resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, trade tensions between the United States and China, and the oil price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia, the tourism sector around the world has been halted. However, the facts, data, and analysis presented in this paper were collected and prepared in January 2020, prior to the onset of social distancing and worldwide restrictions on travel to and from other countries; hence, the findings will continue to be valid when tourism activity resumes and may contribute to the further study of tourism in the GCC countries in the future.

Tourism as an appropriate catalyst for the GCC countries

Globalization has facilitated the spread and growth of the tourism industry. As Henderson (2015) asserted-International tourism has benefitted from and stimulated the enhanced mobility associated with globalization, of which it is both a cause and consequent [14]. Therefore, the GCC countries are not exceptional in benefiting from globalization. Following the oil boom after the 1970s, these countries linked with the new world order and became the center of energy production and financial accumulation [10]. The wealth these countries amassed from the export of hydrocarbon has become the main source of economic development and economic diversification in these nations. Economic diversification is the organized transformation of economic resources extracted from nature, such as hydrocarbon, into resources from other sectors, such as manufacturing and tertiary (service) sectors [15]. The common rentierism system in the GCC countries for distributing the rent of hydrocarbon, coupled with their increasing wealth and population, contributed to the necessity of economic diversification [16]. However, out of all contributing factors, fluctuating oil prices constitute the primary motivation for pursuing economic diversification (Figures 1 and 2). Economic diversification has become a viable catalyst for sustaining the wealth and high standard of living in the GCC countries, for minimizing reliance on hydrocarbon exports, and for increasing the input to the gross domestic product (GDP) of these countries [16-18].

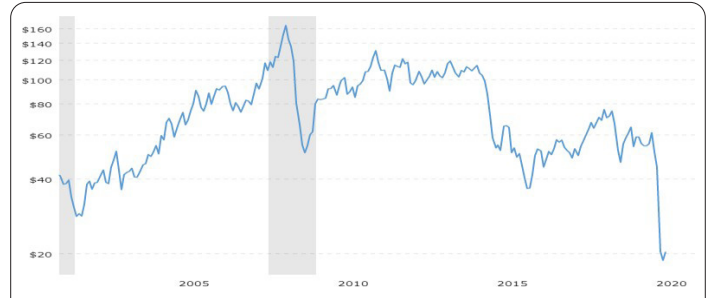


Figure 1: Oil price fluctuations between 2000-2020-20-year historical chart.

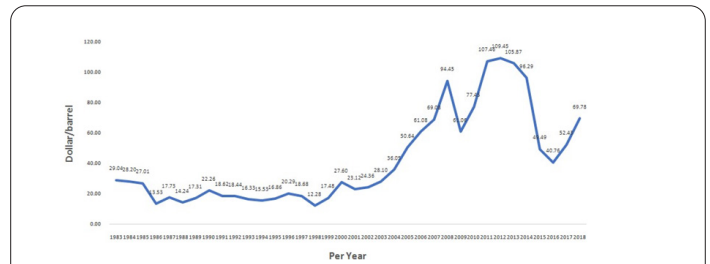


Figure 2: OPEC-ORB oil prices from 1983 to 2018 (Source: OPEC annual statistical bulletin 2019, 2020).

In this context, the tourism industry has emerged as an easy, straightforward, and resilient economic diversification tool among some of the GCC countries. According to the World Tourism Organization, 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals were recorded in 2019 globally, positioning tourism as a leading and beneficial sector within the current global political and trade tensions [19-21]. Furthermore, the Middle East emerged as the fastest-growing region for international tourism arrivals in 2019 (Figures 3, 4, and 5).

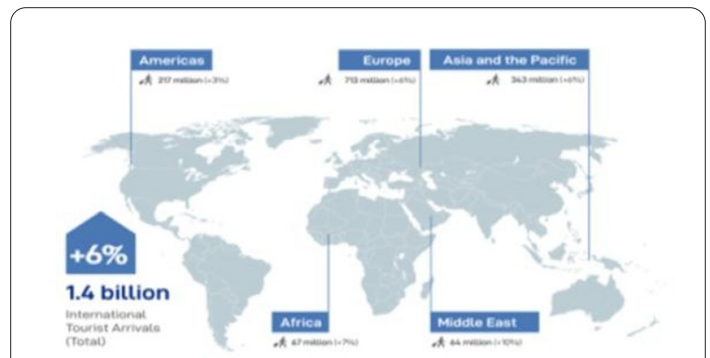


Figure 3: International tourism arrivals 2018 (Source: World tourism organization (UNWTO), 2019).

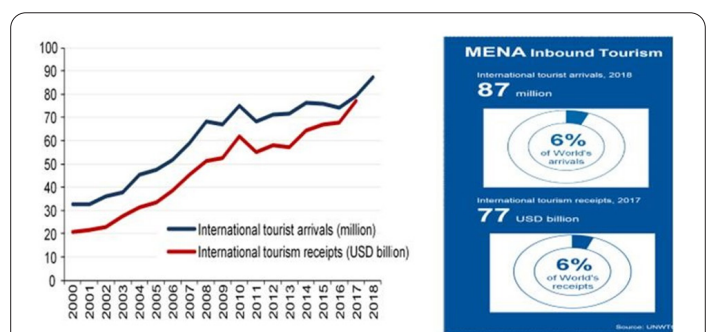
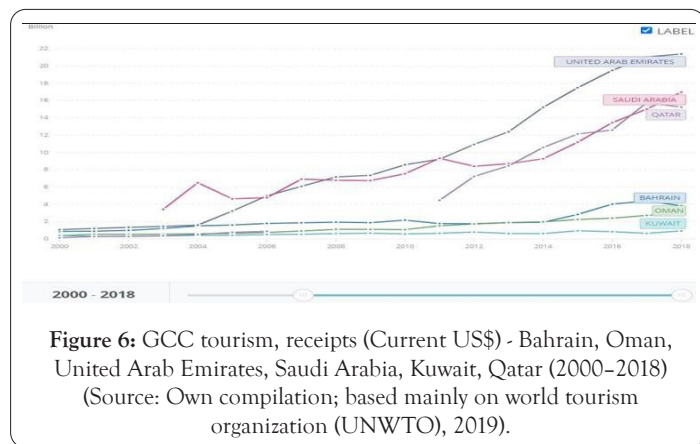


Figure 4: 2International tourist arrivals and receipts in MENA region (2000–2018) (Source: Own compilation; based mainly on world tourism organization (UNWTO), 2019).



According to Mansfeld and Winckler (2007), the tourism industry has the potential to enable developing economies, with their low tourism operations and workforce costs and expenditures, to compete with developed economies in this arena. From this perspective, tourism becomes an-export oriented industry [3]. In the context of some of the GCC countries, the tourism industry becomes a priority for economic diversification as a result of the failure of the oil and gas industries to bring about the expected results with regard to creating new jobs [1]; because the hydrocarbon industry is characterized as a heavily capital-technology-intensive business, there were high expectations for the industry to create jobs for nationals to avoid the influx of large numbers of foreign workers into the GCC countries. This means the hydrocarbon industry depends mainly upon the injection of capital and technology for its growth, and its contribution to the economy in terms of employment was marginal, especially in the GCC context. Conversely, tourism is a labor-intensive sector that focuses on and contributes primarily to employing people and creating jobs. Moreover, most of the GCC countries lack agricultural development due to their climates and the desert landscapes in the region. Alhawaish [22] argued that tourism and the number of tourists arriving in a country affect the country's economic growth in addition to having an impact on labor, capital, and exports, an assumption based on the-tourism-led growth hypothesis. Therefore, the tourism industry has the potential to redistribute wealth, induce economic diversification, use existing economic resources, help other local economies, such as farming and transportation, to flourish, and create jobs, since it is-labor intensivel [8,19,23]. Furthermore, tourism supports economic diversification because it has the capacity to generate economic activity in other areas, such as hotels and tour companies; also, tourism is politically attractive to the rulers of the GCC countries [6] because it can mitigate negative images of the country abroad. As Mansfeld and Winckler (2007) noted:

Since the 9/11 Al Qaeda attacks on the USA, the overall image of the Arabs has been severely damaged in many Western countries. Attracting a large number of tourists from Western countries and offering them a high standard of service combined with unique tourism experiences has the potential to mitigate this negative image.

In addition, tourism has the capacity to promote private sector industries, such as construction, as in Dubai and Doha. One of the main characteristics of tourism is its resilience. There is a contradiction between oil prices and the tourism industry. Mansfeld and Winckler argued:

Since the 1960s, when oil became the most lucrative source of income in the Arabian Gulf countries, there has been a total correlation between economic growth and oil prices. However, tourism, by its nature, reacts negatively to rising oil prices.

Rising oil costs and prices mean more costly tourist services and vice versa. It is this-reverse relationship that explains why tourism was carefully chosen as an industry in the 1990s in some of the GCC countries, as prices of oil were low [3].

While tourism is expected to contribute to the creation of jobs for the citizens of the GCC countries, this expectation has been mitigated by limited success because of massive hidden unemployment rates in the public sector (where most nationals are employed) and the implication of the mechanism of the dual labor market in the context of the GCC countries. The dual market problem is identified as-one market for nationals, who are employed almost exclusively by the public sector and enjoy high salaries and improved work conditions, and another market, the private sector, which employs almost exclusively foreign labor at low salaries [3]. One could argue that the dual market labor problem is a by-product of the political and socioeconomic context of the GCC countries supported by the rentierism system and the social contract that organizes the relation between the rulers and the citizens in terms of the distribution of wealth.

One of the comparative advantages of tourism products in the context of some of the GCC countries is the number of religious, cultural, and historical sites that exist in that region. For example, the Arabian Peninsula hosts the holy cities of Islam and some pre- Christianity archeological sites. Additionally, as noted by Alhawaish [22], more than 12 sites in GCC countries are listed on the UNESCO list of world cultural heritage. The area is considered a cradle of multiple civilizations, from the Persian Empire to the Islamic empire.

Other factors enhance the GCC region's appeal as a tourist destination. The climate is moderate during the winter season. The sun, sand, and sea, the factors that make up-triple-S tourism, are abundant in the region, which is surrounded by the Arabian Gulf from the east, the Indian Ocean from the south, and the Red Sea from the west. In addition, the region's geographical proximity to Europe can attract more tourists. Furthermore, an urbanization process took place in the major cities of the GCC countries as a result of the wealth amassed through the export of hydrocarbon, which contributed to transforming cities like Dubai City into destinations for business and pleasure combined. These cities maintain low crime rates compared to other cities. Also, most of these countries implemented what are known as MICE. (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions) tourism initiatives by hosting regional and international events [3]. For example, Qatar is hosting the World Cup in 2022, and Dubai is hosting Expo 2020 (which has been postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic). Likewise, the aviation industry is considered an integral part of tourism in the GCC countries. Bahrain and then Dubai were the first destinations in the region to focus on the (stopover) market and develop different activities within the tourism industry. The aviation industry has developed rapidly, and to further advance the industry, the regional carriers adopted ambitious projects and objectives, exemplified by efforts such as the competition between the three major players in the region: Emirates Airlines, Etihad Airways, and Qatar Airways [14].

Investing in tourism and expanding its activities has become a trend and a priority in shaping some of the GCC countries' economic diversification policies and initiatives. Currently, most of the GCC countries are investing in the following tourism activities and projects: religious pilgrimages in Saudi Arabia; the creation of shopping festivals and events; construction of air hubs in the UAE, Bahrain, and Qatar; promoting special sports events in Dubai, such as Formula 1 racing; investing more in heritage sites, mountains, and natural landscapes (ecotourism) in Oman; advertising desert safaris and cultural activities (Louvre Museum); and sponsoring medical tourism, such as the 2019 World Medical Tourism and Global Healthcare Congress in Bahrain [4,5,24,25]. Therefore, the tourism industry becomes an appropriate catalyst for most of the GCC countries because it induces economic diversification, provides a new source of employment opportunities for nationals, increases the input for the GDP, benefits from-triple-S tourism, promotes construction and private sector activities, benefits from the existence of cultural, heritage, and archaeological sites, and can be used as a means to gain political and legitimacy advantages (to mitigate negative images). Yet, it is worth noting that there are real differences in terms of socioeconomic condition and political setting embedded in each GCC country that have the potential to facilitate or hinder the development of the tourism industry.

Theoretical approaches

In this section, two theoretical approaches are presented to analyze the tourism sector in the context of the GCC countries to shed light on how tourism can be framed within this context and to explain the relevancy of tourism as a viable, vibrant, and priority economic activity. The first approach is the state capitalism approach, a method through which the state allows market-price mechanisms to operate and the private sector to play a (controlled) role in the economy, but with the state being the key factor in the economy and a disproportionate owner of the means of production [6]. Capitalism has been rooted in the GCC countries since the discoveries of oil and gas. As a result of the processes of capital accumulation, financialization, and internationalization, the GCC countries became a capitalistic block [10]. The GCC countries adopted capitalism but with a different realization-in the GCC countries, the state is the key factor in directing the economy, and it owns and controls most of the industries. Therefore, this approach explains that the tourism industry is enabled not by the supposedly private sector but instead because the state promotes the existence of the industry, since capitalism is driven by profit making. In this view, the tourism industry in the GCC countries has successfully become profitable, which is explained by the competition and the spread of multiple giant aviation carriers and mega airports in small geographic regions with proximity to Europe and East Asia (Figure 6).

Despite adopting the capitalist system, the GCC countries embraced different economic policies that distinguished the philosophy of their policies from neoliberalism. In other words, in the realm of tourism, these countries discouraged policies that allowed for uncontrolled tourism, such as mass-market leisure tourism [6]. Mass-market leisure tourism allows tourists and the tourism industry to introduce businesses and activities within the tourism sector that promote leisure and other liberal activities, such as sex tourism. This could be explained by the social and cultural conservatism characterizing the GCC countries.

The branding approach is the second perspective to explain tourism in the context of the GCC countries. Branding is demonstrated by its links to [a] political economy [that] provide insights into the many connections between politics, economics and tourism. The branding strategy promotes the political agenda by enveloping it within tourism products or activities. Primarily, branding is intended to promote the country's profile and international legitimacy. Some components of the branding strategy are also considered to be aspects of a security strategy [6]. It is evident that all the GCC countries have been involved

in adopting the branding strategy to create a distinctive brand for their tourism destinations and aviation industries. This approach has been pursued to promote their international legitimacy in light of accusations involving different human rights violations and other activities, such as those involved in the devastating war in Yemen, the violent reaction to the peaceful uprising during the Arab Spring in 2011, the murder of journalist Khashoggi, and the blockade of Qatar. Karolak defined branding as the conscious attempt of governments to shape a specifically designed place identity and promote it to identified markets. From this perspective, branding is correlated with the creation of place identity by the government as a means of promoting the country to outsiders. The creation of place identity involves the process of visualizing the place by supporting the dominant ideology of the tourism culture within the global process, but this process manifests in promoting the local construction of that place [24].

Comparative case study: Oman and United Arab Emirates

Oman and the UEA were chosen because of their experience, familiarity, and the fact that they have evolved as the forerunners in the tourism industry compared with the other GCC countries. Likewise, their familiarity and experience may be transferable to the other GCC countries. Compared to other cities in the GCC countries, the city of Dubai in the UAE took the lead in implementing tourism as an alternative economic diversification sector (Figure 7).

	Tourist Attractions	Government Policies	The Size and Scale of Tourism Industries	Future Prospects
UAE	MICE.	Dubai Tourism Vision 2020	Leisure and business purposes	global-local nexus"
	Extravagant parks, hotels, cities.	Abu Dhabi Vision 2030	Positioned itself as a transit point (Air Transport).	
UAE	Expo 2020	Foreign workers are essential in tourism.		
	UAE is home to the busiest airport in the world, Dubai International Airport.			
	Largest indoor shopping center in the world, the largest man-made marina, a ski slope, an artificial palm-shaped Palm Jumeirah Island- Tallest building in the world.			
	International sports championships events. Tourist activities center on beaches and shopping. UAE's beaches are the only ones that are Blue Flag certified.			

Figure 7: UAE Tourism: Attractions - size and policies (Source: Own compilation; based mainly on Henderson, 2015 and Karolak, 2018).

	Tourist Attractions	Government Policies	The Size and Scale of Tourism Industries	Future Prospects
Oman	Oman prides itself on its tolerance and philosophy of non-violence (Ibadi sect).	Announced its 2015-2040 tourism strategy.	Leisure purposes.	global-local coexist"
	Traditional cities.	Objective of attracting 12 million international tourists by 2020	Heritage is prominent.	
	Cultural festivals focus on the local heritage.	Policy of "Omanization"		
	Tourist activities center on beaches, diving and successfully capitalize on its natural environment as a tourism attractor.			

Figure 7: UAE Tourism: Attractions - size and policies (Source: Own compilation; based mainly on Henderson, 2015 and Karolak, 2018).

These efforts are attributed to the depletion of Dubai’s natural resources, mainly oil; the natural resources (i.e., oil) of other GCC countries will run out in the near future [2]. As a seaport, Dubai invested in exploiting its location to construct an image and identity as a destination for tourism in the Gulf region. As Karolak [24] suggested-Indeed, the tourist destination appeal results from a number of factors, which make it [Dubai] competitive, and so far no other entity has been able to reap the benefits stemming from tourism to the extend [sic] Dubai did. As shown in (Figure 7), the UAE and, in particular, Dubai focused on the following to create its tourism attractions: promoting MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions); constructing extravagant parks, hotels, and cities; hosting the Expo 2020 exhibition; building mega airports, as currently the Dubai airport is the busiest airport in the GCC region; competing to build the tallest building and largest indoor shopping center in the world; building the largest manmade marina and a ski slope; creating an artificial palm-shaped island (Jumeriah Island); sponsoring international sports championships events; and renovating beaches (as UAE’s beaches are the only beaches in the GCC region that are certified as —blue beaches, meaning the beaches are environmentally sustainable) [24]. These ambitious tourism projects were introduced and supported by the Dubai Tourism Vision 2020 and Abu Dhabi Tourism Vision 2030. The UAE, especially Dubai, is heavily dependent on foreign workers to achieve these tourist projects because, as Mansfeld and Winckler noted:

The major factor for the low unemployment rate among Dubai’s citizens was the fact that Dubai’s authorities were the first among the Arabian Gulf oil economies to realize that the traditional employment policy of replacing foreign workers by nationals actually failed.

Primarily, leisure and business are the main targeted features for tourism in the UAE [14,24]. For example, the emirate of Abu Dhabi focuses mainly on MICE tourism activities within the context of business tourism. In addition, Abu Dhabi is exploiting the natural resources of the nearby oases, such as Al-Ain and Liwa, as tourism destinations for winter and summer sun tourism [23]. Abu Dhabi is characterized by strong infrastructure, such as highways and airports, effective communications methods, high-quality hotels, safety, and a clean environment. It is also relatively open and liberal compared to the other cities in the region [23]. Accordingly, these characteristics and leverages provide Abu Dhabi with the potential to compete with Dubai City in attracting more regional and international tourists.

One of the characteristics that distinguishes Oman from the rest of the GCC countries is its Ibadi sect, which is an Islamic sect that is neither Sunni nor Shia and is known for its tolerance and peaceful approach. Also, the traditional cities and sites, diverse natural landscape, and wildlife and nature-based activities are the primary tourist attractions (Figure 8). Like the UAE, Oman concentrates on the development of beaches, but Oman focuses more on cultural festivals, natural environments, and local heritage [5]. Comparatively, the UAE topped Oman in tourist receipts as well as in the numbers of international tourist arrivals (Figures 9 and 10). To avoid the negative impacts of mass tourism, Oman focuses on visitors who are attracted to its diverse and natural environment, culture, heritage, history, and archaeology, or what is known as-ecotourism [5].

	Tourist Attractions	Government Policies	The Size and Scale of Tourism Industries	Future Prospects
Oman	Oman prides itself on its tolerance and philosophy of non-violence (Ibadi sect).	Announced its 2015-2040 tourism strategy.	Leisure purposes.	"global-local coexist"
	Traditional cities.	Objective of attracting 12 million international tourists by 2020	Heritage is prominent.	
	Cultural festivals focus on the local heritage.	Policy of "Omanization"		
	Tourist activities center on beaches, diving and successfully capitalize on its natural environment as a tourism attractor.			

Figure 8: Oman tourism: Attractions-size and policies (Source: Own compilation; based mainly on Henderson, 2015, Karolak, 2018, and AlRiyami et al., 2017).

	2008	2010	2015	2020
Bahrain	3.06	3.31	4.23	5.35
Kuwait	7.46	7.85	11	15.02
Qatar	3.79	4.35	7.28	11.80
Saudi Arabia	26.71	29.11	49.69	72.88
Oman	5.07	4.21	6.18	8.55
UAE	37.87	38.45	53.14	73.59
GCC	83.94	87.28	131.52	187.18

Figure 9: Tourism receipts in US\$ billion- comparison between Oman and the UAE (Source: Karolak, 2018; Alpen Capital, 2011).

Country	2013	2024 (prognosis)
Bahrain	9.1a	6.8
Kuwait	0.2	0.4
Oman	2.2	2.9
Qatar	1.3	2.2
KSA (religious tourism)	13.2	20.7
UAE	12.1	39.9
GCC (total)	38.1	72.9

Figure 10: International tourist arrivals (in millions)-Comparison between Oman and the UAE (Source: Karolak, 2018; Data from the World Bank site (<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ST.INT.ARVL>); Alpen Capital, 2014).

One of the challenges for Oman’s tourism sector is the need for better management of tourism resources and attractions. Further, Oman introduced its 2015–2040 tourism strategy with more emphasis on the Omanization process (nationalization of employment) in the tourism sector [5]. The other challenge facing the tourism industry in Oman is the lack of smart tourism systems. Muthuraman et al. [26] identified smart tourism as-A new term which basically implies the application of intelligent technologies in all the phases of the trip, in order to improve the tourist experience and the competitiveness of the destination. The authors proposed the model (Figure 11) to make use of the innovation of technology to contribute to reaching Oman’s tourism goals of 2040 [26-28].

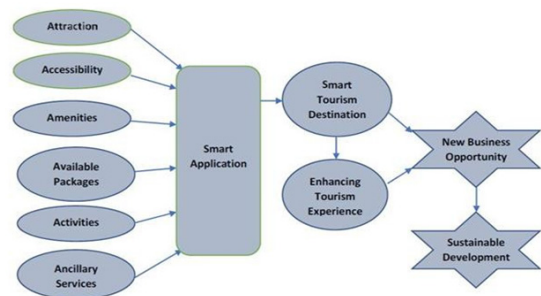


Figure 11: Conceptual model of smart tourism (Source: Muthuraman & Al Haziazi, 2019).

Challenges and structural barriers

This section examines the barriers and challenges facing the development of tourism in some of the GCC countries—in particular, in Oman and the UAE. While economic diversification was intended to create jobs for the economy and, especially, for the nationals of the GCC region, the dependence on foreign workers persists. This may be related to the political and socioeconomic context of the rentier system. As noted previously, Dubai in the UAE was the first to realize the failure of replacing foreign workers, in the tourism industry in particular [3]. Concurrently, the dependence on foreign workers hinders opportunities for citizens to find employment due to the increase in demand for foreign workers. Furthermore, cultural limitations and conservatism in the GCC countries become an obstacle to employing women in the tourism industry. As Stephenson (2017) noted:

Despite arguments concerning the importance of GCC nationals working in the [tourism] industry, such as the role of GCC nationals as cultural ambassadors and role models, this industry is not fully perceived as an attractive source of employment in the GCC Region.

In addition, the adoption of the all-or-nothing strategy by some of the GCC countries in pursuing similar tourism products and initiatives constitutes another challenge facing these countries in diversifying their economies and moving away from dependence upon the export of hydrocarbon. Karolak (2018) explains the problem as such:

The all-or-nothing strategy pursued by some GCC countries (or entities) has resulted in lack of specialized niche tourism products and makes it difficult to compete for less wealthy GCC members unable to commit funds for the development of large-scale projects.

This is explained by the increase in competition between these countries for the same tourism product, which has a direct, negative impact on the marginal profits. Furthermore, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defined the concept of sustainable tourism as tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities [29]. Therefore, sustainable tourism is a recognized policy that highlights the requirements of any tourism activity to achieve sustainability. Some of the GCC countries have achieved some of these requirements in terms of providing employment opportunities in their economies. Yet, these opportunities are occupied mainly by foreign female workers, as efforts have fallen short in securing jobs for female nationals of the GCC countries. Furthermore, from the social perspective, and due to the conservative cultural elements, that prevail in the GCC countries, there are some limitations in regard to making tourism a sustainable sector. From the security and geopolitical standpoints, some obstacles persist against the growth of tourism. Stephenson noted, nonetheless, the region is still vulnerable to security threats and safety risks, which will inevitably test its ultimate tourism potential. Aside from the social and economic aspects, further study is needed to examine other factors that will enable tourism to become sustainable in the GCC region, noting that the road to tourism sustainability is a long process, and tourism as an industry is still new in the region [22].

CONCLUSION

This paper revealed that the tourism industry is a vibrant and priority

economic diversification sector in some of the GCC countries. Therefore, tourism has become a contributing factor in the economic growth of some of these countries. As Karolak asserted, the importance of the tourism industry to the economic growth is well recognized. Further, the tourism sector has received more attention due to its recognized characteristics, such as resilience and, most importantly, the fact that it does not require major changes in the established political and socioeconomic systems of these countries. Furthermore, tourism is interconnected to the spread of globalization, where all the GCC countries are espousing the capitalism mode of production as the dominant economic and financial system among them. In addition, tourism provides the opportunity for some of the GCC countries to brand their image internationally and increase their legitimacy. Therefore, tourism has become the preferred means through which these countries can pursue ambitious dreams and reconstruct their images abroad, particularly after the association of the region with terrorism and violence decades ago.

Likewise, tourism has succeeded in some of the GCC countries because these countries are eager to proactively diversify their economies due to pressing factors, such as environmental concerns, unemployment, and the depletion of oil in some countries. However, the fluctuation of hydrocarbon prices and, above all, oil prices was the primary motivation for planning to take on economic diversification. Remarkably, the wealth accumulated from the export of hydrocarbon has played a major role in making tourism projects and initiatives a priority. Moreover, capitalism and globalization have facilitated the transformation of the GCC countries' economies into international and significant economies.

Because of the peculiarity of the GCC countries in terms of their governing system, their culture, state-society relations, and abundant wealth negatively impacted their ability to make tourism a sustainable sector. Despite that, the tourism industry has emerged as a key driver for a sustainable socio-economic development worldwide. The UEA and Oman took the lead in developing different but viable tourism sectors in the GCC region after their realization of the importance of the tourism industry as an economic diversification strategy. Most of the GCC countries fell short in making tourism sustainable because of the structural barriers and challenges described herein. Notably, the differences in the socioeconomic conditions and political setting of each individual GCC country are the determinants of the growth or impediment of the tourism industry. This is demonstrated in the lack of female participation in the tourism industry as expected, in the heavy dependence on migrant foreign workers, the instability, and in the selectivity in tourism services and products based on competitive advantages rather than country-specific comparative advantages.

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