INSTAGRAM ANALYSIS: IDENTITY CURATION IN ABU DHABI AND DUBAI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORTS

By Lily Cheng

Those familiar with the United Arab Emirates are aware of Dubai and Abu Dhabi's distinct cultural atmospheres: Dubai's luxury and cosmopolitan image is juxtaposed against Abu Dhabi's reputation of conservatism. An analysis of the two cities with a focus on their respective international airports demonstrates how their social media identities confirm their mutual distinctions.

Since the pandemic began, I have been intrigued by how limitations in mobility have ushered in the growth of online media in the Middle East. In a similar vein, I have been fascinated by the interaction between identity curation and user engagement on social media, as well as how they form our cultural perceptions. In particular, Abu Dhabi and Dubai—both growing cities—have formed distinct identities on social media

despite their close proximity to one another. To better understand the differences between the cities, I explored the gateways into them—their airports—through social media, particularly Instagram because it is widespread and easily accessible. My review of their story collections, posts, and tagged photos illustrates that Dubai's International Airport (DXB) curates a cosmopolitan and luxury travel experience, while Abu Dhabi International Airport (AUH) exhibits a more conservative and corporate experience.

From first glance, DXB and AUH's Instagram story icons portray distinct personalities. DXB's story collection icons are listed as "Festive," "Entertaining," "Dining," "Shopping," and "Relaxing," while AUH's icons are designed with categories such as "Dine," "Shop," "Unwind," "#StandbyAUH", and "Travel." The use of imperatives in AUH's story icon titles comes across as more commanding and contrasts with DXB's use of gerunds which more actively engage the viewer. DXB's use of emojis in their icons also suggest a more playful and active experience than AUH's uniformly designed icons. Through its Instagram icons, AUH curates a cleaner and more professional vision to its social media audience than DXB.

This difference in tone is further illustrated when reviewing the posts curated by each account. DXB's photos are filled with food and snapshots of landmarks around Dubai and other cities and countries that have flights connecting from Dubai. Eight of the fifteen most recent posts are either of food offered at DXB or luxury travel opportunities relating to DXB. In contrast, on AUH's account, only one of the 15 most recent posts pertain to dining options. The account also contains five PSAs in primary colors and corporate blue tones, and six photos of the airport's workers wearing masks, creating a more sterile image of this gateway to Abu Dhabi. These differences in social media content of the two airports reinforce DXB's cosmopolitan, luxury travel identity in comparison to AUH's immobile and corporate image.

The airports' tagged photos further exemplify foreign perceptions of city culture. DXB's tagged photos include photos of the Burj Khalifa, trips out in the desert, Dubai's skyline, and luxury hotel pools. DXB's geotagged photos also showcase luxury retail items such as shoes, clothes, and jewelry. In contrast, thirteen of twenty photos tagging AUH's account feature airplanes, and curiously, most of the photos are focused on airplane models specifically. AUH's geotagged photos are mainly selfies of people at the airport, in an airplane, and in one instance a selfie of a person in the airport bathroom. The stark difference in images the public chooses to tag each airport in is striking and further solidifies the existing cultural auras surrounding each city: Dubai as a dynamic city of luxury and Abu Dhabi as a more traditional city, less prominent for luxury tourism.

Social media profiles create compelling stories. Through the Instagram accounts of the Dubai and Abu Dhabi International Airports, we are shown different narratives of cultural differences between each airport's identity. While Dubai is strongly positioned as a dynamic, luxury travel experience, Abu Dhabi is shown as a more professional airport experience. The narratives we create through social media are important, especially considering the exceptionally online era of this past year, when social media has served as a temporary stand-in for in-person experiences. Given these travel restrictions, exploring different cultures online has been both a freeing and refreshing way to understand the identity and culture of new places. Social media allows us to begin to conceptualize a place without physically being there. I think it will be interesting to explore this in other cities as well, as many places have an interesting divergence between what they want tourists to experience and how people truly experience them.

In the end? I'd much rather go experience both cities in person.