



**Politecnico  
di Torino**

Politecnico di Torino

Master of Science Program in

Territorial, Urban, Environmental and Landscape Planning

Curriculum: Planning for the Global Urban Agenda

Master Thesis

**Instagrammable sustainability: Dubai, city branding  
and visual greenwashing**

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Academic Year 2024/2025



## Acknowledgement

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Andrea Pollio for trusting me throughout this process and always having my back. His clarity of thought, his meticulous care for every detail, and his professional mentorship guided me through both the challenges and the achievements of this journey. I am certain that I could not have asked for a more attentive and inspiring mentor in every aspect.

I am equally grateful, first to my family, who reminded me to believe in myself, and then to my friends, who always gave me confidence no matter where they are.

I wholeheartedly dedicate this work to all those who walked beside me on this path.

# Abstract

Dubai's global image has been deliberately constructed through an ambitious strategy of urban branding, in which advertising plays a critical role. Across platforms such as Instagram and urban promotional campaigns, the city projects itself as a nexus of innovation, luxury, cultural heritage, and sustainability. This thesis explores how advertising particularly through digital media shapes Dubai's urban identity while selectively framing its sustainability goals.

Drawing on the literature on city branding (Hesham Sameh et al., 2018) and urban advertising as a cultural and communicative structure (Leonova et al., 2022), this research investigates how visual strategies emphasize spectacle and ecological modernity while often masking underlying urban contradictions. By analyzing a curated set of Instagram content, influencer campaigns, and official media, the dissertation reveals how the aesthetics of sustainability, green spaces, smart technology, and heritage symbolism are used to construct a palatable narrative of progress and ecological responsibility.

However, this narrative often omits critical environmental concerns, such as water scarcity, ecological fragility, and the social cost of hyper development. The thesis engages with visual culture theory, semiotics, and urban communication to unpack the gap between projected brand identity and urban reality, particularly in the aftermath of events like the April 2024 flash floods. Ultimately, it argues that while advertising strengthens Dubai's global competitiveness, it also reproduces forms of visual greenwashing and cultural essentialism that complicate the city's claims to sustainable urbanism.

Keywords:

Dubai, city branding, sustainability, city image, visual greenwashing, visual culture

# Abstract

Sostenibilità Instagrammabile: Dubai, city branding e visual greenwashing

L'immagine globale di Dubai è stata intenzionalmente costruita attraverso un'ambiziosa strategia di urban branding. Attraverso piattaforme come Instagram e campagne promozionali urbane, la città si presenta come un nodo di innovazione, lusso, patrimonio culturale e sostenibilità. Questa tesi analizza come la promozione mediatica, in particolare attraverso i media digitali, contribuisca a plasmare l'identità urbana di Dubai, selezionando e incorniciando i suoi obiettivi di sostenibilità.

Facendo riferimento alla letteratura sul “city branding” (Hesham Sameh et al., 2018) e sulla “urban advertising” intesa come struttura culturale e comunicativa (Leonova et al., 2022), la ricerca indaga le strategie visive che enfatizzano lo spettacolarità e la modernità ecologica, spesso occultando contraddizioni profonde. Attraverso l'analisi di un corpus mirato di contenuti su Instagram, campagne di influencer e media ufficiali, la dissertazione evidenzia come l'estetica della sostenibilità, degli spazi verdi, della smart technology e dei simbolismi legati al patrimonio venga utilizzata per costruire una narrativa seducente di progresso e responsabilità ecologica.

Tale narrativa, tuttavia, tende a omettere aspetti critici, come la scarsità d'acqua, la fragilità ecologica e i costi sociali dell'iper-sviluppo. La tesi si confronta con la teoria della cultura visiva, la semiotica e la comunicazione urbana per mettere in luce il divario tra identità di brand proiettata e realtà urbana, in particolare all'indomani di eventi come le alluvioni lampo dell'aprile 2024. In ultima analisi, la tesi sostiene che, se da un lato la comunicazione visiva

rafforza la competitività globale di Dubai, dall'altro riproduce forme di “visual greenwashing” ed essenzialismo culturale che complicano le rivendicazioni della città verso un urbanesimo sostenibile.



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# Introduction

## 0.1 Overview

In the context of global urban competition, Dubai has positioned itself as a brand-city, crafting an identity that blends economic ambition with visual spectacle. Through a strategic combination of advertising, iconic architecture, and digital media, the city promotes itself as a clean, futuristic, and sustainable metropolis. This branding process aligns closely with Dubai's long-term planning documents, including UAE Vision 2021 and Dubai 2040 Urban Master Plan, which present sustainability as central to the city's future growth. However, much of this sustainability is communicated through curated images rather than demonstrated through systemic ecological reform.

Dubai's urban branding is shaped not only by its physical developments but also by how those developments are seen. Projects such as the Museum of the Future, Expo 2020, and the Dubai Creek Tower are not just infrastructure, they are symbols designed for media circulation. As Sameh et al. (2018) argue in their study on Dubai's city branding, these urban spectacles serve as visual anchors for a brand identity built on luxury, innovation, and cosmopolitanism. The city becomes a product, and advertising becomes the language through which this product is sold.

This branding extends seamlessly into the digital realm, where platforms like Instagram play a central role in shaping urban perception. Promotional campaigns and influencer collaborations craft a continuous stream of polished content that portrays Dubai as green, inclusive, and technologically advanced. These visual strategies are not neutral; they are part

of a promotional culture that selectively highlights certain aspects of the urban environment while obscuring others such as ecological vulnerability, social inequality, or labor conditions.

This dissertation engages with these tensions, exploring the role of visual advertising in Dubai's urban identity and its sustainability. Drawing on theoretical insights from city branding literature (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005), urban visual culture, and recent analyses of visual greenwashing, I unpack how Dubai's future is marketed through imagery, especially on social media. Through a critical reading of advertising content and Instagram campaigns, this work explores how urban imaginaries are constructed, and what kinds of environmental and cultural narratives they choose to show or hide.

## 0.2 Research Question

Dubai has undergone a remarkable transformation into a globally recognized urban brand, strategically using advertising and digital media to construct a carefully curated image of luxury, innovation, and sustainability. This transformation is not only architectural or economic, it is also visual and symbolic, driven by branding practices that shape how the city is perceived locally and internationally. As Sameh et al. (2018) argue, Dubai's branding merges economic ambition, technological spectacle, and cultural distinctiveness to assert its position in global urban hierarchies. In recent years, these promotional strategies have increasingly emphasized sustainability, portraying Dubai as a model of future-oriented development. However, behind the polished visuals and futuristic messaging lies a complex tension between image and implementation particularly in relation to environmental performance, cultural authenticity, and social inclusivity. Advertising in this context does not merely promote urban development; it actively constructs Dubai's urban identity and sustainability narrative. This dissertation investigates how advertising especially on social media platforms like Instagram shapes and communicates these narratives. It approaches advertising not as a neutral marketing tool, but as a powerful form of urban storytelling that mediates between global sustainability discourses, local cultural symbols, and aspirational visions of the future. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from city branding (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005), promotional urbanism (Leonova et al., 2022), and digital visual culture (Highfield & Leaver, 2016), the study examines how symbolic language, green aesthetics, and curated content contribute to producing a persuasive but selective vision of Dubai's urban future.

The main research question asks: How does advertising particularly on social media frame Dubai's urban identity and sustainability goals?

To explore this question in depth, the study addresses four sub-questions:

1. How is urban branding visually constructed on platforms like Instagram?
2. What elements of sustainability are emphasized or hidden in Dubai's promotional content?
3. How are culture and heritage used to legitimize Dubai's future-oriented development narrative?
4. To what extent does advertising align with the sustainability targets set out in the Dubai 2040 Urban Master Plan?

These questions aim to reveal the visual logic, symbolic strategies, and politics of representation that shape Dubai's self-image as a sustainable global city. By analyzing how the future is framed through advertising, the thesis contributes to critical debates on urban imaginaries, visual greenwashing, and the role of media in contemporary city-making.

### 0.3 Conceptual Background: City branding, urban advertising, and visual greenwashing

To answer the research questions, this dissertation works with three bodies of literature: city branding, urban advertising, and visual greenwashing. Dubai's evolution into a world-famous brand-city is no coincidence, but a consequence of a highly choreographed urban branding process. The process entails developing a distinctive urban image attractive to foreign audiences in investment, tourist, and culture domains. According to Sameh et al. (2018) in their research on the case of Dubai's branding framework, the competitive positioning of the city works upon a strong brand image combining economic enthusiasm and spectacular urban growth. The promotional logic of Dubai rests upon visual icons; the urban spectacle becomes, in turn, a visual anchor to a brand identity based upon opulence, technological sophistication, and cosmopolitan dreams.

Key to this branding is its extension into digital realms. Social platforms such as Instagram have come to play a crucial role in crafting public images of urban landscapes. Advertisements, influencers, and lifestyle publications collaborate to generate a flow of sponsored content highlighting Dubai in a green, inclusive, and forward-looking manner. These images are not neutral; they form part of a promotional culture highlighting particular dimensions of urban experience whilst omitting others, such as ecological vulnerability, labour inequality, and socio-political depth. Here, advertising performs not only as communication, but as urban narrative, strategically crafting a future for Dubai. One form of this social media-driven promotion of Dubai's green ambition can be critically examined under the rubric of visual greenwashing strategy through which sustainability is performed as image and spectacle rather than embedded as material practice.

Greenwashing refers to the practice in which organizations, governments, or corporations present themselves as more environmentally responsible than they actually are, often by emphasizing selective initiatives or symbolic gestures while continuing unsustainable practices. It operates as a strategic communication tool to gain legitimacy, attract investment, and appeal to environmentally conscious audiences, without making substantive changes to reduce ecological harm (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015).

Within the context of urban mega-events such as Expo 2020, this can take the form of visual greenwashing and the use of design, imagery, and aesthetic cues to convey a narrative of sustainability. Visual greenwashing relies on elements like lush landscaping, renewable energy symbols, and climate-themed architectural features to create a powerful impression of environmental commitment, regardless of whether these elements significantly reduce the project's ecological footprint (Fernandez, 2022). This form of spectacle-driven representation can shape global perceptions, aligning with promotional urbanism's emphasis on image-making while potentially obscuring persistent issues such as high carbon emissions, resource-intensive infrastructure, and environmental injustice.

In Dubai, images of lush green spaces, walkable boulevards, and integrated smart technologies are often deployed to suggest alignment with global sustainability frameworks. However, these images frequently omit or downplay urgent issues such as water scarcity, desert ecology, and the social costs of hyper-development. Leonova et al. (2022), in their study of urban advertising in Astrakhan, emphasize that such visual environments operate as "projections of societal values," shaping both public imagination and spatial experience. Their insight applies to Dubai, where the saturation of futuristic visuals contributes to a

“mirage image” (Zaidan & Abulibdeh, 2021) a stylized narrative that may not reflect the lived urban condition or the long-term environmental impacts.

## 0.4 Navigating Contradictions: Culture, Development, and Sustainability in Gulf Cities

Dubai's urban development pattern mirrors larger dynamics found within Gulf cities, in which urbanization meets political aspiration, economic openness, and socio-cultural richness. Critiquing the dichotomy of top-down master planning and existing tensions between culture, economic prosperity, and environmental limitation, Zaidan and Abulibdeh (2021) believe Gulf cities would risk producing generic urban morphologies devoid of authenticity and sustainability if culture and ecological wisdom aren't institutionalized within planning practices.

More, too, Fazli and Faridi (2021) allude to deeper socio-economic contradictions of Dubai's transformation. Basking in its infrastructural glory, they acknowledge the “gloomy aspects” consistently kept from official histories such as low-paid migrant labour, abuse of human rights, and pollution of the environment. These issues call for additional examination of what's made evident and what's kept suppressed within Dubai's advertising, in particular as the city more typically deploys sustainability as a major brand theme.

Advertising in Dubai operates as a potent tool of urban storytelling construction, connecting global sustainability discourse, place-based cultural allusions, and prospective city futures. Applying the critical lenses of city branding, promotional urbanism, and digital visual culture, this thesis questions how crafted image, in particular on social media, facilitates a very persuasive but choosy rendition of sustainability. Conceptual bearings of this sort remain integral to clarifying devices by which Dubai's urban identity is visually constructed, ideologically reified, and internationally disseminated.

## 0.5 Methods

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to ensure that only Instagram posts directly relevant to Dubai's urban identity and sustainability narratives were included. This approach enabled the deliberate selection of visual materials most aligned with the research objectives, rather than relying on random sampling. Data collection was conducted between January 2020 and August 2025 and targeted posts that explicitly featured sustainability discourse, heritage symbolism, or urban development branding. Relevant content was identified through three pathways: targeted hashtags (*#greendubai*, *#sustainabledubai*, *#dubaifuture*, *#greenplanetdubai*), geotag filters of significant landmarks such as the Expo 2020 site and the Museum of the Future, and curated lists of official government, tourism, and property developer accounts. The resulting dataset comprised 60 Instagram posts and 30 unique images, which together provide a cross-sectional representation of Dubai's visual branding ecosystem. These materials form the empirical basis for the visual design, thematic, and discourse analyses outlined in the subsequent sections of the methodology.

## 0.6 Key argument

My thesis is that advertising in Dubai functions as a system of mechanisms which does not merely promote the city's urban development but actively constructs its projected identity and environmental legitimacy. Through curated content circulated across digital platforms, particularly Instagram, Dubai's branding machinery crafts an image of a city that is simultaneously futuristic, culturally authentic, and ecologically responsible. This image, however, is highly selective, emphasizing green aesthetics and technological optimism while downplaying the structural contradictions embedded in Dubai's rapid urban growth.

Central to this process is the phenomenon of visual greenwashing, in which eco-friendly imagery such as lush parks, clean transit, solar installations, and desert-oasis aesthetics are deployed to suggest alignment with sustainability goals, even when meaningful ecological practices or inclusive urban policies are limited or absent. These visuals work not as reflections of planning reality, but as ideological tools that communicate stability, responsibility, and modernity to global investors, tourists, and residents. The performance of sustainability thus becomes part of Dubai's urban spectacle, reinforcing a narrative that is visually persuasive but materially fragile.

Moreover, Dubai's advertising relies heavily on cultural legitimation to naturalize its future-oriented development. Emirati symbols, traditional architecture, and heritage motifs are integrated into digital campaigns to create the impression that the city's modernization is rooted in continuity rather than rupture. This fusion of tradition and innovation serves not only to domesticate the image of progress but also to deflect critiques of alienation, erasure, or social displacement. In doing so, Dubai's advertising strategies actively mediate between global branding demands and local political narratives.

My core thesis, therefore, is that advertising is a central agent in shaping Dubai's urban imaginary, contributing to both the perception and production of the city. It frames sustainability not as a material condition to be achieved but as an aesthetic style to be performed. It transforms culture into a symbolic guarantee of authenticity, and it turns development into content. As such, the dissertation positions advertising not as a peripheral or decorative aspect of Dubai's urban transformation, but as a constitutive force in the governance of the city's future image.

## Chapter 1. Conceptual background

This chapter introduces the conceptual foundations that guide the analysis of how cities are imagined, represented, and circulated through visual and digital media. Rather than treating urban branding or representation as isolated practices, it situates them within broader theoretical debates on the relationship between imagery, urban imaginaries, and digital infrastructures. The discussion begins with the role of social media in shaping contemporary experiences of the city, before examining how visual strategies such as greenwashing construct symbolic narratives of sustainability. It then turns to Söderström's (1996) notion of *paper cities*, which illuminates the constitutive power of representations in urban governance, and extends this perspective to recent scholarship on urban imaginaries and platform urbanism (Zukin, 1995; Huyssen, 2008; van der Graaf & Ballon, 2019). Together, these frameworks provide the theoretical lens through which this dissertation interrogates how visual culture and digital platforms mediate urban identity, sustainability, and development.

## 1.1 Social media city

In today's digitally mediated urban landscape, the city is no longer experienced solely through its physical infrastructure. Increasingly, it is encountered through screens, feeds, and platforms produced and circulated through a flood of curated imagery. Among these, Instagram has emerged as one of the most influential tools for shaping the global imagination of cities, transforming urban space into a continuous stream of aesthetic experiences. From aerial views of skyline silhouettes to images of clean green parks, solar-paneled buildings, and carefully framed cultural motifs, cities are increasingly branded through visuals, and those visuals are amplified through algorithmic platforms.

Dubai exemplifies this transformation. It is a city built to be seen from its futuristic towers and artificial islands to its desert luxury and monumental events like Expo 2020. Its urban planning has long been entangled with branding strategies, but in the era of social media, these strategies have become more participatory, networked, and image-dependent than ever before. Instagram, in particular, has become a key site of urban storytelling, where governmental campaigns, influencer content, and user-generated posts work together to project a vision of Dubai that is clean, modern, multicultural, and sustainable. Hashtags such as #MyDubai, #GreenDubai, and #SustainableDubai function not just as metadata, but as tools of narrative control categorizing and promoting a particular version of the city's identity.

This chapter explores how Dubai's urban brand is co-produced through social media, with a focus on Instagram as a visual and algorithmic space where sustainability is performed, culture is stylized, and urban identity is continuously curated. Drawing from literature on platform urbanism, urban imaginaries, and digital aesthetics, it examines how digital

platforms mediate what is visible and what remains hidden. It also reflects on the political implications of this process: whose Dubai is represented, whose sustainability is showcased, and what realities are left out of the frame.

In doing so, the chapter sets the foundation for the thesis's empirical analysis in Chapter 4, where Instagram posts related to Dubai's sustainability, development, and heritage will be examined in detail. The digital layer of the city, though intangible, has become a crucial battleground where urban futures are not only envisioned, but advertised, consumed, and contested.

## 1.2 Visual greenwashing

Visual greenwashing refers to the strategic projection of environmental responsibility through symbolic gestures rather than substantive ecological change (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). In mega-events like Expo 2020, this took the form of eco-symbols such as solar trees, green mobility displays, and climate-resilience narratives that created a compelling image of sustainability without addressing the event's actual environmental footprint (Fernandez, 2022). The Terra Sustainability Pavilion, for instance, offered an immersive and educational experience on environmental issues, yet it avoided confronting Dubai's broader climate contradictions, including its high per-capita carbon emissions, dependence on aviation and luxury consumption, and precarious water security in a hyper-arid environment (Zaidan & Abulibdeh, 2021). In this way, sustainability was framed as an aesthetic performance rather than a material restructuring of urban systems.

This phenomenon intersects with what Söderström (1996) calls paper cities as mentioned in chapter 1.1, where urban plans and spatial visions exert greater influence in policy documents, marketing materials, and architectural renderings than in actual built environments

### 1.3 Paper Cities

Ola Söderström's *Paper Cities* (1996) provides an important theoretical entry point for understanding the power of representation in urban transformation. His work demonstrates that urban planning and governance are never only material practices, but are deeply dependent on the production and circulation of visual and textual artefacts. Maps, masterplans, technical drawings, and brochures are not passive reflections of the city; they are active mediators that shape how the city is imagined, legitimized, and ultimately produced. In this sense, Söderström highlights that the “paper city” precedes and conditions the material city, insofar as decisions, investments, and public perceptions are organized around representations that travel across contexts and gain authority.

This perspective introduces several key concepts that are particularly relevant to this dissertation. First is the idea of visual mediation, where representations serve as instruments that organize complex realities into simplified, communicable forms, making urban futures appear both possible and desirable. Second is the notion of internal and external efficacy: internally, representations guide decision-making and provide a shared framework for planners, developers, and policymakers; externally, they communicate legible images of the city to broader audiences, including investors, tourists, and the global public. Third,

Söderström draws on Latour's concept of immutable mobiles to describe how certain images or diagrams retain their authority while circulating widely, thereby stabilizing urban imaginaries across different scales and audiences.

Advertising on social media and promotional imagery can thus be understood as contemporary extensions of the "paper city." Much like planning maps or architectural renderings, they transform abstract aspirations into tangible visions that appear authoritative and compelling. These viral images not only shape how urban change is communicated but also govern how it is perceived and legitimized across different audiences. In this sense, advertising functions as a form of paper urbanism that stabilizes narratives of transformation and provides symbolic guarantees for futures that may not yet materialize.

This understanding of representation as constitutive of urban life provides the ground for engaging with debates on urban imaginaries and platform urbanism, where the circulation of images increasingly intersects with digital infrastructures, networked media, and new forms of governance.

## 1.4 Urban Imaginaries and Platform Urbanism

Urban imaginaries are the socially and culturally constructed visions through which cities are imagined, represented, and contested, encompassing the stories, symbols, and aesthetic forms that influence how urban identity is produced and circulated across architecture, media, planning, and public discourse (Huyssen, 2008; Zukin, 1995). These imaginaries are not merely abstract ideas; they actively shape policy, development priorities, and spatial design by framing what futures are considered desirable or possible. In a globalized era, they

often merge local cultural narratives with transnational flows of capital, technology, and imagery, producing hybrid visions that can inspire civic pride while obscuring structural inequalities. In Dubai, this imaginary is meticulously curated a polished vision of innovation, luxury, speed, and sustainability yet it is not only the product of planners or advertisers. In the age of Instagram and other platforms, tourists, influencers, residents, and anonymous users also participate in co-authoring the city's brand, amplifying and reshaping its image in real time.

Platform urbanism is commonly understood as a socio-technical formation in which digital infrastructures, algorithms, and interfaces mediate interactions among citizens, private companies, and public institutions. Van der Graaf (2023) contrasts this model with the “smart city” paradigm: while the latter emphasizes efficiency and infrastructure, platform urbanism highlights how commerce, governance, and community intersect in shaping urban experiences. Central to this shift are three interrelated dynamics: participation, mediatisation, and platformisation.

In this context, participation does not refer to formal democratic engagement or policymaking, but to the ways users contribute content, interactions, and data that actively shape urban narratives. On Instagram, for example, tourists posting images of Burj Khalifa or residents sharing stories of “green Dubai” become unwitting co-producers of the city's brand identity. This is a form of “participatory branding,” where everyday acts of posting, tagging, or liking are appropriated into Dubai's broader promotional ecosystem (Boy & Uitermark, 2017; Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Such participation is ambivalent: while it opens space for diverse representations, it is also tightly structured by platform algorithms and

visibility logics that privilege polished, marketable images over critical or messy ones (Manovich, 2017).

Mediatisation refers to the adoption of media logics and aesthetics by institutional actors, as seen in Dubai's government campaigns that emulate influencer-style imagery to enhance relatability and reach. Platformisation, meanwhile, captures the embedding of these practices into wider digital infrastructures, linking state branding efforts with tourism platforms, real estate advertising, and global social media networks (van der Graaf & Ballon, 2019).

Far from being neutral, platforms operate as infrastructures of visibility and engines of data extraction (Chen et al., 2024). They determine what becomes prominent, valuable, and shareable in the city, privileging aesthetics of futurism, luxury, or greenery while obscuring infrastructural inequalities or environmental costs.

Taken together, these perspectives position platform urbanism as a contested but productive lens for analysis. This dissertation adopts it to frame Instagram not merely as a communication channel but as an urban interface through which Dubai's identity and sustainability narratives are produced, circulated, and contested. By clarifying participation as content co-production rather than direct civic involvement the study situates Instagram at the core of Dubai's digital brand infrastructure.

Instagram operates as a paradigmatic urban platform within the framework of platform urbanism, mediating interactions between users, businesses, and institutions through its socio-technical infrastructure of algorithms, interfaces, and data flows (van der Graaf, 2023; Chen et al., 2024). Far from being a neutral communication tool, it actively shapes urban life

by functioning as both an infrastructure of connection and an engine of visibility, privileging certain places, aesthetics, and narratives while obscuring others.

As Boy and Uitermark (2017) demonstrate, Instagram selectively reassembles the city by elevating spaces of high-end consumption and cultural capital while rendering mundane or marginalised areas invisible, thereby reinforcing socio-spatial inequalities. In Van der Graaf's (2023) terms, the platform's dynamics manifest through participation where users co-create and circulate urban narratives via images and hashtags, mediatisation where urban actors adopt Instagram's visual and algorithmic logics, and platformisation where urban experiences are designed to fit the affordances and economies of the platform. Through these processes, Instagram does not merely document the city but reorganises how it is experienced, valued, and governed, embedding itself into both the symbolic and material fabric of urban life.

## 1.5 Visibility, Censorship, and the Politics of Representation

In digital platforms like Instagram, visibility is not a neutral state but the result of algorithmic, cultural, and social negotiations over what is seen and valued. As Highfield and Leaver (2016) note, visual content functions as a key mode of identity construction, political expression, and affective communication, shaping both everyday interactions and large-scale social narratives. Platform affordances such as hashtags, filters, and trending feeds act as mechanisms of amplification, granting certain images prominence while relegating others to obscurity. This selective amplification privileges content that aligns with dominant aesthetic norms and commercial logics, reinforcing specific visions of urban life, beauty, or politics, and leaving less marketable or oppositional imagery at the margins.

Censorship on visual social media operates through both explicit policy enforcement and subtler algorithmic filtering. Content moderation systems remove images deemed inappropriate according to platform guidelines, but these standards often reflect Western-centric norms and can suppress cultural expressions or political dissent (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). At the same time, algorithmic systems deprioritize posts that do not generate engagement at expected levels, effectively silencing them without formal removal. This creates a dual system of governance: formal, rule-based takedowns and informal, algorithmic invisibility. Such mechanisms can disproportionately affect marginalized communities whose visual expressions challenge mainstream values or expose uncomfortable socio-political realities.

The politics of representation refers to the struggle over how individuals, communities, and places are depicted and understood in digital visual cultures. Instagram's visual economy privileges curated, aspirational aesthetics that fit platform-driven ideals of shareability, influencing not only personal self-presentation but also collective narratives about identity, culture, and place (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Representation becomes a contested space where inclusion and exclusion are negotiated: whose stories are told, whose realities are acknowledged, and whose remain unseen? In this sense, platform design and community norms act as powerful gatekeepers, shaping public perception and even political discourse through the circulation or suppression of specific visual frames.

Beyond state control, Instagram itself plays a crucial role in determining visibility. As Manovich (2017) and Highfield & Leaver (2016) note, platform algorithms favor aesthetic coherence, bright lighting, visual minimalism, architectural symmetry, and human-centered storytelling. In Dubai's case, this means that smart benches, clean glass facades, and

inspirational quotes over desert landscapes are likely to outperform more disruptive or unfiltered urban realities.

The result is a selective amplification of certain aesthetics, and the quiet suppression of others. Posts about migrant housing, carbon emissions, or environmental strain do not fit the visual economy of engagement, and therefore remain unseen, not necessarily censored by the state, but hidden by the interface itself. This is what van der Graaf and Ballon (2019) refer to as platformed visibility, where algorithmic logic shapes the city as much as its zoning laws.

## 1.6 Instagram as a Visual Branding Tool

Instagram, launched in 2010 as a mobile-based photo-sharing application, has evolved into one of the most influential visual-locative platforms for shaping identity, place narratives, and urban imaginaries. Its visual-first design, combined with geotagging and hashtag functions, encourages the creation of curated, aesthetically driven portrayals of everyday life. As Boy and Uitermark (2016) note, these portrayals are selective acts of representation that both reflect and reproduce social distinctions, elevating certain images and moments while excluding others. Over the past decade, the platform has shifted from a space for personal documentation toward a highly strategic branding environment. This shift has been fueled by algorithmic curation, influencer economies, and the growing recognition of Instagram's capacity to connect visual content with spatial identities in ways that influence tourism, commerce, and cultural perception.

In the context of cities and urban branding, Instagram plays a dual role as both a public stage and a participatory branding mechanism. Highfield and Leaver (2016) emphasize that its affordances such as the discoverability of content through hashtags, the algorithmic amplification of highly engaging posts, and the ability to maintain cohesive visual narratives make it an effective tool for constructing and disseminating place-based identities. This is reinforced by its geolocation features, which enable users to attach images to specific sites, thereby embedding these locations into wider visual narratives. Research on Łódź, Poland, by Piekarska (2021), shows how geotagged images can reveal patterns of urban representation, highlighting certain landmarks, events, or aesthetic qualities that come to define the city's image in digital space. Such imagery often privileges photogenic, easily consumable aspects of urban life while omitting less marketable realities, creating a selective but influential "image of the city" that circulates globally.

For researchers, Instagram functions as both a site of cultural production and a data-rich archive for studying urban representation. Its visual and textual metadata captions, hashtags, geotags, likes, and comments allow for multi-layered analysis. Boy and Uitermark (2016) outline how the platform's API can be used for large-scale data collection, enabling the combination of spatial mapping with thematic and discourse analysis to trace how cities, events, or brands are visually constructed. Piekarska (2021) demonstrates that by analyzing patterns in geotagged content, researchers can identify not only the most visible parts of a city but also the aesthetic codes and narrative frames that dominate its portrayal. These methods allow for a deeper understanding of the politics of visibility, showing how digital images co-construct the urban imaginary alongside material urban development.

## Chapter 2: Dubai's Urban Transition

### 2.1 Dubai as a Case of Branded Urbanism and Future-Image Making

Over the past six decades, Dubai has transformed from a small trading settlement of fewer than 50,000 residents and just 3.2 km<sup>2</sup> of built land along the creek into a global metropolis. Since the 1960s, a series of master plans have not only guided physical development but also projected carefully crafted images of the city's future. The 1960 and 1971 plans introduced basic zoning for port, commercial, and residential areas, using maps and schematic diagrams to communicate order, modernity, and growth in a rapidly changing Gulf region.

By the mid-1980s and 1990s, the city's planning documents had evolved into more ambitious instruments of what Söderström (2014, 2017) calls "paper cities," plans whose visualizations both depict and promote an imagined future. The 1985 Dubai Structural Plan and the 1995 Urban Area Structure Plan presented renderings of waterfront skylines, landscaped boulevards, and monumental civic buildings, positioning Dubai as an emerging global hub for finance and tourism. These images were not confined to the planning realm; they circulated through investment brochures, exhibitions, and media campaigns, feeding a self-reinforcing cycle in which promotional imagery legitimized large-scale projects and attracted the capital to build them.

Mega-projects such as the Palm Jumeirah, Burj Khalifa, and Dubai Metro illustrate this cycle. Conceptual renderings of the Palm Islands, for example, appeared in government publications years before construction began, functioning as iconic "future-visions" that marketed Dubai's engineering ambitions to an international audience. Likewise, early sketches of a dominant central tower later realized as the Burj Khalifa featured prominently

in the 1995 and 2012 plans, symbolizing vertical ambition and global competitiveness. The Dubai Metro, long depicted in transport corridor maps, was framed as a symbol of modernity and sustainability well before its 2009 inauguration.

The 2012 Dubai 2020 Structure Plan and the current 2040 Master Plan continue this tradition, explicitly intertwining spatial strategy with branding objectives. The 2040 Plan's photorealistic renderings, colorful land-use diagrams, and infographic-style population forecasts depict lush parks, walkable urban districts, and waterfront innovation hubs visions that promote resilience, inclusivity, and sustainability, even when still unbuilt. As with earlier plans, these visuals circulate across social media and marketing platforms, accompanied by slogans like "The World's Best City to Live In", blurring the line between technical planning and promotional advertising.

Across six decades, Dubai's master plans have thus served a dual role: they are blueprints for urban growth and powerful branding devices. By merging planning imagery with marketing channels, they have shaped both the physical city and its global identity, demonstrating how urban visions on paper can become widely consumed cultural products.

## 2.2 Dubai as a Case of City Branding and Future-Image Making

City branding is the strategic creation, communication, and management of a city's image in order to influence perceptions among residents, investors, tourists, and the global public, a process identified by Grodach (2009) as central to municipal marketing and by Riza, Doratli, and Fasli (2012) as integral to sustaining a city's identity in a competitive global context. Branding condenses a diverse set of urban attributes into a coherent narrative that enhances

both the symbolic and economic value of a place. This is closely linked to what Riza, Doratli, and Fasli (2012) describe as city identity, the distinctive, non-reproducible qualities of a city formed through its built environment, history, and cultural expressions. Branding translates these qualities into a marketable form, often blending authenticity with selective representation to appeal to targeted audiences.

A core mechanism in city branding is future-image making, in which visual and textual narratives present a city not only as it is, but as it aspires to become. Vale and Warner (2001) describe this as “constructing visually based narratives about the potential of places,” a process that can blur the boundary between planning and promotion. These future-oriented depictions may highlight iconic architecture, public spaces, and lifestyle imagery while omitting elements that contradict the desired message (Grodach, 2009).

In Dubai, the integration of branding and future-image making is especially pronounced. The city’s identity is articulated through images of landmark projects, cultural events, and lifestyle amenities that project uniqueness and cosmopolitanism. As Riza et al. (2012) argue, such iconic elements whether completed or still in conceptual stages can enhance the perceived quality of life (QOL) for both visitors and residents by shaping expectations and reinforcing a sense of place. Yet, as Grodach (2009) warns, these images are inherently selective, privileging certain narratives while rendering others invisible.

This dual process transforms Dubai into both a physical and symbolic product. The brand emphasizes luxury, innovation, and global connectedness, while future-image making sustains momentum for continuous transformation. In doing so, the city aligns with Harvey’s (1989) observation that place promotion operates as a tool to attract “capital and people of the right sort,” embedding branding within broader economic development strategies.

Ultimately, Dubai's approach illustrates how city branding is not merely a reflection of reality but an active force in shaping urban policy, investment priorities, and the lived experience of the city.

### 2.2.1 Political structure and governance in UAE

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federal state of seven emirates (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Ras Al Khaimah, and Fujairah) each ruled by a hereditary leader. The Supreme Council of Rulers, comprising these leaders, is the highest authority, setting national policy and selecting the President and Vice President, traditionally the rulers of Abu Dhabi and Dubai. The federal government includes the Council of Ministers and the Federal National Council (FNC), a consultative body with limited legislative powers. While political parties are prohibited, governance operates through consensus among ruling families, balancing federal coordination with significant autonomy for each emirate.

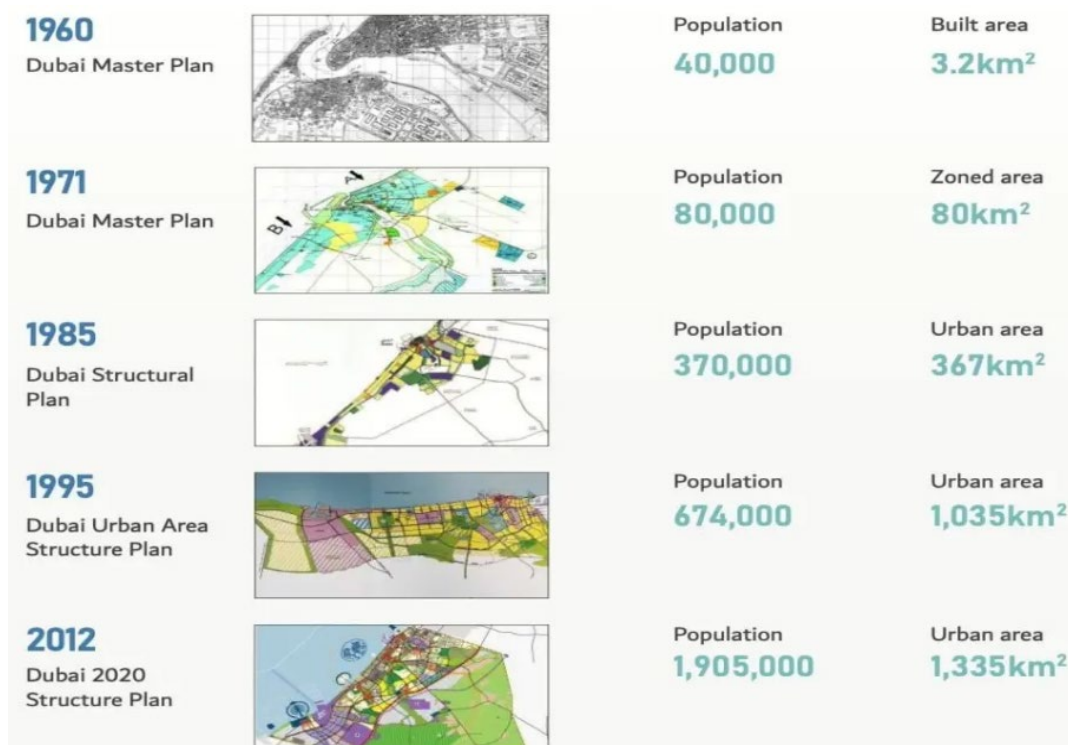


Figure 1: Dubai's Masterplans timeline, Source: Mayak Real Estate. (2024, November 29)



Figure 2: Dubai 2040 Urban Master Plan (Source: Dubai 2040 Structure Plan)

### 2.2.2 Economic Diversification and the Shift to an Experience Economy

Dubai's drive to reinvent itself beyond oil is rooted in its limited hydrocarbon reserves, which account for only about 6% of its GDP, a stark contrast to other GCC states. This scarcity meant that, unlike Abu Dhabi or Qatar, Dubai could not rely on sustained oil revenues to fund long-term development. Moreover, the volatility of global oil markets, particularly the price shocks of the 1980s, underscored the risks of an economy dependent on a single natural resource. In response, Dubai pursued an ambitious diversification strategy, investing in sectors such as trade, tourism, finance, and real estate to establish itself as a global service and logistics hub. These policies aimed to secure macroeconomic stability, prepare for a post-oil future, and sidestep the pitfalls of the "resource curse" often associated with rentier economies (De Jong, Hoppe, & Noori, 2019).

Dubai's post-1990s transformation is deeply tied to its strategic diversification from oil dependence toward a globally oriented, experience-based economy. While early oil revenues were used to establish core infrastructure including ports, highways, and an international airport the emirate's leadership pursued an aggressive policy of economic openness through the creation of free trade zones (FTZs), beginning with Jebel Ali in 1985. Offering incentives such as tax exemptions and full capital repatriation, these zones attracted multinational corporations and catalyzed growth in the tertiary sector, followed by specialized clusters in technology, media, and finance (Elsheshtawy, 2010; Ponzini, 2019).

Parallel to these economic reforms, Dubai embraced what Ponzini and Molotch (2019) describe as "revolutionary urban interventions," producing exceptional construction projects designed as both functional infrastructure and symbolic capital. Landmarks such as the Burj Khalifa, Palm Jumeirah, and the Dubai Metro function not only as urban amenities but also

as globally circulated visual statements, reinforcing the city's brand as a nexus of innovation, luxury, and cosmopolitanism. This strategic emphasis on iconic architecture, supported by targeted media dissemination, aligns with a branding logic in which "the city becomes a product" and advertising becomes its principal language.

The resultant image economy was complemented by a real estate boom, led by developers such as Emaar Properties and Nakheel, whose large-scale projects targeted both domestic and foreign investors. Simultaneously, Dubai expanded its tourism sector through festivals, mega-events, and entertainment complexes, culminating in the global showcase of Expo 2020. Aviation played a critical role in this shift, with the expansion of Dubai International Airport and the rise of Emirates Airline benefiting from an open-skies policy cementing the city's role as a major transit hub (Ponzini, 2019).

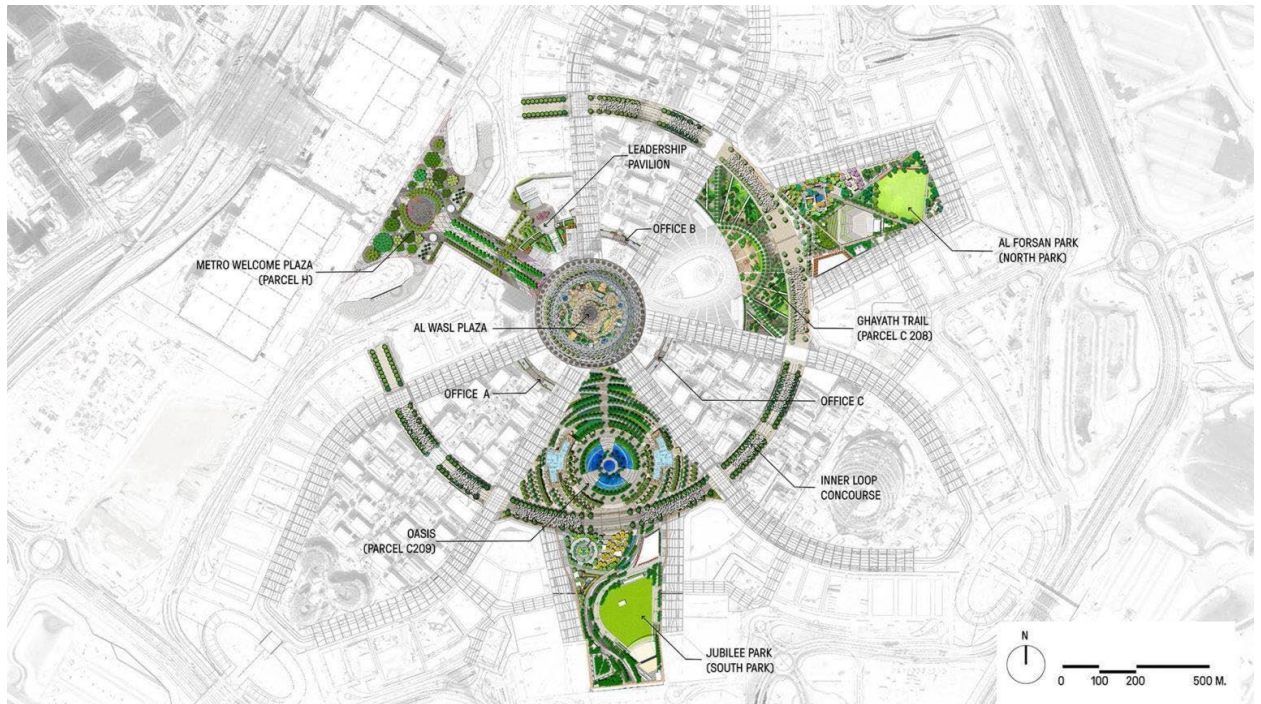
The diversification extended to media and finance through purpose-built districts like Dubai Media City, as well as to logistics via sustained investment in road, rail, and maritime infrastructure, with Jebel Ali Port becoming one of the world's leading multi-modal hubs. Through this integrated strategy, Dubai repositioned itself from a resource-based economy to a global platform for trade, tourism, and investment, using urban spectacle and place-branding as core instruments of development policy.

## 2.3 Expo 2020 and the Branded Future

### 2.3.1 Introduction: Expo 2020 as a Platform for Urban Branding

Expo 2020 Dubai marked a pivotal moment in the UAE's post-oil narrative, one in which a global mega-event served not only as a symbol of national achievement but also as a platform for branding the future. Originally scheduled for 2020 but delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the event was eventually held between October 2021 and March 2022, attracting over 24 million visitors from 192 countries (Ansari et al., 2019). As the first World Expo hosted in the Middle East, the stakes were high: Dubai positioned itself not just as a regional economic center, but as a global capital of innovation, sustainability, and opportunity.

What distinguished Expo 2020 from previous expos was not simply its scale spanning 4.38 square kilometers, equivalent to over 600 football fields but its integration into Dubai's long-term urban development and branding strategy. As articulated in the Dubai Urban Master Plan 2040, Expo was not an isolated event but a spatial and symbolic expression of the emirate's future ambitions. Its themes Mobility, Sustainability, and Opportunity were not abstract slogans, but narrative frameworks that guided everything from pavilion architecture to digital marketing content. These themes aligned closely with Dubai's broader effort to reposition itself within the global economy as a post-oil, experience-driven city built on innovation, tourism, and cultural capital. (Expo 2020 Dubai, n.d.)



*Figure 3: Aerial view of the Expo 2020 site in Dubai, covering 4.38 km<sup>2</sup>*

The master plan centered around three thematic districts Sustainability, Mobility, and Opportunity serving as spatial metaphors for Dubai's long-term urban vision.

Expo 2020 thus became more than an international gathering; it was a soft power project and a visual manifesto Future UAE. (2021, October 11). The event framed Dubai not only as a site of global exchange, but as a curated vision of what the future city should look like technologically advanced, ecologically responsible, and culturally inclusive. Visitors were not merely passive spectators; they were encouraged to "experience the future" through immersive design, smart

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technologically advanced, ecologically responsible, and culturally inclusive. Visitors were not merely passive spectators; they were encouraged to "experience the future" through immersive design, smart infrastructure, and a seamless blend of heritage and innovation. In doing so, Expo 2020 extended Dubai's long standing branding strategy from Burj Khalifa to Emirates Airlines into a comprehensive narrative of global relevance and urban optimism. (Expo 2020 Dubai, n.d.)



*Figure 4: Expo 2020 Dubai official logo and slogan*

Connecting Minds, Creating the Future.” The motto positioned Dubai as a cosmopolitan crossroads of sustainability, innovation, and global opportunity.

selective visibility, and promotional culture. As this section explores, Expo 2020 operated as a pivotal node in Dubai's branding ecosystem, merging event-driven development, architectural symbolism, and platform-mediated storytelling. It reflected the maturation of Dubai's post-oil diversification strategy, offering a polished image of sustainability and innovation, while also inviting critical scrutiny regarding inclusivity, environmental justice, and style over substance. (Commetric, 2022).

### 2.3.2 Thematic Architecture: Sustainability, Mobility, and Opportunity

One of the defining features of Expo 2020 Dubai was the way its core themes Sustainability, Mobility, and Opportunity were embedded not just in rhetoric but in the design and spatial structure of the event. These themes functioned as more than conceptual pillars; they served as the organizing logic of the Expo's master plan and were materialized through three central pavilions that acted as immersive urban narratives. Each pavilion translated its theme into a visually striking architectural language, reinforcing Dubai's attempt to brand itself as a city where technological progress, environmental stewardship, and global collaboration co-exist in harmony (Expo 2020 Dubai, n.d.).

The Sustainability Pavilion, known as Terra, was designed by Grimshaw Architects to be a self-sufficient ecological building that also served as a storytelling device. Equipped with solar "energy trees," rooftop photovoltaic panels, and a greywater recycling system, Terra embodied Dubai's ambition to project itself as a global leader in environmental innovation. Visitors walked through interactive exhibits themed around climate change, ocean plastics, and carbon footprints all wrapped in a stunningly designed, LEED Platinum-certified structure. Yet the pavilion also functioned symbolically: it aesthetically performed sustainability, even as Dubai continues to face serious challenges related to water scarcity, energy consumption, and environmental justice (Zaidan & Abulibdeh, 2021).



*Figure 5: Terra, the Sustainability Pavilion.*  
Source: expo2020dubai.com

The Mobility Pavilion, designed by Foster + Partners, offered another futuristic vision. With an aerodynamic, spaceship-like form and immersive exhibits on autonomous vehicles, hyperloop transport, and digital connectivity, it projected Dubai as a central node in global smart infrastructure. The pavilion emphasized how mobility today is not just about physical transport but also data flows, networks, and speed are core elements in Dubai's wider Smart City ambitions. This spatial narrative aligned with Dubai's long-standing effort to portray itself as a hyper-efficient, globally connected city, deeply integrated into flows of trade, labor, and information.

In contrast, the Opportunity Pavilion, designed by AGi Architects, was more introspective. Focused on human agency and community empowerment, it encouraged visitors to reflect on how small actions can drive global change. While its visual impact was subtler than Terra

or the Mobility Pavilion, the Opportunity Pavilion aligned with Dubai's civic and soft-power diplomacy positioning the city as an inclusive platform for collective global futures.



*Figure 6: The Mobility Pavilion by Foster + Partners.*

Source: Expo 2020 Media Gallery

Together, these three pavilions formed what Ansari et al. (2019) call “experiential narratives,” where architecture became a medium of visual and emotional storytelling. The thematic zones weren’t merely event infrastructure; they were spatial metaphors, each one reinforcing Dubai’s image as green, high-tech, and socially engaged. As Caprotti et al. (2022) argue, such architectural staging exemplifies “platform urbanism,” where the city becomes both a literal space and a branded interface designed to attract, engage, and circulate attention globally.

By translating themes into immersive space, Expo 2020 aligned urban design with emotional appeal and brand coherence. Visitors didn’t just observe the city’s values, they walked through them. This multisensory urban narrative helped to solidify Dubai’s image not only

as a host of global events, but as a curator of futures, where form, function, and promotional culture intersect.



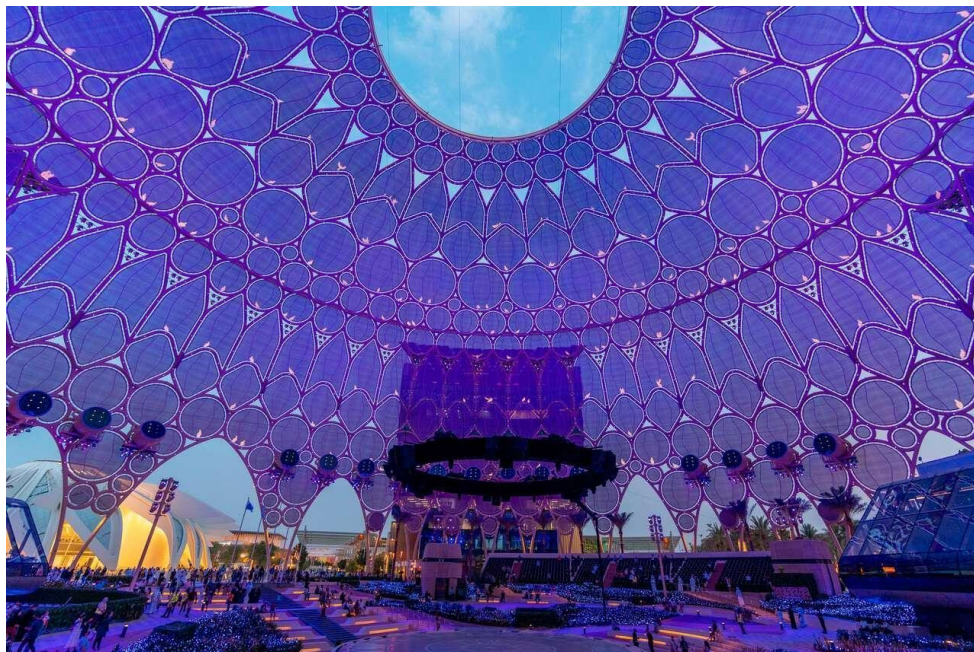
*Figure 7: The Opportunity Pavilion experience*

Source: Expo 2020 Dubai Official

### 2.3.3 Spectacle and Symbolism: Selling the Future

Expo 2020 Dubai was not merely a world fair; it was a mega-event in the sense described by Roche (2000) as a large-scale, internationally significant cultural gathering that merges political, economic, and symbolic functions. Like the Olympic Games or World Cups, it served as a highly visible arena for projecting soft power (Nye, 2004), enabling Dubai to promote its values, ambitions, and post-oil identity to global audiences. As Grix and Houlihan (2014) argue, mega-events increasingly function as instruments of public

diplomacy, allowing states and cities to reshape external perceptions through carefully orchestrated narratives. In Dubai's case, Expo 2020 operated as a strategic branding platform, aligning with Kavaratzis's (2004) concept of city branding as the integration of physical, symbolic, and communicative elements to construct an urban image. The event's architectural symbolism, thematic programming, and platform-mediated storytelling formed what Debord (1994) terms a "society of the spectacle," where reality is reframed through curated imagery. By embedding the Expo within long-term planning frameworks, Dubai used it as a live branding campaign and a performative expression of its diversification strategy paralleling other global cities that have leveraged mega-events for urban regeneration, international positioning, and the projection of an idealized urban future (Smith, 2012; Anholt, 2007).



*Figure 8: Al Wasl Plaza dome during night-time projection shows.*

Source: Expo2020Dubai.com

The spectacle began with iconic architectural forms. The UAE Pavilion, shaped like a falcon in flight, symbolized national pride and technological aspiration. Its designer, Santiago Calatrava, described it as “a fusion of nature, tradition, and future-forward design” (Expo 2020 Dubai, 2021). Such symbolic architecture worked as a form of soft power visually communicating heritage and ambition without needing verbal explanation. Similarly, the Al Wasl Plaza, the geometric centerpiece of the site, served as a visual anchor of unity and openness, housing digital projections and nightly performances that reinforced the Expo’s slogan: “Connecting Minds, Creating the Future.”

Symbolism extended beyond national identity to include narratives of global cooperation, ecological hope, and futuristic lifestyles. The Sustainability Pavilion (Terra) allowed visitors to “experience the planet’s ecological challenges from a child’s eye view,” blending emotional engagement with technical innovation. Such staging reflects what Zukin (1995) calls the “symbolic economy of cities,” where architecture and urban space are deliberately aestheticized to project power, identity, and legitimacy. Expo 2020’s curated symbolism allowed Dubai to speak simultaneously to investors, tourists, residents, and international policymakers, each reading the same visual cues in different ways.

What made this spectacle especially powerful was its platform-mediated nature. Expo 2020 wasn’t just consumed on-site; it was widely shared on Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and through influencer partnerships. Visitors became co-producers of Dubai’s image, capturing themselves beneath solar trees, skyline sculptures, and LED night shows. These micro-images accumulated into a collective aesthetic that visually affirmed the city’s brand: clean, green, advanced, and globally connected. As Manovich (2017) argues, platforms like Instagram don’t just reflect cities, they help construct urban reality through aesthetic codes.

Dubai's Expo strategy anticipated this, offering a photogenic spectacle that could be seamlessly integrated into the feeds of millions.

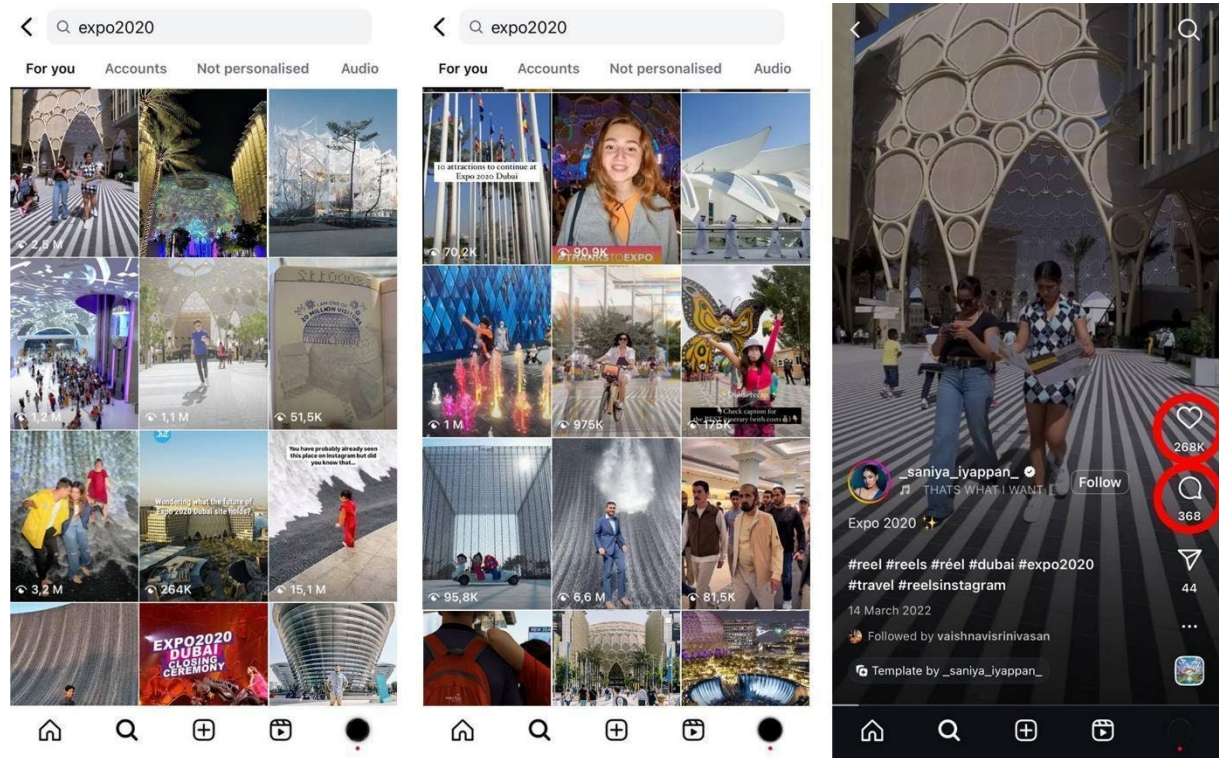


Figure 9: Instagram curation of Expo 2020 moments.

Source: Instagram / Expo 2020 tagged posts

This carefully designed symbolism was not random. It was part of a broader strategy to market Dubai as a curator of global futures. In doing so, Expo 2020 positioned the city as more than a backdrop; it became the main character in a visual narrative about sustainability, innovation, and global dialogue. As Ansari et al. (2019) note, the Expo invited visitors not only to observe change but to feel a sense of participatory belonging in it blurring the line between branding, belief, and built environment.

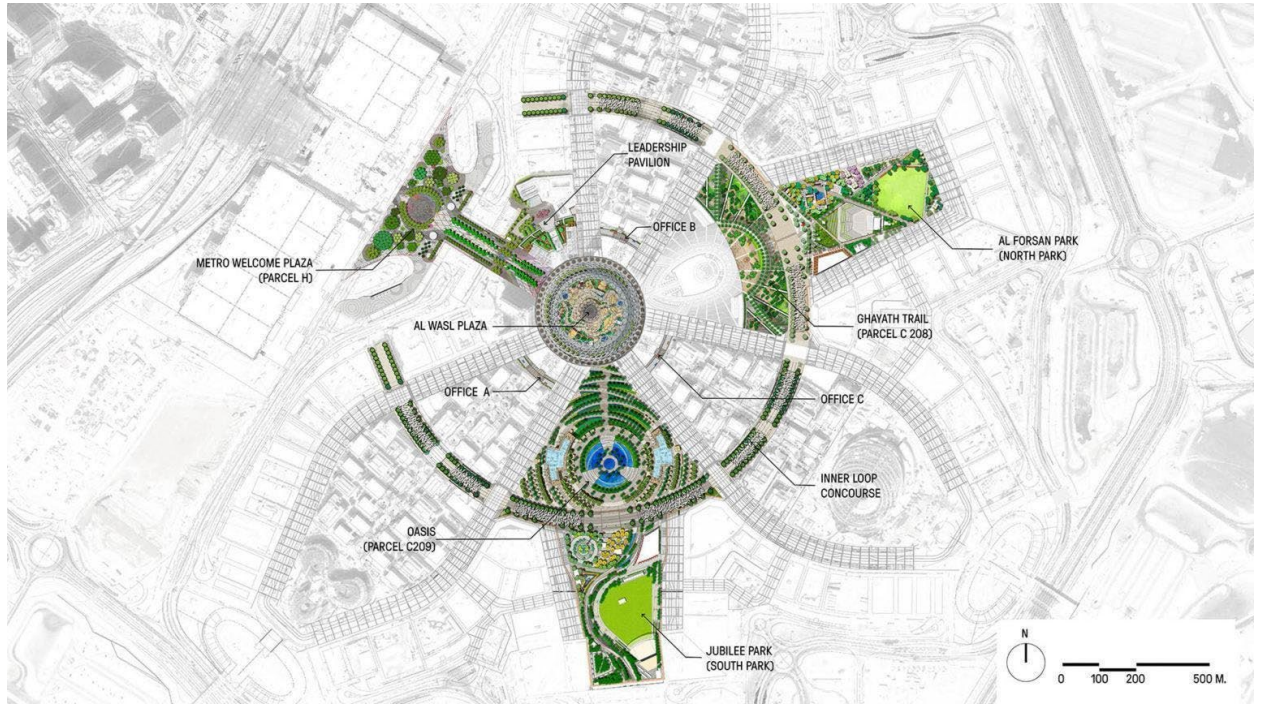
### 2.3.4 From Event to Urban Infrastructure: District 2020

Test-bed urbanism describes the practice of designing cities as experimental platforms for testing new technologies, infrastructures, and modes of governance under real-world conditions. Emerging from the intersection of urban planning, military research, and corporate innovation, it treats the city as a controllable yet dynamic environment where prototypes can be trialed and refined. These urban “test beds” operate as both functional infrastructures and symbolic showcases, promoting an image of technological progress and adaptability. While they can stimulate innovation, they also blur boundaries between experimentation and everyday life, raising questions about who benefits from such trials and whose needs are prioritized. In this way, test-bed urbanism reflects broader transformations in how urban futures are imagined, staged, and governed (Halpern et al., 2013).

Expo 2020 Dubai was not conceived as a short-lived mega-event, but as the seed of a permanent urban district: a test bed for Dubai’s future aspirations in sustainable living, smart mobility, and economic diversification. The transformation of the Expo site into “District 2020” marked a continuation of Dubai’s spatial storytelling shifting from a six-month spectacle to a branded, post-oil innovation hub. This legacy plan highlights Dubai’s approach to event-led urbanism, where architectural investment and promotional narratives evolve into tangible economic and infrastructural systems.

Covering over 80% of the original Expo infrastructure, District 2020 was envisioned as a “15-minute city,” a walkable, mixed-use environment integrating residential, commercial, and cultural spaces. According to Expo planners, the site includes advanced data systems, autonomous mobility lanes, and adaptive reuse strategies (Expo 2020 Dubai, 2022). Key architectural features like Terra (the Sustainability Pavilion) and Al Wasl Plaza were retained

as symbolic and functional anchors of the new urban fabric. This transition from event to district signals Dubai's ambition to lead not only in temporary spectacle, but also in long-term urban innovation aligned with the Dubai 2040 Master Plan.



*Figure 10: Master plan rendering of District 2020*

Source: Expo2020Dubai.com/legacy

The repurposing of the Expo site also speaks to Dubai's strategic embrace of platform urbanism, a model where urban space is managed as both infrastructure and interface. As Caprotti et al. (2022) argue, such spaces operate not just as cities but as smart ecosystems, where data, branding, and economic flows converge. District 2020 was explicitly framed as a "human-centric smart city", designed to host global startups, research hubs, and sustainability-driven enterprises. It reflects a shift in urban logic: from centralized governance

to tech enabled, modular environments designed for continuous adaptation and branded appeal.

Moreover, this transition fits squarely into Dubai's post-oil economic diversification strategy, offering a new spatial identity for the city in the era beyond fossil fuel dependency. The site's projected tenants included Siemens, DP World, and academic institutions, aiming to foster a high-tech innovation cluster in the heart of the desert. It also extended Dubai's soft power infrastructure: positioning the city not just as a destination for events, but as a permanent node in global flows of knowledge, investment, and urban experimentation.

However, while the vision of District 2020 is ambitious, it also raises questions about inclusivity, adaptability, and symbolic continuity. Who will live in this smart city? How will the site integrate with surrounding neighborhoods and non-expo populations? Will the branded aesthetics of innovation and sustainability be matched by meaningful ecological and social outcomes or will the district, like much of Expo 2020, remain a stage set of curated progress?

In this light, District 2020 embodies the afterlife of urban spectacle. It represents Dubai's ability to convert temporary attention into long-term capital, but also reveals the challenges of ensuring that legacy projects serve more than just image management. The built transformation of the Expo site is a powerful metaphor for the city's broader evolution: always building, always branding, and always striving to frame the future.

### 2.3.5 Scholarly Perspectives on Image and Reality

While Expo 2020 was celebrated for its architectural grandeur, technological sophistication, and sustainability messaging, it also exemplified what scholars describe as the paradox of promotional urbanism: the disjuncture between image and implementation. Dubai's Expo site may have showcased solar trees, green mobility, and immersive storytelling around climate resilience but beneath these aesthetics lies a city still grappling with deep-rooted ecological vulnerabilities, labor inequality, and unsustainable resource dependencies.

Dubai faces persistent ecological vulnerabilities, including severe water scarcity addressed mainly through energy-intensive desalination, pronounced urban heat island effects in dense districts, climate change risks such as sea-level rise and extreme heat, and marine ecosystem damage from rapid coastal urbanization (Sherif et al., 2014; Taleb & Abu-Hijleh, 2013; Subraelu et al., 2022; Sheppard et al., 2010). Against this backdrop, Expo 2020 presented itself as a showcase of sustainability, but its delivery told a more complex story. The event's large-scale construction, including the Sustainability Pavilion, resulted in substantial and avoidable CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from imported materials and energy-intensive processes (Dezeen, 2021). While featuring innovations like solar canopies and greywater recycling, the site remained heavily reliant on fossil-fuel-based electricity to operate cooling systems, lighting, and immersive media (Blooloo, 2021). Furthermore, much of the infrastructure was temporary, meaning that the embodied carbon costs outweighed long-term gains, raising concerns about whether hosting such mega-events in resource-stressed environments exacerbates rather than mitigates ecological vulnerabilities (Al-Shihabi et al., 2023).

The United Arab Emirates, and Dubai in particular, has long depended on migrant labor for its rapid urban growth, with the kafala (sponsorship) system serving as the legal framework

that ties workers' residency to their employers, severely restricting mobility and bargaining power (Malit & Al Youha, 2016; Gardner, 2010). This dependency has created entrenched hierarchies in wages and working conditions, where nationals and Western expatriates occupy privileged, high-paying positions while South Asian and African workers often endure physically demanding jobs for wages as low as \$200 per month, alongside inadequate housing and limited access to healthcare or legal protections (Hamza, 2015). These systemic disparities became particularly visible during the lead-up to Expo 2020 Dubai, one of the largest construction projects in the city's history. The accelerated timeline and immense scale of the event intensified reliance on low-wage migrant labor in both construction and service sectors. Investigations revealed that many Expo 2020 workers faced long hours in extreme heat, late wage payments, and exploitative recruitment practices that left them in cycles of debt (Hamza, 2015). Some reports also documented the withholding of passports and overcrowded, substandard accommodations conditions in direct contradiction to the Expo's public image of innovation and inclusivity. While the event's branding projected a vision of global cooperation and sustainability, the realities on the ground showed that Expo 2020 not only rested on but actively amplified the structural inequalities embedded in Dubai's labor economy, revealing a profound gap between promotional narratives and lived worker experiences.

Dubai's growth is sustained by resource intensive systems that place heavy pressure on environmental limits and increase vulnerability to external shocks. Fossil fuels remain central to electricity generation, powering energy-demanding cooling systems, large-scale infrastructure, and desalination plants (Saif et al., 2014). Per capita energy consumption ranks among the highest globally, reflecting both climatic demands and consumption patterns reinforced by subsidies. Water security depends almost entirely on desalination, which

consumes large amounts of natural gas and discharges brine harmful to marine ecosystems (Arafat & Al-Mashaqbeh, 2014). The city is also heavily reliant on imports for food and raw materials, embedding high “virtual water” and carbon footprints into its consumption patterns (Saif et al., 2014).

Within this context, Expo 2020 Dubai positioned itself as a sustainability benchmark but ultimately reinforced these dependencies. The event’s large-scale construction relied heavily on imported building materials, while operations drew on fossil fuel powered energy sources, raising embodied carbon and operational emissions (Dezeen, 2021). Although renewable energy installations and water-saving measures were implemented on site, the short-lived nature of much of the infrastructure meant limited long-term benefits. As a result, Expo 2020 contributed to maintaining rather than reducing Dubai’s dependence on high-consumption, non-renewable systems (Frontiers in Sustainable Cities, 2023).

Year	Domestic	Agriculture	Industrial
1985	229 <sup>b</sup>	—	—
1990	513 <sup>a</sup>	950 <sup>a</sup>	27 <sup>a</sup>
1995	540 <sup>c</sup>	1,300 <sup>c</sup>	95 <sup>c</sup>
2000	555 <sup>c</sup>	1,400 <sup>a</sup>	100 <sup>c</sup>
2005	570 <sup>c</sup>	—	105 <sup>c</sup>
2010	911 <sup>c</sup>	1,545 <sup>c</sup>	110 <sup>c</sup>
2025	1,100 <sup>a</sup>	2,050 <sup>a</sup>	115 <sup>c</sup>

*Table 1: Past and projected water demand (million m3) in the UAE visually supports the pressure (rising demand)*

At the same time, the UAE is highly import-dependent for food and raw materials due to its arid climate and limited arable land, making its supply chains vulnerable to global market volatility and climate-induced disruptions (Munia et al., 2016). These interlinked dependencies underscore the tension between the country's sustainability branding and the material realities of maintaining its current urban and economic systems.

Dubai's desert geography alone raises fundamental tensions. The city's-built environment depends on desalinated water, intensive cooling systems, and imported food, all of which are resource-intensive. The construction of Expo 2020 like much of Dubai's iconic infrastructure required enormous energy inputs, materials, and labor. Yet these structural contradictions were largely absent from the Expo's narrative, replaced instead with high-gloss symbols of environmental consciousness and futuristic urbanism.

At Expo 2020, these two dynamics converged: sustainability messaging and visual symbolism were embedded in the event's master plan and public imagery, while deeper ecological challenges such as high energy consumption, reliance on desalination, and resource-intensive urban growth remained largely unaddressed. Together, visual greenwashing and paper cities reveal how Dubai's Expo operated as a stage for projecting an idealized post-oil future, aligning with promotional urbanism's focus on image-making, yet leaving underlying structural issues unresolved.

From an urban governance perspective, this raises questions about who Expo 2020 was for. Was it a participatory model of inclusive planning or a top down performance staged to attract global investment and political legitimacy? While some pavilions engaged deeply with

global challenges (e.g., water scarcity, digital equity), others served as extensions of national branding campaigns, reinforcing the idea that Expo functions as a global showroom more than a collaborative transformation platform (Smith, 2012; Caprotti et al., 2022).

In this context, Dubai's Expo legacy must be assessed with a dual lens: on one hand, it was an ambitious and artistically executed spectacle, reflecting the city's capacity for staging global futures; on the other, it represented a carefully curated imaginary, in which visibility was tightly controlled, narratives were strategically designed, and sustainability was symbolically rather than structurally delivered.

These tensions will carry into District 2020 and beyond. If Dubai's branded sustainability is to evolve beyond image, it will require confronting uncomfortable questions: about energy and water systems, social equity, urban governance, and the long-term consequences of framing the future through spectacle. The challenge is not to reject branding altogether but to ensure that what is shown reflects what is done, and that urban storytelling becomes a vehicle for accountability as much as aspiration.

Expo 2020 was not only a monumental event in Dubai's urban trajectory, it was a symbolic convergence point for the emirate's decades-long transformation into a branded, post-oil global city. Through iconic architecture, thematic storytelling, and the promise of sustainability, Expo 2020 presented a carefully curated vision of the future. Yet as this chapter has shown, the event also reveals the limits of image-driven urbanism, where visual coherence can mask ecological fragility and social exclusion.

This tension between appearance and material reality, between curated space and lived experience is not unique to Expo. Rather, it defines a broader pattern in how Dubai constructs and projects its identity: through a network of branding tools, aesthetic strategies, and media systems. Increasingly, this work of image-making is not limited to physical space. It now takes place and circulates through digital platforms, where cities are photographed, hashtagged, filtered, and consumed across global audiences.

As the next chapter will explore, Instagram plays a central role in shaping Dubai's urban imaginary. It is the site where the city's most iconic symbols: skylines, solar panels, pavilions, peonies, and polished streets are continuously reproduced and reinterpreted. Social media has become the interface through which Dubai's branded sustainability is not only communicated, but believed, contested, and emotionally engaged. To fully understand how Dubai frames the future, we must now turn to the digital layers where that future is imagined, curated, and performed.

## Chapter 3. Methodology

This dissertation adopts a qualitative, interpretive research approach based on visual and discursive analysis of advertising materials. The focus lies on how Dubai's urban identity and sustainability ideals are constructed and represented through visual media, particularly via Instagram, a platform central to the city's digital brand infrastructure. Following models from visual culture research (Mitchell, 2005), theories of city branding (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005), and urban communication (Zukin, 1995; Leonova et al., 2022), the study treats images not as neutral reflections but as active agents in the production of urban imaginaries. To capture this complexity, the methodological framework combines thematic coding, discourse analysis, and visual design analysis. The latter draws on Rose (2016), Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), Christmann (2008), and O'Halloran (2008) to examine how composition, typography, colour palettes, iconography, and information hierarchies structure meaning in advertising campaigns and Instagram posts. This integration ensures that the analysis accounts not only for what images represent discursively but also for how their formal design choices function as semiotic strategies that legitimize, aestheticise, and stabilise particular visions of the city.

### 3.1 Data Collection

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to ensure that only Instagram posts directly relevant to Dubai's urban identity and sustainability narratives were included. This approach enabled the deliberate selection of visual materials most aligned with the research objectives, rather than relying on random sampling. Data collection was conducted between January 2025 and August 2025 and targeted posts that explicitly featured sustainability

discourse, heritage symbolism, or urban development branding. Relevant content was identified through three pathways: targeted hashtags (#greendubai, #sustainableDubai, #DubaiFuture, #GreenPlanetDubai), geotag filters of significant landmarks such as the Expo 2020 site and the Museum of the Future, and curated lists of official government, tourism, and property developer accounts. The resulting dataset comprised 60 Instagram posts and 30 unique images, which together provide a cross-sectional representation of Dubai’s visual branding ecosystem. These materials form the empirical basis for the visual design, thematic, and discourse analyses outlined in the subsequent sections.

Source Type	Examples	Number of Posts
Targeted Hashtags	#greendubai, #sustainableDubai, #DubaiFuture, #GreenPlanetDubai	20
Geotagged Landmarks	Expo 2020 site, Museum of the Future #marina #burjkhalifa #marina #hatta #barari #miraclegarden #DubaiDesert #burjarab #palmjumeirah	20
Curated Official/Developer Accounts	@visitDubai, @DubaiFuture, @DubaiDesignWeek, @myDubai @DubaiDreamer @Dubai @burjkhalifa @amazingDubai_ @DubaiTravelers @DubaiHomes_	20

*Table 2: Distribution of Sampled Instagram Posts and Unique Images by Source Type*

Table 2, the dataset was evenly distributed across hashtags, geotagged landmarks, and curated official accounts, with 20 posts collected from each pathway. This balanced sampling strategy ensured that institutional branding, location-based imagery, and hashtag-driven narratives were all equally represented. While official and developer accounts highlight strategic promotional content, hashtag-based posts reveal broader thematic trends, and geotagged images capture the visual anchoring of sustainability and heritage within specific sites. Together, these complementary sources provide a robust cross-sectional view of Dubai's visual branding ecosystem.

### 3.2 Analytical Approach

Once the dataset was assembled, an integrated visual content analysis and thematic analysis framework was applied.

- Visual Content Analysis examined formal image attributes such as composition, colour palette, symbolic motifs, and recognisable urban features, drawing on established approaches to interpreting city promotional imagery (Rose, 2016; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005).
- Thematic Analysis targeted captions, hashtags, and embedded text, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage process of familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Coding categories were derived both deductively from city-branding and greenwashing literature, and inductively from recurring motifs in the dataset. This ensured that emergent, Dubai-specific branding practices were captured alongside theory-driven themes.

### 3.3 Visual Discourse Analysis Framework

This research applies a visual discourse analysis approach that integrates semiotic theory and critical discourse analysis. Following Barthes (1977), visual artefacts are analyzed as systems of signifiers (form) and signified (concepts), with meaning contingent on ideological and cultural contexts. Semiotic readings focused on identifying signifiers (objects, colors, compositions) and signified (values such as ‘green modernity’ or ‘cultural authenticity’). To extend this, Fairclough’s (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was employed to situate these meanings within broader ideological narratives, revealing how discourse constructs, sustains, or challenges social power relations. Together, these methods allow for both micro-level decoding of signs and macro-level interpretation of their ideological embedding in city-branding strategies.

### 3.4 Visual Design Analysis of Advertising Images

Because advertising campaigns and Instagram posts are designed artefacts, their visual form is as significant as their representational content. Building on Rose (2016) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), this study employs a visual design analysis framework to account for how layout, composition, typography, colour, iconography, and information hierarchy shape meaning. Composition is examined in terms of balance, symmetry, gaze, and focal points, which direct attention and position urban elements as central or marginal. Typography including slogans, hashtags, and fonts is analysed for its integration with imagery and its

authority in reinforcing narratives. Colour palettes are particularly emphasised: the recurrent use of green, blue, gold, and white functions as semiotic shorthand for ecological responsibility, innovation, luxury, and purity, often masking contradictions through aestheticisation. Iconography such as solar panels, futuristic skylines, or cultural motifs is read as symbolic anchoring of broader narratives of progress, heritage, and sustainability. Finally, hierarchy of information how logos, slogans, and images are layered and scaled reveals what is foregrounded and what is obscured, exposing how design choices selectively amplify desirable urban futures while silencing others (Christmann, 2008; O'Halloran, 2008).

### 3.5 Framework of Platform Urbanism

This study adopts platform urbanism as a key conceptual and analytical framework for understanding how Instagram structures the visibility and circulation of Dubai's urban identity and sustainability narratives. Following van der Graaf and Ballon (2019), platform urbanism is understood as the transformation of urban life through socio-technical systems that mediate interactions between citizens, private companies, and public institutions. Participation, mediatization, and platformisation are treated as key dynamics: users co-create urban narratives, institutions adopt platform-specific logics, and campaigns are embedded into algorithmic ecosystems. This framework acknowledges that platforms are not neutral intermediaries but infrastructures of visibility and engines of data extraction (Chen et al., 2024). Integrating this platform lens with visual discourse and design analysis allows the study to account for both the content of Instagram posts and the logics of algorithmic amplification that determine what becomes visible, valuable, and shareable.

Level of Analysis	Focus	Method/Framework	Key Sources
<b>Visual Design (Micro-level)</b>	Layout, composition, typography, colour palettes, iconography, information hierarchy	Visual Design Analysis (semiotics of form and style)	Rose (2016); Kress & van Leeuwen (2006); Christmann (2008)
<b>Visual Content (Micro-level)</b>	Formal attributes: balance, symmetry, motifs, recognisable urban features	Visual Content Analysis	Rose (2016); Kavaratzis & Ashworth (2005)
<b>Discourse (Macro-level)</b>	Ideological narratives, power relations, sustainability and heritage frames	Visual Discourse Analysis + Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)	Barthes (1977); Fairclough (1995); O'Halloran (2008)
<b>Platform Dynamics</b>	Participation, mediatization, platformisation; algorithmic amplification	Platform Urbanism framework	van der Graaf & Ballon (2019); Chen et al. (2024)

*Table 3: Integrated Analytical Framework for Visual, Discursive, and Platform Urbanism Analysis*

## Chapter 4. Visual and Discursive Constructions of Dubai's Urban Identity

This chapter presents the empirical analysis of Dubai's urban branding on social media, with a particular focus on Instagram as a key platform for visual circulation. As outlined in Chapter 3 (Methodology), the study employed purposive sampling techniques to curate a dataset of sixty Instagram posts and thirty images collected between January 2020 and August 2025. These posts were identified through sustainability related hashtags, geotags linked to flagship urban projects, and content produced by official governmental, tourism, and real estate accounts. The aim was to capture a corpus of material that directly engages with themes of sustainability, heritage, and urban development, thereby providing insight into how Dubai frames its urban identity for both local and global audiences.

The analytical approach builds on the conceptual tools introduced in Chapters 1 and 2, particularly the notions of city branding (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005), paper cities (Söderström, 2014), and platform urbanism (Barns, 2019). These frameworks are mobilized through an integrated method of visual discourse analysis, which combines Barthes' (1977) semiotic theory of signifier and signified with Fairclough's (1999) critical discourse analysis of how power, ideology, and identity are embedded in language and representation. By drawing on Rose's (2016) guidelines for interpreting visual culture, this framework allows for a systematic reading of both images and captions, highlighting not only what is shown but also what is strategically omitted.

The analysis is structured around the four research questions defined in the Introduction. The first examines how Dubai's urban branding is visually constructed on Instagram,

focusing on recurring motifs such as skylines, green spaces, and futuristic architecture. The second investigates the selective emphasis on sustainability, tracing how eco-symbols such as solar panels, greenery, and blue skies are used to project environmental responsibility, while less visible issues such as water scarcity or labor precarity remain hidden. The third explores how references to culture and heritage through falcon imagery, desert symbolism, or Islamic architectural motifs are mobilized to legitimize Dubai's future-oriented development trajectory. Finally, the fourth assesses how these promotional narratives align with, or diverge from, the stated sustainability objectives of the Dubai 2040 Urban Master Plan, particularly its commitments to livability, inclusivity, and ecological resilience.

Each section of this chapter (4.1–4.4) applies this framework in turn, moving from the descriptive to the interpretive. Images and posts are first situated within their immediate context before being deconstructed as semiotic and discursive devices. The findings are then positioned against the broader conceptual debates introduced in the earlier chapters, allowing the analysis to show how Dubai's Instagram branding operates as both a technical representation of urban development and a promotional artifact designed for circulation in global media. In this way, the chapter not only answers the research questions but also demonstrates how urban planning, advertising, and digital platforms intersect to construct and disseminate Dubai's branded urban future.

## 4.1 Visual Construction of Dubai's Urban Branding on Instagram

A central research question of this study is how Dubai's urban branding is visually constructed on Instagram. As demonstrated in the dataset, the city's image is consistently crafted through carefully curated aesthetics that foreground futurism, luxury, and ecological responsibility. This construction aligns with what Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) describe as city branding through visual cues, in which architecture, infrastructure, and cultural symbols are strategically mobilized to reinforce a coherent identity. On Instagram, this is evident in the prominence of iconic landmarks such as the Burj Khalifa, the Museum of the Future, and the Expo 2020 pavilions, which frequently serve as the backdrop for promotional narratives. These images operate as more than architectural documentation; they are saturated with symbolic value, projecting Dubai as a global hub of innovation and ambition.

The visual repertoire identified in the dataset reveals a reliance on recurring motifs that naturalize Dubai's aspirational urban identity. Posts tagged under hashtags such as #dubaifuture (21k posts) and #greendubai (19.7k posts) frequently depict glass skylines against blue skies, interspersed with greenery, palm-lined boulevards, and waterfront vistas. Such imagery reflects Barthes' (1977) semiotic principle, where the signifier (a tree-lined promenade or solar panel) is linked to the signified (sustainability, progress), thereby constructing an urban narrative that is as much ideological as it is material. These curated sign systems reinforce a vision of Dubai not merely as a built environment but as a consumable brand (Rose, 2016).

Equally significant is the aesthetic logic of consistency. The city is repeatedly framed through sleek, symmetrical compositions and polished color schemes, often edited with filters that accentuate warmth, clarity, and vibrancy. This uniformity of visual language echoes

Söderström's (2014) concept of "paper cities", where planning imagery circulates as polished promotional artifacts. On Instagram, this effect is amplified through the platform's algorithmic logic, which privileges highly aestheticized content and increases its visibility to global audiences (Barns, 2019). The dataset illustrates how this cycle operates: promotional content from official accounts (such as Dubai Tourism or Expo 2020) is frequently reshared by influencers and ordinary users, producing a self-reinforcing loop that elevates Dubai's branded imagery into transnational circulation.

This visual branding, however, is not limited to monumental projects. Residential communities such as Dubai Hills (#dubaihills, 165k posts) and Al Barari (#barari, 15k posts) also play a crucial role in constructing Dubai's identity as a livable, green, and exclusive city. Posts from real estate developers frequently showcase aerial views of gated communities, landscaped gardens, and lifestyle imagery (yoga in green parks, families near water features). These visuals embed the promise of sustainability and wellness within private enclaves, reinforcing the narrative that ecological living is possible even in the desert if mediated through curated luxury. In doing so, they blur the line between urban planning and

marketing, embedding the city’s development trajectory into everyday social media consumption.

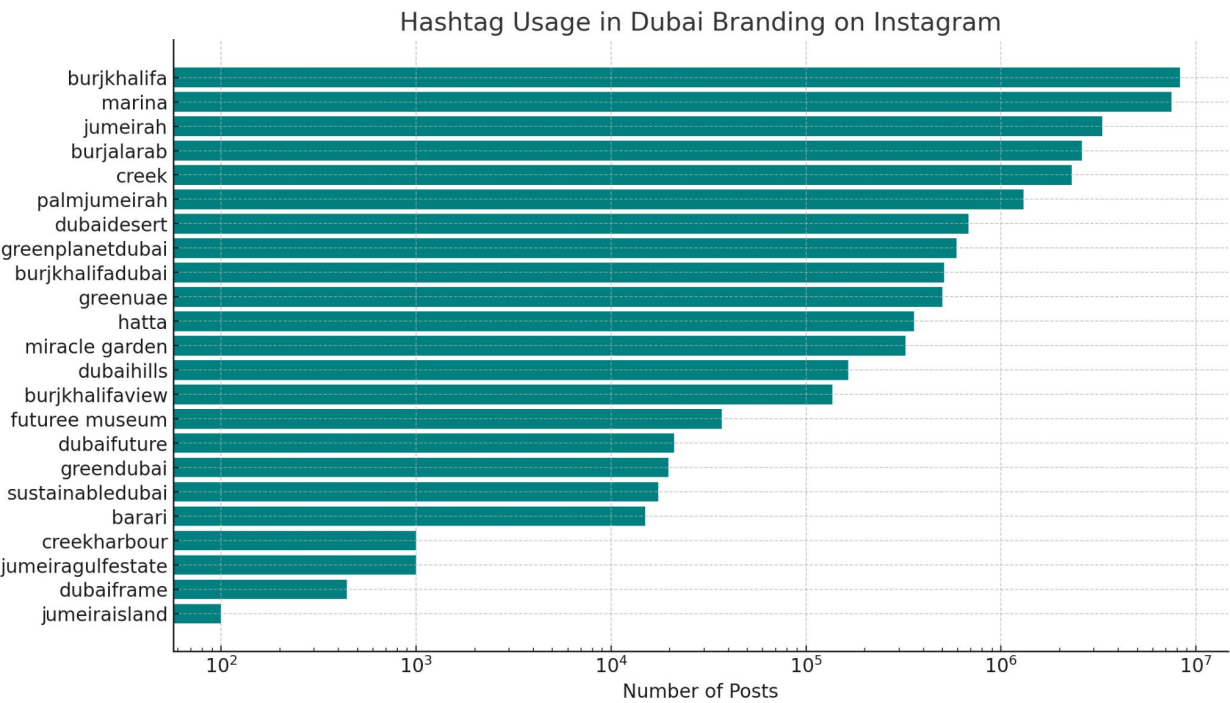


Figure 11: Hashtag usage on Instagram related to Dubai’s branding

In sum, Dubai’s urban branding on Instagram is built through a constellation of symbolic landmarks, green aesthetics, and lifestyle imagery that together articulate a coherent future-oriented identity. These representations function simultaneously as visual documentation and as marketing discourse, projecting an urban imaginary designed to attract investment, tourism, and talent. As such, Instagram operates not merely as a platform for sharing images but as a medium through which Dubai’s branded future is staged, circulated, and legitimized.

This table illustrates how Dubai’s Instagram branding relies on a limited but highly consistent repertoire of motifs, which collectively reinforce the city’s aspirational identity.

Category	Examples	Branding Message / Function
<b>Iconic Landmarks</b>	Burj Khalifa, Museum of the Future, Burj Al Arab, Dubai Frame, Ain Dubai, Jumeirah Mosque, Al Bastakiya (Old Town), Sheikh Zayed Mosque, Dubai Fountain, Hatta Dam	Position Dubai as a global city of innovation, luxury, and cultural heritage; symbols of global recognition.
<b>Green / Eco-Symbols</b>	Miracle Garden, Green Planet, Sustainable City, landscaped parks and boulevards	Project sustainability and livability through lush imagery in a desert context (“green oasis”).
<b>Residential Communities</b>	Al Barari, Dubai Hills, Jumeirah Islands, Jumeirah Golf Estates, Arabian Ranches, Mirdif, Damac Hills, Green Community, Emirates Hills, Discovery Gardens, Dubai Silicon Oasis	Promote exclusivity, family-friendly lifestyle, and eco-conscious branding in master-planned gated environments.

<b>Entertainment &amp; Leisure</b>	IMG Worlds of Adventure, Motiongate Dubai, Aquaventure World, Dubai Parks, Ski Dubai	Showcase Dubai as an experience economy hub; entertainment as a core component of city branding.
<b>Waterfront/Skyl ines</b>	Dubai Marina, Dubai Creek, Palm Jumeirah, Marina skylines, waterfront promenades, desert- meets-water visuals	Project cosmopolitan lifestyle, connectivity, and aspirational luxury.
<b>Lifestyle &amp; Experiences</b>	Jumeirah Beach, Madinat Jumeirah, Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve, Desert Safari, wellness and leisure imagery	Market Dubai as a cosmopolitan yet rooted city; fusing tradition (desert, heritage) with modern leisure.

*Table 4: Instagram sampling of 60 posts*  
Source: Author's dataset (2020–2025)



*Figure 12: The Sustainable City, marketed as Dubai's eco-friendly urban model and repeatedly showcased in branding campaigns (Official website, 2024)*



*Figure 13: Dubai Marina skyline, widely used in promotional imagery to symbolize cosmopolitan lifestyle and global connectivity (Instagram, 2024).*

Recurring motifs reveal how Dubai's Instagram branding blends iconic modern landmarks with eco-symbolism, residential exclusivity, and leisure culture. These carefully selected images construct a coherent narrative of Dubai as both a global metropolis and an environmentally conscious, lifestyle-oriented city.

To better understand how Dubai's promotional imagery organizes its urban identity, the research maps the relationships between different categories of branded spaces and their symbolic functions. Figure 12 illustrates this conceptual network, showing how residential communities, entertainment parks, green neighborhoods, iconic landmarks, waterfront skylines, and lifestyle experiences are woven together into a unified narrative of sustainability, luxury, and global connectivity.

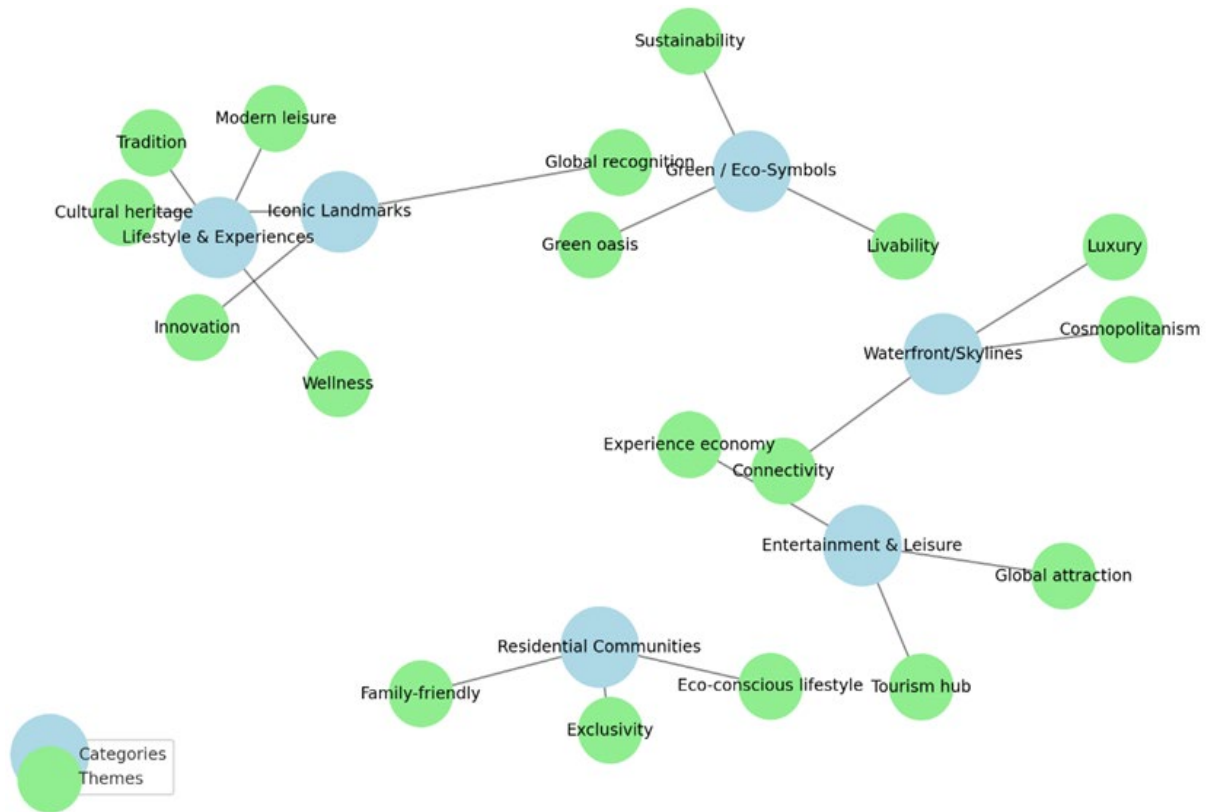
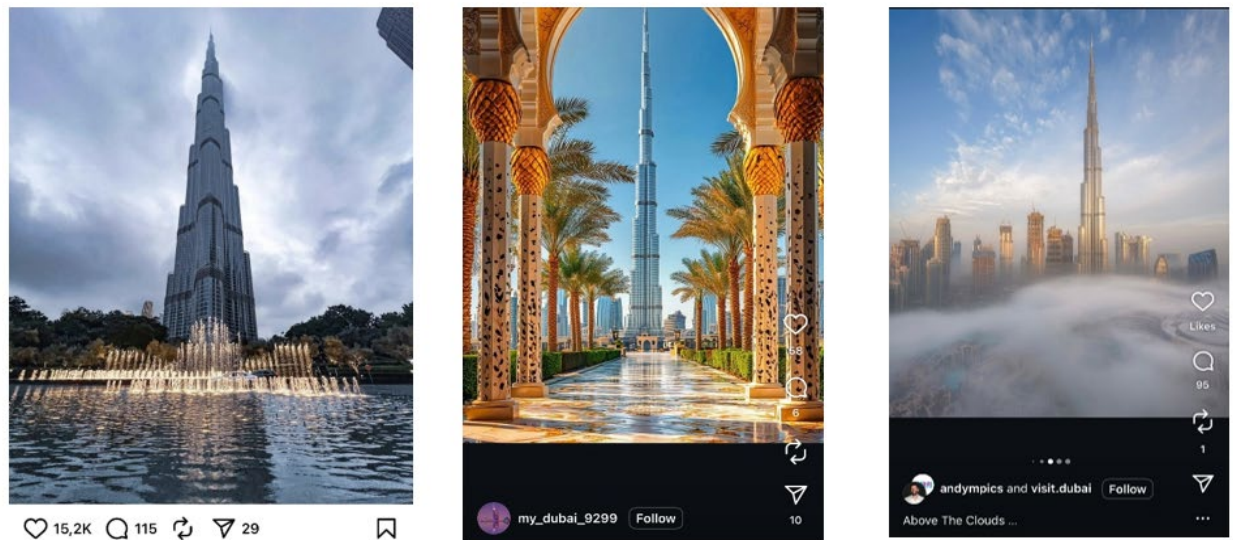


Figure 14: It was produced from the coding of Instagram posts (see Section 0.4).

Posts were categorized into six spatial groups and linked to thematic codes such as sustainability, luxury, and cosmopolitanism. The network was visualized using Gephi, where categories appear as blue nodes and themes as green nodes, with connections showing how branding motifs intersect across the dataset.

This diagram highlights how Dubai's promotional imagery weaves together diverse urban elements ranging from residential enclaves and entertainment parks to landmarks, waterfronts, and lifestyle settings into a unified narrative. These spaces operate as symbolic anchors rather than neutral depictions, projecting a carefully curated identity of sustainability, luxury, and cosmopolitan modernity that aligns with the city's global branding goals (Söderström, 2014; Zaidan & Abulibdeh, 2021; Leonova et al., 2022). A striking feature of

the dataset is the visual perfection of Dubai's imagery. Across both official and user-generated posts, buildings, streets, and public spaces consistently appear pristine facades gleam, pavements are spotless, and skylines are captured without visual disruption. These images circulate with minimal need for editing, reinforcing the idea that Dubai itself performs as an already-polished stage for global consumption. From a semiotic perspective (Barthes, 1977), this emphasis on cleanliness and shine functions as a signifier of modernity and success, naturalizing the association between urban order and global competitiveness. Rose (2016) reminds us that visual culture is never neutral, and in this case, the absence of imperfection operates as an aesthetic strategy that conceals the messier realities of labor, maintenance, and environmental cost. In Zukin's (1995) terms, this constitutes an "urban imaginary," where the symbolic economy of luxury and progress dominates the city's visual identity. In response to RQ1, the findings suggest that Dubai's urban branding on Instagram is constructed through a regime of visual perfection images that present the city not only as futuristic and sustainable but as immaculately complete, erasing any trace of vulnerability or incompleteness.



*Figure 15: Burj Khalifa as a polyvalent icon in Dubai's branding*

*Sources: andympics, 2025; my\_dubai\_9299, 2025; visit.dubai, 2025.*

These images demonstrate how Dubai's visual branding relies on the repetition of iconic forms, particularly the Burj Khalifa, to stabilize associations of ambition, order, and futurity. Whether presented against water, framed by heritage motifs, or rising above the clouds, the tower functions as a polyvalent signifier consolidating Dubai's symbolic economy of progress and perfection. As Ponzini (2019) argues, iconic architecture in Gulf cities operates less as functional infrastructure and more as a communicative device within a global competition for visibility. The Burj Khalifa exemplifies this logic: its value lies not only in its material scale but in its capacity to circulate endlessly across media platforms as a symbol of ambition, innovation, and modernity. Within the dataset, this is evident in the prominence of the #burjkhalifa hashtag, which exceeds 8.3 million posts, demonstrating how the tower functions as a media icon whose digital reproduction reinforces its symbolic centrality. Through such repetition, the Burj Khalifa becomes detached from its immediate urban

context and transformed into a mobile brand asset, anchoring Dubai's global identity while reinforcing the performative nature of its urban spectacle.

The findings from 4.1 show that Dubai's visual branding relies on repetition of polished skylines, iconic landmarks, and curated lifestyle settings. These images work less as neutral depictions of the city than as strategic symbols that circulate globally to frame Dubai as futuristic, sustainable, and culturally distinctive. In this way, Instagram acts not only as a medium of representation but as a mechanism of city-making, where visual narratives consolidate urban identity and extend the ambitions of planning documents into everyday digital culture.

While the construction of Dubai's brand rests on images of order, modernity, and spectacle, one of the most powerful recurring motifs is the staging of sustainability. The next section (4.2) examines how ecological themes are emphasized or strategically obscured in this promotional imagery, revealing the role of "visual greenwashing" in aligning Dubai's global image with the ambitions of the 2040 Master Plan.

## 4.2 Sustainability Emphasized and Hidden in Promotional Content

In Dubai's branding, sustainability is staged less as policy and more as spectacle. On Instagram, the city appears through lush enclaves, solar-powered landmarks, and futuristic buildings surrounded by greenery images that transform a desert landscape into an ecological showcase. This curated aesthetics align Dubai with global discourses such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, while sidestepping the contradictions of water scarcity, carbon-intensive construction, and resource dependency. As Zaidan and Abulibdeh (2021) note, Gulf cities often highlight sustainability as an image of progress rather than a systemic practice, a strategy that scholars describe as "visual greenwashing" (Leonova et al., 2022). This section examines how Dubai's promotional content emphasizes certain eco-symbols while obscuring the environmental and social costs behind them.

### 4.2.1 Emphasized Sustainability: The Aesthetics of Green Urbanism

Promotional imagery of Dubai consistently foregrounds symbols of greenery, innovation, and ecological responsibility. Residential developments such as Al Barari or the Sustainable City are frequently presented in aerial shots where villas appear immersed in dense vegetation, swimming pools, and shaded walkways. These visuals establish a narrative of "living green in the desert," transforming environmental scarcity into a branded lifestyle. From a semiotic perspective (Barthes, 1977), the lush vegetation functions as a signifier of sustainability, while its signified meaning is exclusivity and luxury sustainability not as shared urban infrastructure but as a purchasable commodity.

Instagram posts of Miracle Garden similarly deploy natural aesthetics, presenting vast floral landscapes that contrast sharply with Dubai's arid environment. The garden's bright colors and immersive design create highly photogenic content, reinforcing Dubai's reputation as a city of spectacle. While framed as an ecological achievement, such spaces are resource-intensive to maintain, yet this contradiction is visually silenced in the branding.

Expo 2020's Sustainability Pavilion (Terra) exemplifies the most technologically polished expression of Dubai's green narrative. Official posts highlight its solar trees, shaded walkways, and immersive exhibits, projecting the city as a leader in global ecological innovation. Families and tourists are often shown engaging with interactive installations, producing a visual link between sustainability and everyday experience. Here, as Leonova et al. (2022) argue, advertising transforms ecological responsibility into an aesthetic encounter, something to be consumed visually and emotionally, rather than materially restructured.

Taken together, these examples show how sustainability in Dubai's promotional content is primarily emphasized through aesthetics of greenness, lush landscapes, futuristic eco-architecture, and leisure settings that appeal to global audiences. This emphasis constructs sustainability as a visual and experiential narrative, aligning the city with international discourses of resilience and progress while framing ecological modernity as part of Dubai's cosmopolitan brand.

#### 4.2.2 Hidden Dimensions: What the Images Leave Out

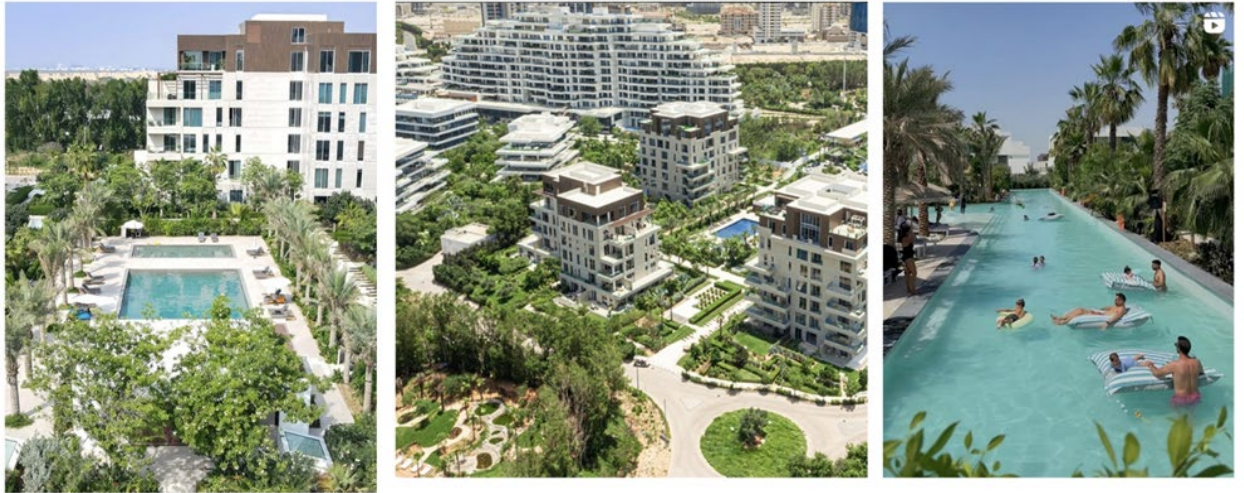
While Dubai's branding emphasizes lush greenery and futuristic eco-design, what remains absent from the visual narrative is equally telling. Promotional content rarely addresses the ecological and social costs of sustaining such environments in a hyper-arid climate. The irrigation of green landscapes and maintenance of large floral parks like Miracle Garden depend heavily on desalinated water, an energy-intensive process that contributes to high carbon emissions. Similarly, residential "green" enclaves such as Al Barari mask their dependence on resource-intensive cooling systems and imported materials, realities that contradict the effortless image of ecological harmony presented online.

The city's broader reliance on carbon-intensive sectors such as aviation, real estate, and luxury consumption is also invisible in promotional imagery. Instagram posts celebrating Dubai's skyline or its international connectivity seldom acknowledge that Emirates Airlines and global tourism are among the largest contributors to its carbon footprint. Instead, the narrative of seamless modernity displaces attention from the environmental costs of sustaining a global hub in the desert.

Social dimensions are similarly obscured. While advertising depicts sustainability as inclusive, the labor conditions underpinning these projects, particularly migrant construction work are absent from the imagery. As Zaidan and Abulibdeh (2021) observe, Gulf cities often struggle with aligning sustainability goals with social equity, yet these contradictions are visually silenced in Dubai's branding.

In this sense, the absence of water scarcity, carbon intensity, and labor precarity is not accidental but structural to the branding process. By concealing these dimensions, Dubai

sustains a narrative where sustainability appears effortless, aesthetic, and universally accessible, an image designed to attract investment and admiration while deflecting critical scrutiny.



*Figure 16: Al Barari - Sustainable City*

Instagram post of Al Barari, showcasing villas immersed in greenery. Sustainability is presented as a purchasable lifestyle rather than collective urban infrastructure.

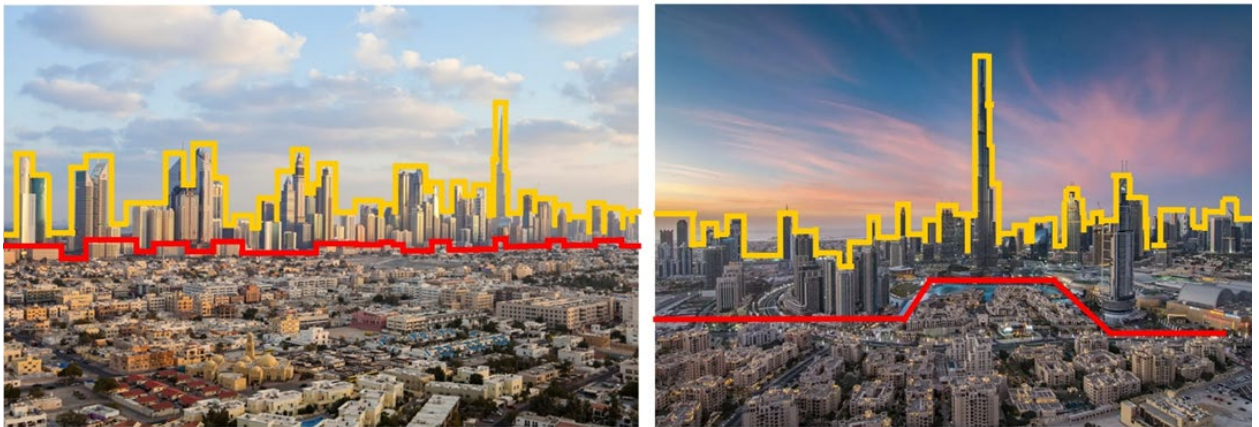


*Figure 17: Miracle Garden colorful floral display.*

Instagram post of Dubai Miracle Garden. While framed as ecological creativity, the resource intensive upkeep of such landscapes is visually silenced.



*Figure 18: Contrast Image desert highways*



*Figure 19: Contrast Image Dubai skyline.*

Emphasized in Imagery	Hidden or omitted
Lush greenery in residential areas	Water scarcity and desalination dependence
Solar panels, solar trees (Expo 2020)	High energy intensity of construction/cooling
Walkable, shaded communities	Migrant labor precarity and inequality

Floral spectacles (Miracle Garden)	Resource intensity and environmental cost
Futuristic eco-architecture	High per capita carbon footprint

*Table 5: Sustainability in Dubai’s Instagram Branding – Emphasized vs. Hidden Elements*  
Source: Author’s dataset (2020–2025); adapted from Zaidan & Abulibdeh (2021); Leonova et al. (2022).

The contrast between what Dubai highlights and what it conceals becomes particularly clear when Instagram content is systematized. As shown in Table above, sustainability is framed through a narrow set of visual motifs lush greenery, solar trees, shaded walkways, and futuristic architecture that align with global discourses of ecological modernity. Yet absent from these images are the material foundations that sustain them: water scarcity managed through desalination, energy-intensive cooling systems, carbon-heavy construction, and the precarious labor underpinning mega-projects. By juxtaposing emphasized and hidden dimensions, the table illustrates how branding produces a curated environmental imaginary. Sustainability is staged as an aesthetic and experiential narrative while its structural contradictions are excluded, ensuring that Dubai’s green image remains both persuasive and selective (Zaidan & Abulibdeh, 2021; Leonova et al., 2022).

#### 4.2.3 Visual Greenwashing: Sustainability as Spectacle

The analysis of sustainability in Dubai’s promotional imagery reveals how ecological narratives are selectively aestheticized, producing a powerful but incomplete vision of environmental responsibility. Yet sustainability is not the only lens through which Dubai legitimizes its future-oriented identity. Equally central is the mobilization of culture and heritage, where symbols of traditional mosques,

calligraphy, historic districts, and desert landscapes are strategically woven into branding narratives. The next section (4.3) examines how these cultural references work alongside futuristic imagery to legitimize rapid urban transformation, offering continuity with the past while projecting an aspirational global future.



*Figure 20: Dubai Opera Garden promoted on Instagram as a green cultural hub.*

The space symbolizes ecological harmony but relies on resource-intensive upkeep, exemplifying visual greenwashing.

A further example can be seen in the Dubai Opera Garden, a manicured green space situated beside one of the city's most prominent cultural landmarks. Promotional images of the garden present it as a tranquil and environmentally conscious urban oasis, seamlessly blending culture, leisure, and ecological symbolism. Yet, much like Miracle Garden or other curated landscapes, its sustainability is primarily visual: the lush lawns and seasonal plantings depend on desalinated water and intensive maintenance in a desert climate. In this sense, the Opera Garden illustrates how green spaces in Dubai function less as ecological

infrastructures and more as branding devices reinforcing the narrative of a sustainable city while masking the material and resource-intensive realities that sustain such spectacles.

### 4.3 Culture and Heritage as Legitimation

Dubai's branding, culture and heritage are not simply celebrated; they are strategically mobilized to legitimize the city's rapid transformation. Scholars of Gulf urbanism emphasize that heritage in the region is often reconstructed and staged to balance modernization with continuity (Commins, 2019; Wippel, 2014). Mosques, Arabic calligraphy, desert landscapes, and curated heritage districts like Al Fahidi are selectively highlighted in promotional content, functioning as symbolic anchors that naturalize ambitious urban change. As Graham (2000) argues, urban infrastructures and cultural spaces often operate as "premium network spaces," projecting not only functionality but also symbolic value. Similarly, Molotch and Ponzini (2019) show how Gulf cities invest in museums, cultural districts, and heritage projects as tools of global identity-making. In Dubai, this strategy ensures that futuristic megaprojects such as the Burj Khalifa or the Museum of the Future are not perceived as ruptures, but as extensions of a cultural narrative that blends tradition with innovation. In this way, heritage operates as a discursive resource simultaneously local and global used to stabilize Dubai's aspirational image on the world stage.

### 4.3.1 Symbolic Heritage

Islamic architecture, particularly mosques, plays a central role in Dubai's urban branding, functioning as cultural anchors that legitimize the city's modern transformation. The Jumeirah Mosque, often featured in tourism campaigns and Instagram posts, is framed as both authentic and accessible, its open-door policy symbolizing hospitality and religious inclusiveness. Similarly, the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, although located in Abu Dhabi, circulates widely in UAE branding campaigns, reinforcing the image of the Gulf as a space where spirituality coexists with modernity. Such representations exemplify what Graham (2000) terms "premium network spaces," where cultural infrastructure is leveraged not only for local meaning but for global consumption.

In promotional imagery, mosques operate semiotically as signs of authenticity: their minarets and domes evoke continuity with Islamic tradition, while their pairing with skyscrapers or futuristic skylines conveys a narrative of balanced progress. This selective juxtaposition reflects Wippel's (2014) observation that Gulf urbanism often relies on carefully staged cultural motifs to mediate the speed of development. The mosque's role in this visual economy is not confined to religious identity but extends to branding Dubai as a cosmopolitan hub that is at once deeply rooted and forward-looking.

By circulating images of mosques alongside icons like the Burj Khalifa or the Museum of the Future, Dubai's promotional strategy blurs boundaries between heritage and innovation. This visual pairing reassures both global audiences and local constituencies that modernization does not erase tradition but builds upon it. In this sense, mosques are not only architectural landmarks but branding instruments: their presence legitimizes Dubai's global ambitions by embedding its futuristic image within an enduring cultural framework.

### 4.3.2 Cultural Landscapes in the Service of Dubai's Urban Image

Alongside religious architecture, Dubai mobilizes heritage districts and desert landscapes as branding tools that anchor its futuristic image in narratives of authenticity. The restoration of Al Fahidi Historical District (formerly Al Bastakiya) illustrates this dynamic. Once neglected, the district was redeveloped into a curated heritage zone showcasing traditional wind towers, narrow alleys, and museums. Promotional materials present the area as a timeless urban fabric, yet scholars note that such reconstructions are highly selective, offering an “aestheticized authenticity” designed for tourism and investment (Elshtawy, 2010; Molotch & Ponzini, 2019). The district thus functions less as a preserved community and more as a cultural showcase, legitimizing Dubai's global modernity by situating it within a visually consumable past.

Desert landscapes play a similar role. Instagram posts of dune safaris, camel rides, and Bedouin-style camps frame the desert as a site of cultural continuity, positioning Dubai as both a futuristic metropolis and custodian of Emirati heritage. Yet these experiences are largely commodified, packaged for global audiences as leisure products. As Commins (2019) argues, Gulf states frequently deploy desert symbolism as a unifying cultural narrative, but in Dubai's case, the imagery is amplified through advertising that merges spectacle with tradition. By presenting the desert as both authentic and consumable, Dubai crafts a powerful narrative of rootedness that legitimizes its rapid transformation.

In both heritage districts and desert imagery, branding operates by compressing complex histories into visual symbols. The effect is a city that appears deeply connected to its past

while projecting a global future. This duality reassures local populations of cultural continuity and persuades international audiences of Dubai’s legitimacy as a world city, even as the lived realities of heritage and desert life are reshaped into curated spectacles for branding purposes.

<b>Symbolic Element</b>	<b>How It Appears in Branding</b>	<b>Underlying Reality / Critique</b>
<b>Al Fahidi Historical District (Al Bastakiya)</b>	Promoted as “authentic Dubai,” showcasing wind towers, alleys, cultural museums.	Restored and curated primarily for tourism; limited ties to original community life (Elsheshtawy, 2010).
<b>Desert Safaris &amp; Camel Rides</b>	Marketed as cultural continuity with Bedouin heritage; widely shared on Instagram.	Highly commodified tourist product; reduces complex desert culture to spectacle (Commins, 2019).
<b>Bedouin-Style Camps</b>	Framed as immersive heritage experiences of Emirati tradition.	Artificially constructed for leisure; heritage staged as consumable entertainment (Molotch & Ponzini, 2019).

*Table 6: Symbolic heritage and desert elements in Dubai’s branding.*

While marketed as authentic continuities with tradition, these spaces are carefully staged and commodified, functioning as branding devices rather than lived heritage.

The dual role of heritage districts and desert imagery becomes clearer when these elements are compared in terms of how they are staged in branding versus their underlying realities. As shown in Table 5, sites such as Al Fahidi Historical District or desert safari camps are framed in promotional materials as authentic continuities of Emirati culture. Yet their reconstruction and commodification reveal how authenticity is selectively curated to support branding objectives. This contrast highlights how Dubai's heritage operates less as lived tradition and more as a symbolic resource that legitimizes rapid urban change. By reducing complex cultural practices to consumable visuals, branding ensures that heritage is seamlessly integrated into the city's global image, reinforcing Dubai's narrative as both rooted and forward-looking.

#### 4.3.3 Commodification of Tradition

Museums and cultural districts in Dubai operate less as neutral repositories of culture than as carefully staged instruments of branding. The Museum of the Future, with its calligraphy-clad torus form, exemplifies this logic. Its design was conceived for global circulation as an instantly recognizable landmark optimized for digital reproduction. As Wang (2018) argues, contemporary museums increasingly function as “media spectacles,” where architecture itself becomes a branding device. In Dubai, the building's fusion of Arabic script with futuristic form communicates a dual message: the city is at once culturally rooted and technologically advanced.

Other institutions, such as the Al Shindagha Museum, deploy heritage in a different register. Here, curated exhibitions on Dubai's maritime and Bedouin past present a carefully ordered vision of tradition. Yet, as Molotch and Ponzini (2019) note, Gulf heritage projects often serve strategic purposes: they project stability, continuity, and legitimacy while aligning national identity with global cultural tourism. This dual function pedagogical for local audiences, promotional for external ones makes heritage museums central to Dubai's branding ecosystem.

Beyond individual buildings, cultural clusters such as the Dubai Design District (d3) and Dubai Opera District transform cultural production into lifestyle branding. These districts are marketed not merely as functional spaces but as premium cultural environments (Graham, 2000), where art, commerce, and cosmopolitanism intersect. Their promotional materials emphasize creativity, innovation, and global connectivity, reinforcing Dubai's image as a cultural as well as economic hub.

Taken together, Dubai's museums and cultural districts illustrate how culture is instrumentalized as soft power. Whether through futuristic icons or staged heritage, these institutions extend Dubai's branding into the cultural sphere, offering curated narratives that are as much about visibility and competitiveness as they are about education or preservation. Yet, these cultural spaces also reproduce what Fernández (2022) terms *visual greenwashing*: the strategic use of aesthetic cues to project values such as sustainability, authenticity, and inclusivity without addressing the structural inequalities or ecological vulnerabilities beneath them. For example, museums framed as "green innovation hubs" or heritage districts promoted as symbols of continuity sanitize the complexities of labor, resource dependency, and displacement, replacing them with easily consumable visual tropes. In this sense, culture

not only strengthens Dubai's soft power (Nye, 2004) but also reinforces its promotional logic sustainability and heritage are presented as images, staged for global circulation, rather than as systemic practices embedded in urban governance.

Type of Institution	Example(s)	Branding Logic	Underlying Critique
<b>Futuristic Icon</b>	Museum of the Future	Visual spectacle optimized for global media circulation; fuses Arabic calligraphy with futuristic form.	Functions more as a branding device than a traditional museum; architecture overshadows content (Wang, 2018).
<b>Curated Heritage</b>	Al Shindagha Museum	Presents a selective narrative of maritime and Bedouin past; stabilizes identity through staged tradition.	Heritage is reconstructed and commodified for tourism and external legitimacy (Molotch & Ponzini, 2019).
<b>Cultural Clusters</b>	Dubai Design District (d3), Opera District	Marketed as creative lifestyle environments linking art, commerce, and cosmopolitanism.	Prioritizes consumption and visibility over organic cultural production (Graham, 2000).

*Table 7: Comparative Branding Logics of Dubai's Cultural Institutions*

Comparative branding logics of Dubai’s cultural institutions, illustrating how futuristic icons, curated heritage, and cultural clusters each contribute to the city’s global identity while raising questions of authenticity and commodification.

#### 4.4 Advertising and the Dubai 2040 Master Plan

A critical dimension of this study is the relationship between Dubai’s promotional imagery and the official narratives articulated in the Dubai 2040 Urban Master Plan. While previous sections have examined how branding constructs sustainability, heritage, and cultural legitimacy, this section evaluates the degree of alignment between these representations and the city’s stated policy goals. The Dubai 2040 Plan presents a vision of a “best city to live in,” emphasizing sustainability, livability, and innovation through green corridors, transit-oriented development, and cultural integration (Dubai Urban Master Plan, 2021). At the same time, scholars caution that such plans operate as aspirational “paper cities,” projecting idealized futures that serve promotional as much as technical functions (Söderström, 2014; Zaidan & Abulibdeh, 2021). To interrogate this relationship, Table 4.5 compares the Plan’s strategic objectives with their representation in Instagram advertising and the realities that are less visible in official narratives.

Dubai 2040 Goal	How It Appears in Advertising/Instagram Branding	Underlying Reality / Critique
<b>Green Corridors &amp; Parks</b>	Renderings and posts highlight lush promenades, Miracle Garden, Opera Garden, and curated green oases as proof of ecological modernity.	Sustainability remains aesthetic: water-intensive landscapes in desert climate, reliant on desalination and artificial maintenance (Zaidan & Abulibdeh, 2021).
<b>Walkability &amp; Public Transit</b>	Advertising emphasizes pedestrian-friendly visuals (Dubai Marina, Downtown Boulevard, Metro stations as clean icons).	Reality: Dubai remains car-dependent; walkability limited outside select high-end districts (Elsheshtawy, 2010).
<b>Innovation &amp; Smart Districts</b>	Museum of the Future, Expo 2020 site (District 2020), Dubai Design District promoted as global innovation hubs.	Branding foregrounds technology but omits challenges of implementation, inclusivity, and reliance on migrant labor (Molotch & Ponzini, 2019).

<b>Cultural Heritage Integration</b>	Al Fahidi, desert safaris, and mosques appear in branding to connect futurism with tradition.	Heritage is curated and commodified for tourism, functioning as branding rather than lived continuity (Commins, 2019).
<b>Sustainability &amp; Climate Resilience</b>	Instagram content foregrounds solar panels, greenery, clean skylines, and eco-symbols.	Visual greenwashing: high per-capita carbon footprint, intensive cooling, and water scarcity are excluded (Leonova et al., 2022).

*Table 8: Dubai 2040 Goals vs. Branding Representations vs. Hidden Realities*

#### 4.4.1 Alignment with 2040 Goals

A number of themes in Dubai’s advertising and Instagram branding align directly with the priorities outlined in the Dubai 2040 Master Plan. Chief among these is the emphasis on green corridors and parks. Posts showcasing Miracle Garden, Opera Garden, or the promenades around Downtown Dubai echo the Plan’s visual renderings of lush urban spaces, presenting greenery as both ecological achievement and lifestyle amenity. In this sense, advertising reinforces the Master Plan’s narrative that environmental sustainability can be seamlessly integrated into a cosmopolitan urban fabric.

Another area of convergence is the promotion of walkability and transit-oriented development. While the 2040 Plan envisions compact, pedestrian-friendly districts, branding similarly highlights images of Dubai Marina, Downtown Boulevard, and clean metro stations as symbols of modern mobility. These visual strategies communicate alignment with global discourses on sustainable urbanism, portraying Dubai as a city that has embraced accessibility and reduced dependence on cars.

The Plan's ambition to establish innovation hubs and smart districts also finds a parallel in branding campaigns. The Museum of the Future, Expo 2020 legacy site (District 2020), and Dubai Design District are frequently represented on social media as evidence of Dubai's leadership in technology and creativity. These spaces are not only infrastructural projects but also branded environments, aligning closely with the Plan's vision of positioning Dubai as a global center of innovation.

Finally, the 2040 Plan's call for cultural heritage integration is echoed in the visibility of heritage districts and mosques in promotional imagery. Posts of Al Fahidi or Jumeirah Mosque, for instance, complement futuristic skyscraper skylines, reflecting the Plan's stated intention to embed cultural authenticity within its developmental trajectory.

Together, these examples illustrate how Dubai's promotional imagery does not operate independently of planning policy but often amplifies the official goals of the 2040 Master Plan. In doing so, advertising strengthens the credibility of the Plan by translating technical visions into accessible visual narratives for

#### 4.4.2 Contradictions Between Promotional Imagery and Urban Reality

Although Dubai's promotional imagery appears consistent with the objectives of the 2040 Master Plan, closer scrutiny reveals important omissions and contradictions. The most significant concerns relate to environmental sustainability. Advertising frequently showcases manicured parks, floral installations, and eco-symbols such as solar trees, yet these images obscure the material costs of maintaining greenery in an arid desert climate. As Zaidan and Abulibdeh (2021) observe, Dubai's reliance on desalinated water, energy-intensive cooling, and imported food supplies undermines the ecological narrative advanced in both official planning documents and social media branding. In this sense, sustainability functions less as systemic reform than as an aesthetic spectacle designed to appeal to global audiences.

A further contradiction emerges around mobility and accessibility. Promotional content highlights pedestrian-friendly boulevards and the sleek infrastructure of the metro, suggesting alignment with the Plan's ambition for walkable, transit-oriented districts. Yet these representations are largely confined to select enclaves such as Downtown and Dubai Marina. In reality, car dependency dominates the urban landscape, and pedestrian accessibility remains limited in peripheral residential areas (Elshehtawy, 2010). The imagery of mobility thus presents an idealized vision that obscures uneven geographies of access.



Figure 21: Renders: Futuristic promotional visualizations produced by the Roads and Transport Authority (RTA)

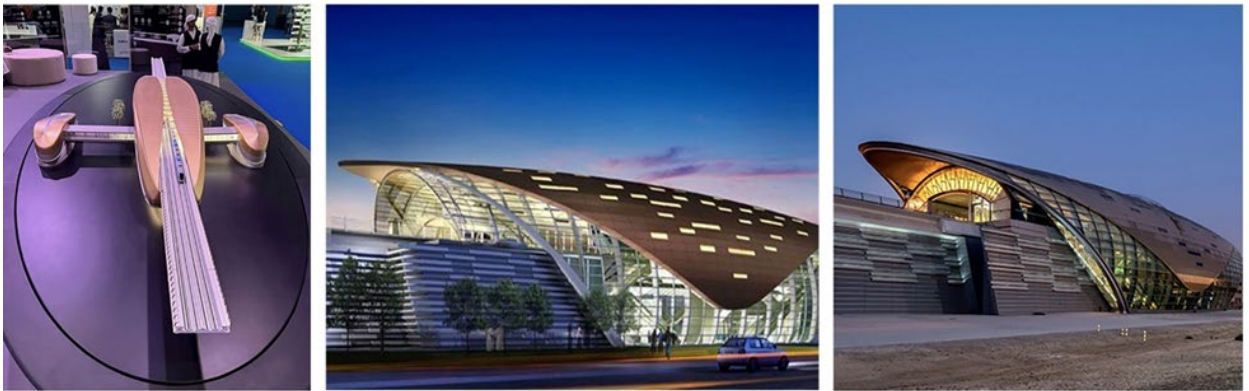


Figure 22: Figure 22: Final Project: Built stations showcasing sleek architecture but less futuristic than advertised.

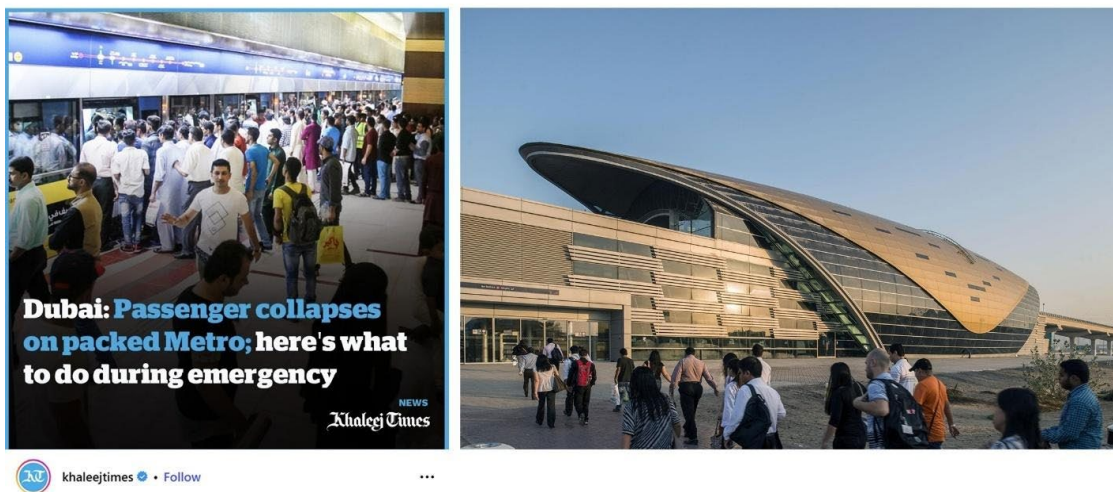


Figure 23: Reality: Everyday mobility challenges, including overcrowding and uneven accessibility.

Promotional renderings of Dubai Metro stations versus their everyday reality. While branding images emphasize futuristic design and seamless connectivity, lived experience often reflects overcrowding, limited accessibility, and uneven integration into the wider urban fabric (Images adapted from Dubai Roads and Transport Authority, promotional renders; Khaleej Times, 2022).

To illustrate this tension, Figure 23 contrasts official renderings of Dubai Metro stations with on-the-ground realities. The glossy visuals project futuristic mobility, while everyday experiences reveal congestion and infrastructural limits underscoring the selective framing within Dubai's branding discourse

The branding of innovation hubs similarly downplays issues of inclusivity and labor. Spaces such as District 2020 and Dubai Design District are promoted as nodes of creativity and global competitiveness, but their visual representation omits the reliance on low-wage migrant workers whose labor underpins construction and maintenance. As Molotch and Ponzini (2019) argue, cultural and infrastructural projects in Gulf cities often privilege image and prestige over social equity, reinforcing the city's international profile while sidelining questions of justice.

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Finally, the selective use of heritage integration reveals further silences. While mosques, desert imagery, and heritage districts are prominently displayed in branding, these representations are carefully curated. They avoid reference to the displacement of older communities, as in the redevelopment of Al Fahidi Historical District (formerly Al Bastakiya), where residents were relocated to make way for a heritage showcase designed for tourism (Elsheshtawy, 2010). The result is a sanitized cultural narrative that legitimizes rapid modernization while commodifying tradition into a consumable experience for global audiences (Molotch & Ponzini, 2019).

In sum, Dubai's advertising does not simply echo the ambitions of the 2040 Master Plan but strategically curates them. Symbols of sustainability, mobility, innovation, and heritage are emphasized where they reinforce the city's brand, while ecological fragility, labor inequality, and uneven access remain hidden. These omissions highlight the operation of promotional urbanism, where the gaps in representation are as revealing as the images themselves.

#### 4.4.3 Performative Sustainability and Global Image

A central characteristic of Dubai's urban branding is the performance of sustainability as a communicative device within its global image-making strategy. Rather than signaling structural ecological transformation, sustainability is enacted through carefully staged spectacles such as Expo 2020's solar trees, the futuristic renderings of the Dubai Metro, and promotional imagery of verdant parks that circulate widely across digital platforms. These representations function less as infrastructural solutions than as symbolic gestures, projecting environmental responsibility to investors, tourists, and policymakers. As Caprotti et al. (2022)

observe in their analysis of expos, sustainability often operates as a “performative script,” where ecological aesthetics serve to legitimize developmental ambitions without requiring substantive systemic reform.

This performativity aligns closely with Söderström’s (2014) concept of paper cities, where planning images function as semiotic devices projecting aspirational futures. Dubai’s advertising reproduces this logic by deploying sustainability as a signifier of modernity and resilience, positioning the city simultaneously as futuristic and ecologically conscious. Yet, as Graham (2008) demonstrates in his analysis of premium network spaces, such imaginaries prioritize symbolic capital over material equity, producing environments that appear sustainable while masking underlying dependencies on energy-intensive cooling, desalination, and aviation.

The circulation of these curated images is intensified on social media, particularly Instagram, where both official accounts and user generated posts showcase solar pavilions, manicured green corridors, and pristine skylines while systematically omitting visual evidence of ecological strain. This selective framing echoes Ponzini and Molotch’s (2019) observation that Gulf urbanism privileges global visibility over local accountability, generating an image of resilience that is consumable for international audiences yet detached from the city’s environmental and social realities.

Ultimately, sustainability in Dubai’s advertising functions as a branding asset: a performative vocabulary that reassures global stakeholders of ecological credibility while consolidating the city’s reputation as a hub of innovation and luxury. Within the scope of this study, the analysis demonstrates that advertising does not merely echo the aspirations of the Dubai 2040 Master

Plan but actively reframes them, transforming sustainability into a communicative spectacle at the core of Dubai's projected urban identity.

## 4.5 Chapter Synthesis

The analysis in this chapter has shown that Dubai's global image is not produced by material development alone but by a carefully orchestrated regime of visual and discursive strategies. Through Instagram, planning documents, and mega-event campaigns, Dubai's identity is consolidated as futuristic, sustainable, and culturally rooted. Yet this image emerges less as a reflection of lived urban reality than as a curated construct one that operates at the intersection of visual greenwashing, platform-mediated visibility, heritage legitimization, and planning imaginaries.

The first key insight concerns sustainability as visual performance. Across Instagram posts and campaigns, green aesthetics are repeatedly staged lush corridors, solar trees, and futuristic renderings of walkable boulevards. These images stabilize Dubai's claim to ecological responsibility, but as the analysis revealed, they conceal the city's structural dependencies on desalination, energy-intensive cooling, and carbon intensive aviation (Zaidan & Abulibdeh, 2021; Fernandez, 2022). Sustainability thus functions primarily as a semiotic device, legitimizing growth through aesthetics rather than systemic reform.

A second insight is the central role of Instagram in amplifying and curating these narratives. Far from being a neutral platform, Instagram operates as what van der Graaf (2023) terms a platform mediated urban interface. Algorithmic logics prioritize iconic skylines, spectacular sustainability imagery, and sanitized cultural symbols, marginalizing messier or less

marketable aspects of urban life. In this way, Instagram transforms planning visions and architectural icons into a streamlined digital imaginary, producing global visibility while narrowing the range of what is seen.

Third, the chapter highlights how heritage is instrumentalized as a legitimating frame. Districts like Al Fahidi or commodified desert landscapes are mobilized to stabilize Dubai's rapid modernization in a narrative of cultural continuity. As Molotch and Ponzini (2019) observe, cultural projects in Gulf cities often privilege prestige over equity, and in Dubai this dynamic is particularly visible: heritage is curated not to preserve lived histories, but to brand modernity as authentic. This selective appropriation underscores the dual role of heritage as both anchor and marketing tool within the broader strategy of promotional urbanism.

Finally, the analysis shows that urban planning and advertising are structurally entangled. The Dubai 2040 Master Plan, like its predecessors, does not circulate only as a technical blueprint but as what Söderström (2014) calls a paper city: a material-semiotic artifact that projects desirable futures. Once reframed through advertising and social media, these renderings become promotional assets, reinforcing the image of Dubai as "the world's best city to live in." The cycle from plan to image, and from image to digital spectacle, demonstrates how planning has become inseparable from branding.

Taken together, these findings point to a broader conclusion: branding in Dubai functions as a mode of governing urban perception. Through the interplay of green aesthetics, platform amplification, curated heritage, and planning imaginaries, the city's image is stabilized as globally competitive and ecologically credible, while silences around inequality, ecological fragility, and uneven accessibility persist. What emerges is a city branded not only through

its skyline but through its visual discourse, where sustainability, heritage, and innovation are staged as mutually reinforcing rather than contested.

This duality between spectacle and structure, visibility and omission sits at the core of Dubai's branded urbanism. It also establishes the groundwork for the concluding reflections in Chapter 5, where the implications of these dynamics for city branding, global sustainability discourse, and the politics of urban perception will be addressed.

## 5. Conclusion

This dissertation has examined how Dubai's urban identity is constructed through advertising, planning, and social media, demonstrating how visual culture functions as a form of governing perception. Across the Dubai 2040 Master Plan, Expo 2020 campaigns, and Instagram branding, the city is projected through curated aesthetics of futurism, sustainability, and cultural continuity. These representations align with Söderström's (2014) notion of paper cities, where planning documents and promotional media collapse into a semiotic system that markets aspirational futures as if they were inevitable realities.

A central finding is the prevalence of visual greenwashing (Fernández, 2022; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). Solar pavilions, manicured parks, and futuristic renderings circulate as signs of ecological responsibility, yet they obscure structural dependencies on desalinated water, carbon-heavy aviation, and energy-intensive cooling systems (Zaidan & Abulibdeh, 2021). Sustainability thus emerges less as systemic reform than as spectacle, performed for international visibility. Instagram intensifies this process: posts highlight polished skylines, greenery, and solar installations while omitting signs of ecological stress, thereby reinforcing a narrative of ecological modernity optimized for digital circulation. Crucially, Instagram's algorithm privileges highly aesthetic, polished content, ensuring that spectacular images of Dubai's skyline or curated green spaces are amplified over more mundane or critical depictions, further naturalizing selective imaginaries of the city.

Heritage is mobilized in a similar way. Restored quarters such as Al Fahidi and commodified desert landscapes are curated as cultural anchors, reinforcing modernity through consumable images of tradition. Instagram content replays these motifs through tourist snapshots,

influencer aesthetics, and official campaigns, reframing heritage into an easily shareable spectacle. As Molotch and Ponzini (2019) argue, such projects privilege prestige and visibility over preservation, situating heritage within Dubai's symbolic economy rather than its lived communities.

Equally significant are the silences embedded in this branding. Migrant labor, which underpins construction and services, remains invisible in official and user-generated imagery alike. As Buckley (2012) and Malecki & Ewers (2007) show, this erasure reflects structural inequalities within Gulf urbanism, where class struggle and social precarity are masked to preserve an image of luxury and order. On Instagram, this absence is amplified: the platform privileges images of spectacular skylines, clean streets, and luxury lifestyles, while the workers who maintain these are systematically excluded. This constitutes a form of social whitewashing, parallel to ecological greenwashing, in which inequality is deliberately hidden from global consumption.

Theoretically, this study extends debates in urban branding and platform urbanism. It demonstrates how paper cities operate not only as planning tools but as branding devices, how Instagram functions as an infrastructure of visibility (Barns, 2020; van der Graaf, 2023), and how visual greenwashing operates at the scale of cities, not just corporations. Taken together, these dynamics position branding as a communicative mode of governance, where advertising, planning, and digital platforms intersect to produce urban imaginaries as influential as material infrastructures.

Practically, the findings highlight the risks of relying on symbolic sustainability and curated heritage in city-making. Such strategies may attract investment and tourism, but they undermine credibility when detached from ecological reform and social equity. Addressing

Dubai's contradictions requires aligning imagery with material change: reducing carbon dependency, securing water resilience, and acknowledging the contributions of migrant workers in urban narratives.

Ultimately, Dubai's trajectory illustrates the growing centrality of Instagram and digital platforms in shaping urban futures. What circulates in planning renderings, advertising campaigns, and Instagram feeds is not neutral representation but an active tool of governance, directing how the city is perceived, consumed, and legitimized. The challenge moving forward lies in bridging spectacle and substance ensuring that sustainability and heritage are not merely staged for global audiences but embedded in the lived realities of the city. Only then can branding evolve from a strategy of perception management into a vehicle for accountability in urban development.

For future research, it is crucial to acknowledge that the media landscape through which Dubai's image circulates is rapidly shifting. Instagram remains central, but its algorithm increasingly privileges short-form video, with Reels now dominating engagement. YouTube vlogs provide longer promotional narratives, while LinkedIn and ArchDaily frame projects in technical and architectural terms. In contrast, critical counter-narratives—on inequality, migrant labor, and ecological fragility are more visible in outlets such as *The New York Times* and investigative platforms. This divergence underscores the need to examine how different media ecosystems shape, amplify, or contest urban branding narratives.

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NotebookLM was used to ask targeted questions from specific articles, assisting in extracting key arguments and clarifications without replacing critical engagement with the texts.

All empirical analysis, argumentation, and interpretive insights remain the responsibility of the author. GenAI outputs were reviewed, verified against primary sources, and substantially revised before inclusion in the dissertation.

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## Figure sources

1. Figure 1: Mayak Real Estate. (2024, November 29)
2. Figure 2: Dubai 2040 Structure Plan
3. Figure 3: Expo2020dubai.com
4. Figure 4: Expo2020dubai.com
5. Figure 5: Expo2020dubai.com
6. Figure 6: Expo2020dubai.com
7. Figure 7: Expo2020dubai.com
8. Figure 8: Expo2020dubai.com
9. Figure 9: Instagram / Expo 2020 tagged posts
10. Figure 10: Expo2020dubai.com
11. Figure 11: Hashtag usage on Instagram related to Dubai's branding, Author
12. Figure 12: [www.thesustainablecity.com](http://www.thesustainablecity.com), 2024
13. Figure 13: Instagram, 2024
14. Figure 14: coding of Instagram posts, Author
15. Figure 15: andympics, 2025; my\_dubai\_9299, 2025; visit.dubai, 2025.
16. Figure 16: albarari.com

17. Figure 17: Instagram/Miracle Garden
18. Figure 18: [www.amazingaerial.agency](http://www.amazingaerial.agency)
19. Figure 19: [businessinsider.com](http://businessinsider.com)
20. Figure 20: [www.greenroofs.com](http://www.greenroofs.com)
21. Figure 21: [www.rta.ae.com](http://www.rta.ae.com) Roads and Transport Authority (RTA)
22. Figure 22: [khaleejtimes.com](http://khaleejtimes.com)
23. Figure 23: Instagram/Khaleejtimes

## Table sources

Table 1: Murad, A. A., Al Nuaimi, H., & Al Hammadi, M. (2007). Comprehensive assessment of water resources in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). *Water Resources Management*, 21(9), 1449–1463.

Table 2: Author. (2025). Instagram dataset on Dubai’s urban identity and sustainability narratives (2025) [Unpublished dataset].

Table 3: Author. (2025). Sustainability in Dubai’s Instagram branding – Emphasized vs. hidden elements (Table 4.2) [Unpublished dataset]. Adapted from Zaidan, E., & Abulibdeh, A. (2021). Sustainable urbanism in the Gulf: Challenges and contradictions. *Sustainable Cities and Society*, 64, 102512.

Table 4: Author. (2025). Sustainability in Dubai’s Instagram branding – Emphasized vs. hidden elements, In Unpublished master’s thesis on Dubai’s urban identity and sustainability branding (p. 78). Politecnico di Torino.

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Table 6: Author, (2025). Comparative branding logics of Dubai’s cultural institutions. In Unpublished master’s thesis on Dubai’s urban identity and sustainability branding (p. 95). Politecnico di Torino.

Table 7: Author, (2025). Dubai 2040 goals vs. branding representations vs. hidden realities.  
In Unpublished master's thesis on Dubai's urban identity and sustainability branding (p. 98).  
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## Generative AI Acknowledgement






This dissertation made limited use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools to support, but not substitute, the research and writing process.




ChatGPT (GPT-5, OpenAI) was used for language editing, including improving clarity, fixing grammar, reducing repetition, and occasionally double-checking the structure of chapters. It was also used to generate Figure 12 (conceptual network diagram) based on prompts I provided.







ChatPDF was employed as a tool to scan uploaded academic articles and quickly assess whether their content was relevant to the research questions. It was not used for generating analysis but to accelerate document review.

## Annex 1






Table of images:




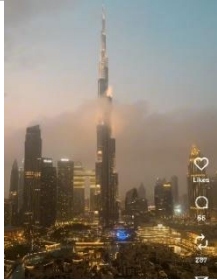

No.	Sources	Picture
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4	<a href="https://providentestate.com/area-guides/the-sustainable-city/">https://providentestate.com/area-guides/the-sustainable-city/</a>	
5	<a href="https://www.dubaihousing-ae.com/post/off-plan-vs-ready-to-move-which-one-are-you-planning-to-buy-in-dubai">https://www.dubaihousing-ae.com/post/off-plan-vs-ready-to-move-which-one-are-you-planning-to-buy-in-dubai</a>	






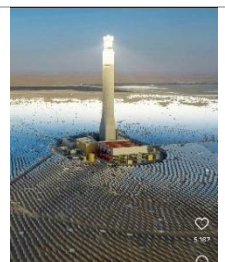
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11	<a href="https://dubaimetroguide.com/">https://dubaimetroguide.com/</a> Al khalil metro station	




12	<a href="https://dubaimetroguide.com/">https://dubaimetroguide.com/</a> Expo metro station	
13	Dubai miracle garden	
14	<a href="http://www.expo2020.com">www.expo2020.com</a> Terra the sustainability	
15	Jabel hafeet	
16	Half desert road <a href="https://gotrips-dxb.com/half-desert-road/">https://gotrips-dxb.com/half-desert-road/</a>	
17	<a href="http://www.stockphotos.com">www.stockphotos.com</a>	
18	<a href="https://transformtransport.org/media/articles/sheikh-zayed-road/">https://transformtransport.org/media/articles/sheikh-zayed-road/</a>	


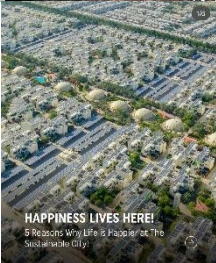
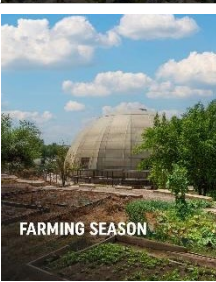



19	Dubai Opera Garden Green Roof <a href="https://www.greenroofs.com">https://www.greenroofs.com</a>	
20	Dubai Opera Garden Green Roof <a href="https://www.greenroofs.com">https://www.greenroofs.com</a>	
21	Creek harbour <a href="https://www.dandbdubai.com/dubai-communities/dubai-creek-harbour-the-lagoons">https://www.dandbdubai.com/dubai-communities/dubai-creek-harbour-the-lagoons</a>	
22	<a href="http://www.topluxuryproperty.com">www.topluxuryproperty.com</a> Dubai Creek park	
23	Biomac planting <a href="https://www.globalconstructionreview.com/how-they-built-the-hill-under-dubais-museum-of-the-future/">https://www.globalconstructionreview.com/how-they-built-the-hill-under-dubais-museum-of-the-future/</a>	
24	Before and After of Biomac planting <a href="https://www.globalconstructionreview.com/how-they-built-the-hill-under-dubais-museum-of-the-future/">https://www.globalconstructionreview.com/how-they-built-the-hill-under-dubais-museum-of-the-future/</a>	
25	<a href="https://www.finnpartners.com/cn/news-insights/the-great-escape-dubai/">https://www.finnpartners.com/cn/news-insights/the-great-escape-dubai/</a>	

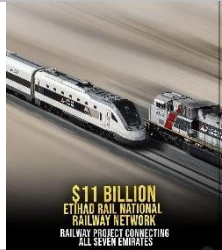
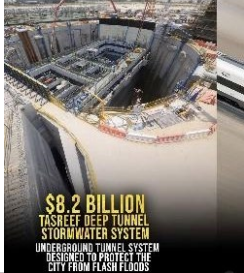


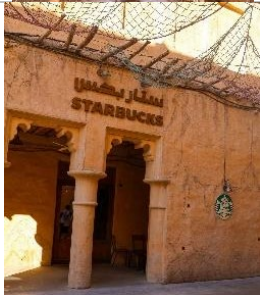
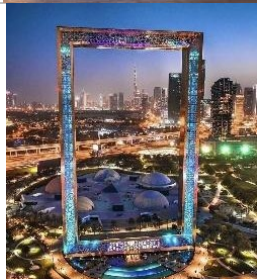
26	<a href="https://www.happydesertsafari.com/blog/dubai-mall-human-waterfall/">https://www.happydesertsafari.com/blog/dubai-mall-human-waterfall/</a>	 A large, cylindrical structure covered in a dense waterfall of people, with a palm tree in the foreground.
27	Aerial view of road with geometrical pattern in Dubai <a href="https://www.amazingaerial.agency/image/I0000gO1y99W.CbU">https://www.amazingaerial.agency/image/I0000gO1y99W.CbU</a>	 Aerial view of a road with a complex, symmetrical, and colorful geometric pattern in the center.
28	<a href="https://www.dm.gov.ae/2025/01/20/dubai-worlds-cleanest-city-for-fifth-year/">https://www.dm.gov.ae/2025/01/20/dubai-worlds-cleanest-city-for-fifth-year/</a>	 A wide view of a green park area with a large, colorful, circular flower bed in the foreground, with the Dubai skyline in the background.
29	<a href="http://www.thenationalnews.com">www.thenationalnews.com</a>	 A modern building with a unique, curved, and metallic facade, situated in a desert landscape.
30	<a href="https://www.constructionweekonline.com/projects-tenders/article-39043-dewa-solar-panels-installed-on-30-dubai-buildings">https://www.constructionweekonline.com/projects-tenders/article-39043-dewa-solar-panels-installed-on-30-dubai-buildings</a>	 A large, flat roof covered with a grid of solar panels, with a city skyline in the background.



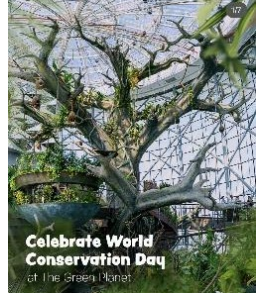



No .	Caption / Description	Source (Instagram)	Pictures
1	Solar trees at Expo 2020	@future.architects_	
2	The region's first bio-dome and experience a tropical rainforest filled with reptiles, birds and animals to discover.	@arabianadventures	
3	The beauty of Dubai Hills Estate.	@dubaihillsestate	
4	Burj Khalifa above the clouds	@andympics	
5	Burj Khalifa framed by palm colonnade	@my_dubai_9299	

6	Burj Khalifa and fountains at night	@visit.dubai	
7	Al Fahidi Heritage District alley	@visitdubai.af	
8	Desert safari camel ride	@thedesertsafari	
9	Dubai Marina skyline	@dxbmarina	
10	Luxury desert resort	@almaha_resort	
11	Rotating mirrors focus heat on the world's largest concentrated solar power plant	@geosteinmetz	

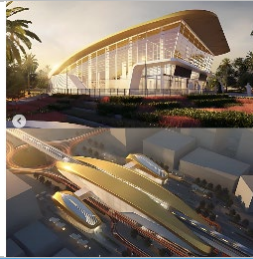




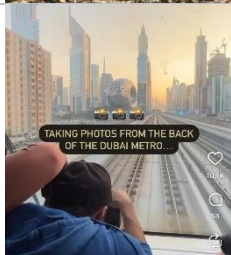
12	#dewa solar park in Dubai	@ash_megamind	
13	Dubai Solar Power Surges to 3,860MW as Clean Energy Hits 21.5	@financeworldmagazine	
14	Dubai continues to inspire me with its forward-thinking leadership and clear	@patriziamarinofficial	
15	Facade cleaning drone	@tarek.mufti	
16	Garden of Dreams entrance, Jumeirah Beach Residence, Dubai Feb 2025	@tapanimakinen	
17	Miracle garden, flower heaven	@stefanvoyages	
18	Dubai metro line	@thevisuallife_	






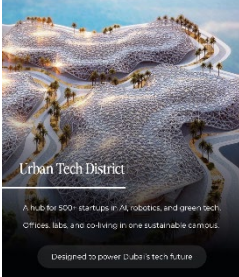
19	Horizon of the Greatness	@_m7ahmed1	
20	Where Sustainability Meets Happiness!	@thesustainablecity	
21	With the outdoor farming season soon approaching, residents of The Sustainable City are increasingly embracing sustainable practices.	@thesustainablecity	
22	Over the last 8 years, the Biodomes of The Sustainable City have cultivated and distributed over one million potted plants	@thesustainablecity	
23	Transforming Dubai's Urban Landscape - The Loop!	@noblehorizon_dxb	
24	Dubai is building the future while the world watches	@wealth	





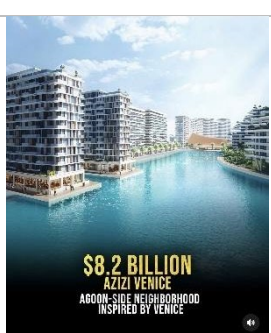

25	Dubai is building the future while the world watches	@wealth	
26	Dubai is building the future while the world watches	@wealth	
27	"You look happier. Thanks, I'm in Dubai."	@dubai.travelers	
28	Starbucks in Dubai	@ayane7628	
29	Mainstream cafes in Old Dubai, featuring a very often photographed	@arcticthunderstorm	
30	Dubai frame	@Dubai	

31	The golden hour at  @dubaicreekharbour with skyline silhouettes and still waters stealing the show	@visit.dubai	
32	If you're scrolling through this, close your eyes, take a deep breath, and picture yourself	@visit.dubai	
33	Adventure is calling! Step into a day full of fun facts, tiny creatures and nature.	@thegreenplanetdubai	
34	@andras.ra walks through the magnificent Dubai, Aquarium as marine life swims by his side.	@mydubai	
35	City skyline behind you, Jumeirah Beach stretching out ahead	@mydubai	
36	View	@dubai.travelers and @feelingofluxury	

37	Dubai Run #Dubai30X30	@dubai	
38	One Zaabeel #Dubai by: @ahmadannaji	@dubai	
39	Dubai's best green communities, where tranquility meets modern living.	@tvgrealtors	
40	Dubai's best green communities, where tranquility meets modern living.	@tvgrealtors	
41	Dubai downtown	@visit.dubai	
42	The Dubai Metro Blue Line with 14 stations connecting key areas. The line will integrate with the Red and Green Lines, enhancing Dubai's transportation network.	@dubai_homes	

43	The Dubai Metro Blue Line with 14 stations connecting key areas.	@dubai_homes	
44	A routine metro ride turned eventful for a Dubai Metro commuter when a fellow passenger had a seizure and fell inside the coach shortly.	@khaleejtimes	
45	Dubai attraction	@amazingdubai_	
46	Dubai's breathtaking skyline in one frame, From the iconic Burj Khalifa	@_faulty_engineer_	
47	Incredible Burj Al Arab views	@AMAZINGDUBAI —	
48	Good times in Dubai shooting from the back of metro line	@thevisuallife_	

49	Dubai Miracle Garden	@placestovisitindubai	
50	A self-sustained city hovering over Downtown Dubai. Autonomous transport pods. Unmatched vision.	@pictown.co	
51	Dubai's Ruler has set out the next stage of the city's 2040 Urban Master Plan, with new housing and easier commuting among the top priorities.	@mansionisti	
52	Rising 74 meters high and designed by SOM, the architects behind Burj Khalifa, the new ST METRO Emaar Properties Station will be part of the Dubai Metro Blue Line.	@dxbinvesting	
53	From breathtaking skyscrapers to smart cities powered by AI, Dubai is shaping the future of how we live, work, and invest. With world-class infrastructure, sustainable initiatives, and limitless opportunities. #futuredubai	@mustapha.realestate	
54	Dubai is not just growing, it's reinventing itself.	@elite.luxury.dubai	

55	Dubai is not just growing, it's reinventing itself. #dubaifuture	@elite.luxury.dubai	 A rendering of the Dubai Green Spine, a 64 km green boulevard across the city. The image shows a wide, landscaped corridor with trees, paths, and bike lanes, flanked by modern buildings and a clear sky. Text overlay: "Dubai Green Spine", "64 km green boulevard across the city", "Planned 1 million trees, shaded paths & bike lanes", "Turning highways into living forests".
56	Dubai is not just growing, it's reinventing itself. #dubaifuture	@elite.luxury.dubai	 A night-time rendering of the Dubai skyline, featuring the Burj Khalifa and other skyscrapers, with a modern, curved building in the foreground.
57	Dubai future #dubaifuture	@vibesby_kk	 A night-time rendering of the Dubai skyline, featuring the Burj Khalifa and other skyscrapers, with a modern, curved building in the foreground.
58	The Pearl: the story of four sea shells that went for a walk from the Dubai Creek Harbour	@amorphoustudio	 A rendering of The Pearl, a series of artificial islands in Dubai Creek Harbour, showing the unique shell-like architecture and surrounding landscape.
59	Dubai is building the future while the world watches. #dubaifuture	@wealth	 A rendering of the Azizi Venice development, showing a large, modern residential complex with a canal and surrounding infrastructure. Text overlay: "\$8.2 BILLION", "AZIZI VENICE", "ABOON-SIDE NEIGHBORHOOD", "INSPIRED BY VENICE".
60	EXPO CITY DUBAI Landscape & Public Realm Masterplan	@arquilizer	 A rendering of the Expo City Dubai landscape, showing a modern, curved building with a large, open plaza and surrounding infrastructure.

