

## Analyzing the Discourse and Advertising Strategies of ‘Dubai Bling’: Unveiling the Evolving Marketing Dynamics

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### Abstract

This study delves into the intricate realm of ‘Dubai Bling’ scrutinizing its discourse and advertising strategies to reveal the evolving marketing dynamics. Drawing on advertising theory, the research dissects the promotional tactics employed within the show, shedding light on their effectiveness and impact. Simultaneously, discourse theory is applied to unravel the communicative structures embedded in ‘Dubai Bling’, exploring how narratives shape perceptions and contribute to the show’s broader societal discourse. The study examined the targeting of different audiences through the show, how it can be adopted by other countries particularly Pakistan, and relevant professionals, and would aim to unearth the probable reasons and strategies behind Dubai being a global attraction.

**Keywords:** ‘Dubai Bling’, Marketing, Discourse, Advertising Strategies.

### Introduction

Netflix show, ‘Dubai Bling’, is a reality show that covers the lives of many people who became millionaires soon after moving to Dubai. The show was produced by Mazen Laham, Dany K. Saliba, and Lama Samad. According to the show, the city hosts about 26000 millionaires, and the show has an IMDB rating of 3.7 (A-alsuwaidi, 2022). Although it’s a commonly known fact that Dubai is a capitalist state, this stance was once applicable to the citizens of Dubai only. But now with the increasing appeal of the city, people from all around the globe are moving to Dubai; all thanks to its marketing model and strategies. This study explored the promotional and marketing elements are present in the show and how these elements and factors have been put into practice to impress and attract the audience.

Josh Hammerling (2011) in his work quoted, “This city is a testament to the fact that with enough money and governmental gusto, any architectural feat can be achieved.” There is no doubt that real estate has been the greatest source of development in Dubai and the greatest reason for foreigners being attracted to the city and moving there. Based on this statement by Hammerling, an analysis of the architectural marvels of the city also conducted to analyze how they have been set to compliment the dialogues that explicitly carry grandeur, promotion, and marketing elements. While in the same work, Hammerling stated, “You’ve not seen industry until you have seen Dubai; it’s capitalism on steroid” (Hammerling, 2011). Hence, the different aspects of the show were studied that promote Dubai as a city of money, luxury, and comfort.

Qualitative in nature, this study would raise and answer multiple questions, such as: How Dubai has changed the lives of characters presented in the show, and how does the portrayal of these characters promote the image of Dubai? What aspects of marketing and promotion have been shown in the show? What are different elements that make Dubai differentiated from other Arab and third world countries, and why out of all UAE countries/cities Dubai has been selected for this purpose of attracting and appealing the foreigners?

Through these questions, the study aims to explore the extent of the promotion that prevails in the show and hence to explore the ultimate objective of the show, and its impacts on people from across the globe. Pakistan, itself is a country with great potential with characteristics such as that of great history and tourism potential. So this study would aim to achieve an understanding of whether such a technique can be applied to promote the image of Pakistan. Illustrating the metaphorical significance of the architectural presence to promote the image of Dubai is also another of the research purposes to be achieved.

As the study is based on the analysis of dialogues by characters, no attempt has been made to verify the background or struggles of the characters as stated by them in the show. As the show is believed to be a marketing act for Dubai to attract and lure more people toward Dubai, so there might be a hue of exaggeration in the statements of the characters. As the study is limited to only the first season of the series, it restricts the conclusion to be explicitly drawn and generalized. Moreover, a few of the characters are introduced in the later episodes, this also limits the study in terms of character analysis.

## Background and Literature Review

This section deals with and highlights the previous studies conducted both in relation to the several characteristics of Dubai that it exhibits as a state or a city and also the marketing strategies that it is implementing to lure more and more people into its extravagance and luxury. Almost all of these studies agree on the point of Dubai being a capitalist state and a state of extravagance. A certain piece of literature in consideration is found to focus on a certain aspect such as some are found to be focused on the capitalistic aspect of the city, others on it being a democratic/non-democratic state, a study of its marketing model, utilization of marketing to promote its healthcare facilities, and satisfaction of students with the educational marketing mix offered by universities.

Clay Fuller (2010) in his work highlighted the background of Dubai by stating, “The small Persian Gulf Emirate of Dubai has moved from pre-industrial to industrial to quasi-post-industrial service economy status in less than half of a century.” He further extends his proclamation by declaring Dubai as “a luminous Arab version of Western capitalism”. Along with talking about capitalism and democracy in Dubai, Fuller also highlighted how very little academic attention has been paid to the study of the reasons behind the marvelous success of Dubai. We aim to extend our study in accordance with this gap by highlighting the statement that Dubai is not only advertising its major industries and amenities but is also marketing and advertising itself as a city of opulence by imitating desires in its audience.

Paul Thompson (2016) has also highlighted the development of Dubai by stating, “Dubai from the late 19th and 20th century has metamorphosed from little more than a fishing and pearl diving base into a global financial and trading hub.” In addition to this, he also has shed light on the political economy, the role of the state, and the “liberal free market capitalism” that prevails in the state. He states, “.....the city’s political economy is deeply immersed in a socio-economic development model that is state-led, state-centric, and features a deeply embedded system of state-sponsored patronage”. Moving ahead in his statements Thompson presents the notion of Dubai being “the custodian of liberal free market capitalism” to be controversial and argues that “Dubai has emerged as a quintessential exemplar of a new brand of authoritarian state capitalism supported by state-owned/co-owned profit-driven entities”. But Thompson also fails to highlight how the state is targeting people from around the globe to advertise itself and influence them.

Regarding the political economy of the state, Rafeef Ziadah (2018) has also stated a few significant insights in his work. Ziadah makes three connected points: firstly, that port infrastructure is crucial for connecting different types of capital accumulation in Dubai; secondly, Dubai's government-controlled conglomerates have expanded the city's global capital reach through public-private partnerships in port management; and thirdly, that the harsh labor regulations in Dubai are a key factor in its success in the logistics industry worldwide. In addition to such works as that of Ziadah, numerous works also focus on the study of how this city negatively impacts the lives of immigrants who end up doing low-ranked/ less prestigious jobs.

Hepşen and Vatansever (2011) forecasted future trends in the Dubai housing market using the Box-Jenkins autoregressive integrated moving average. Their findings predicted a 2.44% increase in the index of housing sales during 2011. However, their study was and is restricted only to that specific time period and does not talk about the role of marketing in such a significant rise in the housing index. From the above-mentioned works, it has become clear that no special academic attention has been paid to the efforts of the state of Dubai to market itself as a land of luxury and grandeur, what role the city has played in transforming the lives of many, and how its marketing strategy has adopted an indirect shape in the form of series and shows. In this study, we aim to highlight this aspect of such a renowned state and related what changes such a model can bring about for the state of Pakistan.

### **Research Methodology**

Qualitative data analysis encompasses a comprehensive procedure, which involves careful perusal of the collected data, identification of key ideas from the available information, addition of explanatory notes on identified ideas, and merger of similar information to explore predominant themes using standardized analytical techniques. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that the analytical technique to be used should relate to the qualitative research design and the phenomenon of research interest. Interpretative Phenomenological analysis (IPA), as enumerated by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2012), provides a detailed, systemic, and interconnected procedure to analyze qualitative data and leads researchers toward the identification of themes. Moreover, the IPA procedures guide the researcher, to begin with concrete elements and ideas and arrange those under abstract and broader themes (ibid). The guiding principle that governs the entire IPA process emanates from the researcher's or analyst's commitment to formulating an in-depth understanding of the subjects' points of

view. After acquainting the subjects' perspectives thoroughly and identifying the predominant ideas that they have expressed the researcher proceeds with the meaning construction and making broader interpretations on the basis of available data.

Most often, qualitative studies explore a phenomenon in its depth and, to this end, researchers collect data from multiple sources. To keep the analysis process smooth, researchers should begin with one data set at a time, apply analytical techniques, identify key ideas, construct prevalent themes, and then turn towards the other data sets turn by turn. To begin with, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2012) asserted that researchers should engage with data through a repetitive reading/ observation process. After getting immersed in the data, the process of notation should be carried out; this involves the identification of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual information from the textual responses. Explanatory or summative notes are added to the selected textual chunks throughout a transcribed version of the performative response. Then, after reviewing all the added notations, the researcher employs intuitive reasoning to identify emergent themes based on the patterns, connections, and similarities (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012; Yin, 2018). After identifying emergent themes from all the data sets, the researchers apply a process of synthesis to explore dominant and pervasive themes.

While carrying out the entire process of data analysis, the researcher must keep the focus on the subjects' expressed perspectives. To clarify one of the subjects' perspectives, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2012) and Yin (2018) explain that the researchers are required to engage in a wholesome reading and listening process, which acquaints them with the information and the way it has been expressed in the data set. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2012) propound that researchers should listen to a videotaped version of the data after the first reading. Such listening and observation enable the researcher to better immerse into the data, get a deeper cognition of the ways in which respondents express their opinions, and resultantly establish a deeper, accurate, and reliable understanding of the data set.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study analyzed the 'Dubai Bling' through various promotional theories as described by Angelina Lewis. Lewis (2021) in her work "The Theories of Promotion" states that promotion theories suggest advertising as a great tool for marketing management as it increases people's knowledge about a certain thing or product by increasing their awareness and knowledge about the product and influencing them to make a purchase for that product that they did not

previously perceive or felt a need to purchase. This statement of Lewis perfectly seems relevant and applicable to the context of 'Dubai Bling'. From the perspective of this theory, the show was analyzed to explore how it adds to the knowledge of people about Dubai and urge them to visit and settle here.

As CDA along with DA forms a potential framework and methodology that helps to critically analyze ideas (Salma, 2018). Discourse theory by Michael Foucault along with content analysis was utilized to analyze the dialogues and visuals of the show. Content analysis involves a more streamlined and methodical approach to identifying, categorizing, and articulating prevalent themes across sets of data (Upton & Cohen, 2009), therefore it would be used for an expansive and detailed study of the show. Foucault contends that it is essential to uncover the multiple historical layers, connections, hierarchies, and purposes that characterize any given period. He emphasizes that historical descriptions are influenced by the current state of knowledge and evolve with each transformation. In other words, they continuously break away from their previous forms (Felluga, 2021). It was also used to contextualize texts, uncover implicit messages and underlying narratives, and to customize the analysis it also examined how the marketing strategy and tactics are breaking away from their traditional norms in the shape of this show.

The show's narratives in the context of changing societal norms, cultural shifts, and the evolving landscape of entertainment was studied along with evaluating how it establishes connections with different audiences (Nisa et al., 2022, 2023). The framework of the research consisted of the following steps: identifying the show as promotional/advertising material, identifying the ultimate goal of promotion and the tactics to do so, and observing the underlying narratives.

### **Results and Findings**

It is quite obvious that not everyone needs to move to Dubai for the sake of better facilities, lifestyle, and working opportunities as many other places besides Dubai are quite promising in these regards. But Dubai unlike these other places, is making explicit efforts to present itself as a much better choice to move to and it can be seen from the very opening dialogue of the first episode of the show 'Dubai Bling'. In that dialogue, Zeina is shown saying, "They call Dubai the diamond city" (Ep-1 00:00:12 --> 00:00:14) followed by the striking footage of luxury cars, sky-rise buildings, dancing fountains, majestic lights, and more. Music played in the background is another element of advertisement that not only plays a vital role in grabbing the

attention of the audience but also increases the persuasiveness of the advertisement (Ambeker, 2009). The music in the background is highly upbeat followed by very strong and attractive images of luxury cars, Palm Jumeirah, Burj Khalifa, desert safari, luxury houses, helicopters, yachts, and more.

Soon after Zeina, Ebraheem is shown to say, “Dubai is a land of wealth, luxury, and prosperity” (Ep-1 00:00:27 --> 00:00:30). While Zeina again follows him to say, “Many people have become millionaires in Dubai. And I’m one of them” (Ep-1 00:00:33 --> 00:00:37) . This statement of Zeina is explicit enough to show that she is crediting the state for her and many other’s success. Afterward, she again states that there are many people in their circle who are from different backgrounds and belong to different states, but all of them are leading luxurious lives. This makes the element of advertisement or marketing more obvious as it presents Dubai which is open to all people irrespective of their backgrounds or states. This adds more to the argument that the show is nothing but an advertisement or marketing tactic to attract more and more people to move to Dubai, benefit themselves, and in return pay taxes, generate more money flow, and thus add up to the national wealth of the city.

Kris Fade comments on the city in the following words, “Everyone here is looking for something. Money, power, image, or love”(Ep-1 00:02:29 --> 00:02:34). This statement of Fade carries the underlying meaning that no matter what you (audience) are looking for, Dubai has got it all, adding to the appeal of Dubai. While talking about her journey to becoming a millionaire, Zeina says that she had only 300\$ when she came to Dubai, but she multiplied it into millions (Ep: 1, 00:03:04 --> 00:03:08) and comments the same about Kris Fade stating his background identity as Lebanese-Australian and a former barista who used to clean toilets (Ep:1, 00:08:10 --> 00:08:13 and 00:08:13 --> 00:08:16) who also had the sum close to 300\$ (00:08:16 --> 00:08:18). He turned into a successful radio host and businessman within a very short span of time. (00:08:18 --> 00:08:22). Before the end of the first episode, it manages to shed light on the life of Farah Bodi who has gained success through social media and is a very renowned social media influencer (00:20:19--> 00:20:28).

Episode 2 aims at advertising the riches and brands that one can easily access in the city. In the episode, characters are shown to describe themselves in terms of high-end brands. For example, Farah states, “It’s so Amalfi, so Dolce. I love the shades by the way.” (00:20:12--> 00:20:15). While the advertisement of the riches of the city is reflected in this statement of Zeina, “In Dubai, there are 26,000 millionaires from both genders” (00:21:34 --> 00:21:38). The

same things (both riches, and lucrative luxuries) are shown in Episode 6 by DJ Bliss through his dialogue that states, “The launch party is on a yacht.” (00:02:47 --> 00:02:49) Lavish and expensive locations for parties are shown regularly in the show.

Similarly, the famous tourist and shopping spots are also highlighted as Lojain Omran puts it into words, “Today I’m presenting the closing ceremony for the Dubai Shopping Festival” (00:30:06 --> 00:30:10). Episode 6 highlights this part too by presenting the wax statue museum as an elite tourist attraction in Dubai (00:08:58 --> 00:09:00). Episode 5 also adds to this side of the image of Dubai by highlighting the latest and infamous trend of replicating the famous tourist sites (including buildings, statues, and more). The episode highlights replicated Beverly Hills in this context, as Briana says, “I found my perfect dress in Beverly Hills” (00:27:01 --> 00:27:04). The same thing is presented in Episode 3 where Fahad talks about Dubai Eye (a replica of London Eye) while describing his vacation he had with his wife Safa. He says, “I decided that let’s go to Dubai Eye (00:35:26 --> 00:35:31).

### **Analysis and Discussion**

When analyzed as a whole, the show appears to exhibit multiple elements of marketing and advertisement and the phenomena related to Economics such as elasticity. “In economics, “elasticity” is a term that identifies how closely two variables, such as price and consumption, are linked” (Allen, 2018). Here the estimated cost to move to Dubai has been stated as 300\$ while the approximate consumption can be assumed as the number of millionaires stated i.e. 26000. Additionally, if analyzed through the lens of different types of marketing appeals, the show has been found to exhibit music appeal, masculine-feminine appeal (based on creating the image of a perfect person through the use of cosmetics, clothing, etc), brand appeal (as found in Farah and Safa’s dialogues), adventure appeal (through the presentation of different tourism spots and additional elite amenities), and more (Shafi, 2019).

The marketing mix model of advertisement, if taken into consideration, for the analysis of the show, suggests four basic elements both for making a strong advertisement and analyzing the one already made. The first element is a product which in this case is Dubai. The second element is the price which in this case is implied as 300\$. A third element is a place that “represents the variables of getting the product to the consumer such as distribution channels, market coverage, and movement organization”. Place in the context of the show can be assumed as any place and any state from where people can move to Dubai. The last element is promotion which is the process of making the advertisement reach the target audience and



influence them to purchase the product which in this case is the show itself. Hence, it would be quite right to say that the show not only aims at entertaining people but also to advertise and market Dubai and add to its already skyrocketing hype.

Besides this, 'Dubai Bling' lures its audience to believe that Dubai offers a first-world lifestyle to its residents. This can be seen from the very first episode of the show where Safa fights with her husband just because the wardrobe in their bedroom is not fulfilling the storage capacity for her clothes. Zeina comments on this issue of Safa by saying, "This is a first-world problem". Similarly, while highlighting the issue of abortion in relation to Safa, both Zeina and Safa are found to comment that such things are not allowed in other Arab countries, but Dubai like all the other developed countries and nations allows it.

The content analysis incorporates smoother and more systematic patterns for the identification, categorization, and formulation of themes prevailing across data sets (Upton & Cohen, 2009). Additionally, content analysis offers substantive support for studies that seek to explore experiential and knowledge-based phenomena (Ahmed et al., 2021). By allowing researchers to sort out and evaluate recurrent patterns in the data set, the content analysis leads toward an elaborate and expansive analysis. These rich media advertisements are defined as those with which users can interact as opposed to sole animation, and they include almost every form of media. This show or advertisement contains images or videos and involves some kind of user interaction. While text ads sell with words, and display ads sell with pictures, Rich Media ads offer more ways to involve an audience with an ad. The ad can expand, float, peel down, etc. One can access aggregated metrics on the audience's behavior, including a number of expansions, multiple exits, and video completions.

Emotions also play a crucial role in advertising (Arif et al., 2022), and their connection to the topic of 'Dubai Bling' and its advertising strategies is significant. Emotional advertisements tend to capture viewers' attention more effectively than purely informational ones (Hassan et al., 2021). In the context of 'Dubai Bling', the use of emotional elements in advertising can enhance engagement, drawing the audience into the narrative of the reality show and its associated marketing content. Advertisements that evoke emotions can influence viewers' attitudes and behaviors (Shafi et al., 2023). 'Dubai Bling' being set in Dubai, advertisers need to be attuned to the cultural nuances and preferences of the target audience, using emotions that resonate within that cultural framework.

Pakistan is a country with huge potential in terms of what it has to offer. While the country is missing out on a huge part of marketing, the PR and collaboration part of marketing has been practiced by Pakistan by inviting travel vloggers such as Rossie Gabriel and Luke Dampant but this only succeeded in portraying the friendliness and hospitality of the Pakistani nation and its natural beauty but Pakistan has much more than that to offer. For example, Pakistan owns the world's largest salt mine, and even if we consider the corporate side of the country, Bahria Town Pakistan is the largest real estate holding company in Asia. Such a marketing model can help Pakistan win worthy recognition.

Dubai's transformation from a desert to a thriving international city is a remarkable example of destination branding and marketing. The article highlights the importance of destination marketing in today's crowded tourism marketplace, where numerous countries compete for the attention of travelers and new talent. Destination marketing plays a crucial role in shaping a destination's image and attracting tourists as well as rich migrants. By understanding the needs and preferences of potential visitors, destinations can develop effective branding and positioning strategies. A successful destination marketing campaign requires collaboration among stakeholders to create a compelling destination vision. Positive brand images have been proven to boost economies and attract tourism, residents, and investment.

Dubai serves as a prime example of this phenomenon. Through consistent marketing efforts, infrastructure development, and brand building, Dubai managed to change its image from a desert to a desirable destination in just a decade. Dubai's success lies in its ability to sell a myth and create desire through effective branding and marketing. The article explores how others can learn from Dubai's tourism strategies to enhance its own tourism and investment sector by analyzing an example of rich media advertisement namely 'Dubai Bling'.

As global tourism competition increases, destination personality becomes a crucial aspect of destination branding. Crafted destination personalities help create unique identities for tourist places, making them stand out in the market. Dubai, situated strategically between Europe, Asia, and Africa, has capitalized on its location to become a significant international city. From being a small fishing village heavily reliant on oil reserves, Dubai has transformed itself into a modern metropolis within a relatively short span of time. Its success story showcases the power of effective destination branding and marketing.

Dubai's bling has helped the city gain international recognition and become synonymous with luxury, grandeur, and innovation. It has become a symbol of modernity and progress, attracting tourists, businesses, and investors from around the world. The bling factor has been a major driver of tourism in Dubai. The city's iconic landmarks such as the Burj Khalifa, Palm Jumeirah, and luxury hotels like the Burj Al Arab have become tourist attractions in their own right. The influx of visitors contributes significantly to the local economy, generating revenue and creating job opportunities. Dubai's glamorous image attracts multinational corporations and entrepreneurs seeking a vibrant business environment.

### Conclusion and Future Implications

All these factors enlighten us on how the marketing landscape is evolving and is innovating and adapting the traditional approaches of marketing to achieve specific purposes. While marketing is traditionally related to products and services, Dubai has altered the whole notion by making it about itself with reality shows, like 'Dubai Bling'. It is important to note that Dubai garnered attention and popularity via its real estate feats and recreational amenities. Hence, this study of the show sheds light on the importance of city branding, how it has revolutionized the global image of Dubai and emphasizes the need for such an approach to be adopted by Pakistan, particularly when Asia's largest real estate developer i.e. Bahria Town belongs to Pakistan and is developing world-class architectural marvels. According to Defence Forum India, the largest fountain in Asia was unveiled by Bahria Town Karachi in 2017 (Neo, 2017). Pakistan is also richer in its natural resources, historical monuments, and cultural diversity. Therefore, the study provides relevant insights for urban planners, marketers, and policymakers of Pakistan to capitalize on these resources and enhance the country's global image. The future researches can be done on the themes of objectification and gender roles employed in the show as well.

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