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## **IMPACT OF MARKETING COMMUNICATION ON UAE TOURIST'S PROPENSITY TO VISIT SRI LANKA**

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### **Abstract**

Tourism industry has become a vital industry to the Sri Lankan economy. Sri Lanka should focus on attracting high spending tourists in order to gain more economic benefits to the country. United Arab Emirates (UAE) has become one of the fastest growing tourists generating markets in the world. Emirati's are spenders with a higher spending capacity. Many UAE tourists are been attracted by Maldives, Singapore, Malaysia & Thailand with a good number of arrivals. But as a destination Sri Lanka has not been able to achieve a reasonable market share of these tourists who could generate a higher value of tourist receipts. This study is focused to analyze the impact of Marketing Communication on UAE tourists' arrivals into Sri Lanka and to provide necessary recommendations with appropriate strategies to develop UAE as a source market for inbound tourism. The researchers have used samples of 100 potential UAE tourists through a structured questionnaire. It was noticed that there is a considerable continuous drop in the UAE arrivals into Sri Lanka. Though the perception of Emirati's about the destination is positive due to the unproductive marketing and promotional activities and methods they are not induced to visit Sri Lanka. Hence the tourism authorities and private sector should collaborate and implement suitable marketing and promotional activities to attract these potential tourists to the destination.

**Keywords:** Marketing, tourism, UAE tourist, promotion, marketing communication

### **1. Introduction**

Middle East is one of the fastest growing tourists generating regions in the world, it has grown by 4.1% which is the global average. (UNWTO, 2018). Middle East tourists are one of the highest spending travelers in the world. This has made the Middle East countries one of the

most lucrative outbound tourist markets in today's fast-growing international tourism industry. This niche market has huge potential for growth. Various media channels, surveys say the Emiratis are increasingly traveling for personal and professional reasons. In 2015, the number of outbound trips from the UAE reached 3.5 million, with a total spending of AED 71 billion. UAE Outbound Tourism Market is predicted to surpass US\$ 24 Billion by the year 2025.

Table 1: Outbound statistics of UAE to competitor destinations in 2018

Destination	Total tourist Arrivals (Mn)	Total Tourism Receipt (USD, Bn)	UAE arrivals
Malaysia	26.1	21.21	11,170
Thailand	38.28	58	151,137
Singapore	18.5	20.15	76,268

Malaysia Tourism (2020); Ministry of Tourism & Sport Thailand (2020); Statistic Singapore (2020).

The UAE has arisen as an important source of outbound tourism market over the years and is expected to grow vastly on the account of many influences including a rise in disposable income, passion to explore the world and increasingly efficient flight connectivity to different parts of the world.

Table 2: Middle East & UAE Arrivals into Sri Lanka during 2015-2019

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Middle East	101,006	107,635	95,581	71,636	46,235
UAE	10,576	8475	7136	5785	3528

SLTDA (2020)

The table 2 indicates the unsatisfactory data about the arrivals from Middle East & UAE into Sri Lanka. Despite having a good accessibility, Sri Lanka is not selected as a favorite destination by UAE nationals. Currently there are fewer researches done to understand the reasons behind poor UAE arrivals and to explain the benefits of attracting this source market. Sri Lanka must focus on attracting high spending tourists into the country and generate a tourist receipt of at least USD 250 to make the industry economically viable by. (SLTDA,2018). The economy of the UAE is the second largest in the Middle East with a gross domestic product of US\$354 billion in 2020. In 2015, the number of outbound trips from the UAE reached 3.5 million, with a total spending of USD 19.3 billion. UAE Outbound Tourism Market is predicted to surpass US\$ 24 Billion by the year 2025. (DTCM, 2018). Studies should explore the reasons why destination has failed to attract these potential tourists with a satisfactory number. Hence, attracting UAE tourists and pull them towards Sri Lanka by competing with the competitor destinations through marketing communication strategies is



vital to the industry. Therefore, this study analyze the impact of Marketing Communication factors on UAE tourists' arrivals into Sri Lanka.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **Marketing Communication**

In practice, destination marketing has tended to focus on the task of promoting and selling. That is, the concept of marketing has typically only been applied to the destination in very limited ways. As a result, there is much scope for the application of a true marketing philosophy to enhance destination competitiveness. This broader application of marketing extends beyond promotion and selling alone to encompass all aspects of the marketing mix with a focus on satisfying visitor needs and wants as the primary aim of destination marketing (Crough, 2007).

The brand is the abstract of the destination's identity, the way the destination wants to project itself in the market and be recognized. Brand is a promise, anticipation and an expectation (Terzibasoglu, 2004).

The positioning of a destination is the process of establishing a distinctive place of that destination in the minds of potential visitors (Gartner,1989). Destination's position in the market is how a destination is perceived by actual and potential visitors in terms of the experiences it provides relative to competing destinations (Terzibasoglu, 2004). Customer Analysis refers to the process of examining the current and potential customer profile for a particular tourist destination. Market segmentation is a technique used to divide a heterogeneous market into homogeneous sub-groups. 'Positioning' concerns where, in the mind of the tourist, the destination is located compared to its competitors. How a destination is so positioned depends upon its perceived relative uniqueness in terms of the characteristics valued by tourism market segments. Branding is the tool used to create this positioning. Destination positioning entails knowing how different market segments currently perceive the destination, which market segments it makes most sense to covet and therefore target, and how the destination might be effectively repositioned with respect to these segments. Destinations with a clear competitive position and strong supportive branding usually perform better in gaining the attention of potential tourists.

This highlights the importance of marketing communication in destination marketing. Greater attention must be paid to the characteristics of visitors when trying to develop a marketing communication strategy. A clear market segment must be identified, and investigation made of the buying decision factors, which predominate in that segment. It is, however, important to recognize that the tourist product is a composite product and that there is more than one type of client.

Destination image management is considered as an important aspect of destination marketing and the images held by individuals in the marketplace are considered crucial to a destination's marketing success (Tasci, Gartner and Cavusgil, 2007). Further the traveler's



choice of a vacation destination depends largely on the favorableness of his or her image of that destination communicated through marketing activities. In the meantime, marketing communication is considered as a critical factor and a driving force behind tourist behavior that influences intention to visit, destination loyalty and positive word of mouth communication.

### **Communicating the destination image**

Marketing communication activities are primary means of manipulating demand and influencing buyer behavior. This enable business to reach people in their homes or other places away from the places of production and delivery, and to communicate to them message intention to influence their purchasing behavior. In its simplest form, communication in tourism is a process and relevant to destination marketing for tourism business to reach the target market. Displaying the destination through marketing in brochures, billboards, and commercials can help to create a positive image for the destination. Marketing strategies should focus on highlighting destination in a positive and realistic manner.

**Promotion** can be used in order to increase sales, attract new customers, create awareness, change attitude or create an image, through advertising, personal selling, public relations, publicity, direct marketing and sales promotion and interactive/internet marketing. The important task of promotion is that “it fills the perceptual and informational gaps that exist between suppliers of tourism and the tourists (market)”. Furthermore, the promotion has a certain influence on the decision to purchase products and services, or in the case of destination marketing - to choose specific destination. Accordingly, promotion lays in the fact that it has high potential to produce different benefits: increase the interest in the destination, shows the benefits of a certain destination, differentiate the destination, it can create the image of the destination and it can also motivate tourists to stay longer in destination. When using promotion as a strategy for influencing tourists’ decision it is important to choose a good promotion tool. “Promotion tools are devices, activities, or methods used by marketing managers to convey the desired message to the market in order to achieve any desired promotion objectives” (Esu & Ebitu, 2010).

**Social Media as a tool for Tourism Marketing** - Social media, also known as consumer – generated media, has brought many changes in communication with customers, in the tools and strategies for communicating, to be more precise. There are many different definitions in order to define social media. It is a relatively new term in marketing and there is no general opinion to refer to its exact meaning. Social media as a concept composed of different online, word of mouth forums, as blogs, chat rooms, emails, company websites, photos, videos, social network sites, and other online platforms. Social media can be interpreted as a way to experiment with new opportunities that can help improve and create new forms of customer value which is very significant when it comes to attracting new customers (tourists is in case of tourism) and building strong relationships with them, as well. Internet has changed from world of information to world of influence in the same time and its elements such as



social media “start to revolutionize the state of marketing, advertising and promotions” (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011).

**Word of Mouth** - Many authors have studied the effects and the impact of advertising and WOM activities. The process as an information diffusion process, whereby an organization sends consumers advertising messages containing explicit or implicit information about itself or its products. The process is initiated by sending a message to several potential customers over an appropriate communication channel (Nelson, 1974). A certain fraction of the potential consumers will acquire the advertising information. After a period, some may have forgotten or they are not interested or convinced and, in this case, the customers are considered independent of one another.

### 3. Research methodology

#### Operationalization of the concept

The independent variable of marketing communication strategy is operationalized based on the *Kasim & Alfandi (2014) and Kuric (2016) with four indicators such as destination awareness, destination promotions, social media marketing and WOM marketing*. The indicators were measured through 10 items using structured questionnaire. Whereas the dependent variable of propensity to visit Sri Lanka is operationalized based on the *Silva (2013) and Morachat (2003)* with three indicators namely, perception about the destination, interest of travel, revisit intention. The indicators of dependent variable were measured through 10 items using structured questionnaire.

#### Data Collection

The researchers have collected data from 100 samples to make this study more reliable and appropriate. Convenience sampling is used in this exploratory research where the researcher is interested in getting an inexpensive approximation. Data was collected through a structured questionnaire using 1-5 Likert scale questions and administered by e-mail & an online survey. Questionnaire consisted of 2 parts such as section “A & B”. Section A consisted of questions to analyze the demographic characteristics of Emiratis nationals and section B is about the marketing communication factors influencing UAE tourist arrivals.

### 4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

The alpha coefficient for the 20 items of the questionnaire was 0.866, suggesting that the items have relatively high internal consistency. A reliability coefficient of .70 or higher is considered “acceptable” and, those over .80 good in most social science research situations (Sekeran & Bougue, 2013). It is assumed that the responses to the surveys in the current study provided a valid measure to understand the marketing communication factors affecting UAE inbound tourism.

**Descriptive Statistics for Demographic Factors**

All 100 respondents are Emirati nationals. Out of 100 respondents, 59% of the respondents were females and 38% of them were males. Majority of the respondents' average age was in between 26-39 years and 60% of respondents were employed. 54% of them were married and 25% of them have minimum of 3 children in their family. Furthermore 45% of the respondents would like to have family vacations and 41% of them will travel as small groups with a minimum of 5 travelers together. And 71% of them would prefer to stay in 4-5star accommodation. The table below shows the percentage distribution of the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 3: Frequency Distribution for Demographic Factors

Demographic Factor	Levels	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Nationality	UAE	100	100
Gender	Male	38	38
	Female	59	59
Age group	Age 18-25 years old	26	26
	Age 26-39 years old	51	51
	Age 40-59 years old	17	17
	Age over 60 years	5	5
Occupation	Employed	60	60
	Self-employed	16	16
	Retired	2	2
	Student	10	10
	Other	11	11
Marital Status	Married	54	54
	Single	46	46
Number of Children	None	51	51
	One	7	7
	Two	16	16
	Three and above	25	25
Travelling with	Spouse/Partner	13	13
	Family	45	45
	Friends	32	32
	Other	7	7
Number of Travelers	Sole	3	3
	2 Tourists	13	13
	3-5 Tourists	38	38
	More than 5 Tourists	41	41
Preferred Accommodation	3 Star	4	4
	4-5 Star	71	71
	Luxury Apartment	21	21
	Other	1	1



**Reliability Analysis for Inter-item Consistency**

The reliability test of Cronbach’s Alpha was used to determine the consistency. According to reliability analysis, coefficient for the 20 items of the questionnaire, in all the variables are having Cronbach’s alpha values more than 0.8. This indicates that there is an internal consistency between the items and the internal consistency reliability was higher and satisfactory. Therefore, variables can be created with respect to the corresponding items included in the questionnaire.

Table 4: Reliability Analysis

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	No of Items
Marketing Communication (MC)	0.851	10
Propensity to visit	0.900	10

Accordingly, marketing communication factors as the highest standard deviation is 0.72. This says that marketing communication factors has comparatively higher variance. All the coefficients of skewness are between -1 and +1. This says that data are normally distributed.

Table 5: Test of Normality

	MC	PROPENSITY
N Valid	99	99
Missing	1	1
Mean	3.2544	3.8926
Std. Deviation	.72233	.67663
Skewness	.367	-1.032
Std. Error of Skewness	.243	.243
Kurtosis	.243	2.403
Std. Error of Kurtosis	.481	.481

**Correlation Analysis**

Relationship between the variables has been calculated by the correlation analysis using Pearson’s correlation. Individually the association between the variables has been determined. The correlation analysis results indicated that marketing and communication factors and propensity to travel to Sri Lanka factors have positively correlated ( $p < 0.05$ ) at 1% significant level.



Table 6: Pearson Correlation Analysis

		PROPENSITY
MARKETING	Pearson Correlation	.286**
COMM	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004
	N	98

**Regression analysis**

The regression analysis was conducted to reveal how marketing and communication factors affect the propensity to visit Sri Lanka by Emirati nationals. Researcher analyzed the effect of independent variables on the propensity to visit Sri Lanka by Emirati nationals by applying regression model.

Table 7: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.747 <sup>a</sup>	.558	.539	.41603	1.931

a. Predictors: (Constant), MARKETING COMM

b. Dependent Variable: PROPENSITY

This says that there is a strong joint association between the individual factors of marketing communication and propensity to visit Sri Lanka by Emirati nationals. Coefficient of determination R-square is 0.558. This indicates that 55.8% of propensity to visit Sri Lanka by Emirati nationals (dependent variable) has been covered by the model. Adjusted R-square is also representing that 53.9% of the dependent variable has been covered by the model. Durbin-Watson statistic is 1.931. This is very close to 2 and will be between 1.5 and 2.5. Therefore, residuals are independent, and model is appropriate. Individual effect on the factor was given below. Probabilities of Marketing communication factors are highly significant with positive beta values. This says that they influence positively on propensity to visit Sri Lanka by Emirati nationals.

Table 8: Coefficients of Correlation

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		Collinearity Statistics		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	.027	.392		.068	.946		
	MARKETING	.239	.059	.281	4.045	.000	.987	1.014
	COMM							

a. Dependent Variable: Propensity to Visit SL



**Factor Analysis****Marketing Communication (MC)**

There were ten items in this construct. Each item is measured on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where a response of 1 indicates strong disagreement while a value of 5 indicates strong agreement to the statements.

Table 9: Analysis on items in Marketing Communication

	MC1	MC 2	MC 3	MC4	MC5	MC6	MC 7	MC8	MC 9	MC10
MC 1	1	.828	.741	.607	-.159	-.137	.674	.561	.388	.178
MC 2	.828	1	.847	.761	-.021	-.041	.774	.571	.304	.292
MC 3	.741	.847	1	.746	-.088	-.043	.731	.598	.323	.342
MC 4	.607	.761	.746	1	.130	-.055	.674	.543	.492	.334
MC 5	-.159	-.021	-.088	.130	1	.695	.095	.166	.242	.357
MC 6	-.137	-.041	-.043	-.055	.695	1	.090	.098	-.030	.447
MC 7	.674	.774	.731	.674	.095	.090	1	.665	.266	.433
MC 8	.561	.571	.598	.543	.166	.098	.665	1	.504	.523
MC 9	.388	.304	.323	.492	.242	-.030	.266	.504	1	.235
MC 10	.178	.292	.342	.334	.357	.447	.433	.523	.235	1

## Standard Deviation &amp; Mean value

	Statistics									
	MF1	MF2	MF3	MF4	MF5	MF6	MF7	MF8	MF9	MF10
Mean	3.18	3.15	3.09	3.06	4.15	4.19	3.03	2.53	2.49	3.53
SD	1.029	1.019	1.046	.932	1.044	.893	1.197	.994	1.110	1.277

The descriptive statistics for the items in Marketing Communication factors construct are presented above. The mean values for all the items are towards 5. This means, generally, the respondents were satisfied with the Marketing Communication. The highest correlation for each item, with at least one other item in the construct is between 0.5 and 1. Thus, not all the items correlate adequately in the hypothesis.

**Propensity to visit Sri Lanka Factors (PV)**

There were ten items in this construct (refer to questionnaire). Each item is measured on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where a response of 1 indicates strong disagreement while a value of 5 indicates strong agreement to the statements.

Table 10: Analysis on items in Propensity to visit Sri Lanka

	PV1	PV2	PV3	PV4	PV5	PV6	PV7	PV8	PV9	PV10
PV1	1	.303	.606	.747	.293	.583	.072	.648	.655	.515
PV2	.303	1	.543	.365	.404	.487	.470	.361	.373	.369
PV3	.606	.543	1	.754	.554	.627	.340	.633	.663	.665
PV4	.747	.365	.754	1	.483	.698	.184	.687	.732	.536
PV5	.293	.404	.554	.483	1	.554	.163	.411	.446	.311
PV6	.583	.487	.627	.698	.554	1	.204	.599	.622	.485
PV7	.072	.470	.340	.184	.163	.204	1	.238	.286	.402
PV8	.648	.361	.633	.687	.411	.599	.238	1	.742	.448
PV9	.655	.373	.663	.732	.446	.622	.286	.742	1	.556
PV10	.515	.369	.665	.536	.311	.485	.402	.448	.556	1

Standard Deviation & Mean value

	Statistics									
	PV 1	PV 2	PV 3	PV 4	PV 5	PV 6	PV 7	PV 8	PV 9	PV 10
Mean	4.30	3.70	4.10	4.30	4.17	4.04	2.78	4.09	4.03	3.75
SD	.646	.884	.817	.698	.717	.854	1.214	.751	.911	1.086

The descriptive statistics for the items in Propensity to visit Sri Lanka are presented in the above table. The mean values for all the items are towards 5. This means, generally, the respondents are satisfied with the Propensity to visit Sri Lanka factors. The highest correlation for each item, with at least one other item in the construct is between 0.5 and 1.

**5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

**Impact of Marketing Communication on UAE tourists and propensity to visit Sri Lanka**

According to the study only 30% of the respondents have seen Sri Lanka’s tourism marketing promotional activities. As a result, only a 17% has visited Sri Lanka. The Emirati’s who has seen the tourism advertisements or any form of marketing communication of Sri Lanka agreed the communications were attractive and useful. Majority of the young Emiratis have not seen any images or video’s about Sri Lanka through any form of marketing communication or social media channels. And only a small percentage agrees on the reliability and accuracy of the information provided on social media about Sri Lanka. About 80% of the Emirati’s confirmed the Sri Lankan expatriates living in UAE is encouraging them to visit Sri Lanka as a holiday destination. Also, Emirati’s who has visited Sri Lanka is recommending fellow Emirati’s to visit Sri Lanka. Apart from few, many have not seen any travel blogger feedback about Sri Lanka. From the respondents only 16% has seen the CNN tourism campaign about Sri Lanka. During one of the annual tourism activities held in Dubai “Arabian Travel Mart” only 20% of



Emiratis has visited the Sri Lanka Pavilion. About 46% mentioned their travel agent has recommended them to visit Sri Lanka as a holiday destination.

Propensity to visit Sri Lanka by Emiratis are at a satisfactory level. None of the respondents disagree on visiting Sri Lanka for a holiday. And majority has an intention to visit Sri Lanka in future. 56% has mentioned that they would like to visit Sri Lanka annually. As we could see only a small portion of the population would visits Sri Lanka for their meetings, conference, incentive or exhibitions. And 78% thinks they should make multiple visits to Sri Lanka to cover different tourist attractions in Sri Lanka.

Emirati's are not induced to visit Sri Lanka based on the awareness of the destination. Accordingly, the survey results clearly indicate that the most lacking strategy is the destination marketing communication and promotion. Lack of joint promotion between government and private sector regarding UAE inbound tourism is observed. And should research on the best marketing and promotional channel before implementing any campaign and analyze the productivity of the existing promotional methods without continuing them as a tradition. Authorities need to develop effective positioning and branding strategy for the destination and communicate effectively in order to attract and make Arab-friendly tourism.

### **Recommendations**

Productive marketing communication and promotional tools should be used in taking part in the "Arabian Travel Mart" which is held annually in Dubai for many years and to cover the "CNN global advertising campaign". Develop a marketing incentive scheme for the frontline staff of the outbound travel agents to involve in marketing communication and promotional activities about Sri Lanka aggressively. The young Emirati's are high tech savvy. So, the most influential marketing and promotion method will be social media marketing and they are influenced by the travel bloggers and social media figures. Sri Lankan expatriates living in UAE could be used as brand ambassadors of the destination and create effective word of mouth communication. Word of mouth is a strong marketing method to attract Emirati's into Sri Lanka. Hence it is important to give 100% satisfaction to the Emirati's visiting Sri Lanka to take back pleasant memories with them. Respecting cultural and religious sensitivity will make the Arab guests overwhelmed and this would generate positive WOM communication.

Maintaining consistency among the branding elements is critical. The slogan needs to reflect the brand image and the brand personality of a destination. The marketing campaign must be realistic, and the positioning statement of Sri Lanka should reflect the perceived image which destination is able to offer. By having a travel coordinator skilled of speaking Arabic means that potential tourists will feel more comfortable and safe making reservations. Additionally, having a who speak Arabic can help tourists feel more welcomed. 72% of Internet users desire purchasing a product or service in their native language. Strengthening the workforce with an Arabic-speaking staff means customers are more probable to pick destination than a competitor's that doesn't offer that convenience.

It is equally important to effectively market the tourism industry for UAE tourists. Authorities needs to allocate an adequate funds for the successful marketing communication



and promotion of tourism and DMCs should effectively manage it to build strong brand perception through building positive destination image and effective positioning while enhancing the other factors.

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