

Crafting the Modern Oasis: Expo 2020 and the Sheikh Zayed Festival as Instruments of UAE Nation Branding and Soft Power

Eissa AlMazrouei^{1*}, Rashid Alshamsi², Dr. Sleiman El bssawmai³, Dr. Majed Alkindi⁴

¹Student at Communication Department, Abu Dhabi University, Abu Dhabi, UAE

²Student at Communication Department, Abu Dhabi University, Abu Dhabi, UAE

³Supervisor at Communication Department, Abu Dhabi University, Abu Dhabi, UAE

⁴Supervisor at Communication Department, Abu Dhabi University, Abu Dhabi, UAE

Abstract

In an era where nations are increasingly relying on culture and megaevents as tools of international communication, a critical knowledge gap has emerged regarding how different event formats provide complementary and distinct strategic roles for a given country. In this context, this study seeks to fill this gap in knowledge through examining how a Gulf nation like the United Arab Emirates has used two different but complementary event formats—namely Expo 2020 Dubai and the Sheikh Zayed Festival—as tools for strategic national-level international communication. Utilizing a case study comparison analysis approach to its research methodology and design, this study argues that a sophisticated two-track strategy is adopted in this regard, wherein Expo 2020 Dubai is a revolutionary platform that has helped to re-position this nation as a future-focused global gateway for innovative collaboration and partnerships in this categorically new and different post-pandemic world order. On a complementary and distinct note in this context, this event study argues that a bi-annually repeated Sheikh Zayed Festival is a critical authenticity-creating platform that has helped to validate and re-emphasize this nation's key foundational value of tolerance and heritage in a similar but fresh and innovative context.

Key Words: Major cultural, Expo 2020, Sheikh Zayed festival, UAE

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I. Introduction

In an era of intensified global connections, nations increasingly recognize major cultural events as powerful instruments of international communication and soft power projection (Figure 1). As (Nye, 2004) articulates, soft power represents the ability to shape others' preferences through attraction rather than coercion, with culture, political values, and foreign policies serving as its primary resources. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has demonstrated remarkable proficiency in leveraging this concept, establishing itself as a hub for mega international events as part of its strategic vision to diversify beyond hydrocarbon dependency (Askri et al., 2025). This approach aligns with the broader Gulf Cooperation Council's increasing engagement in regional and international affairs, where these nations are assuming more substantial roles in global governance structures (Antwi-Boateng & Alhashmi, 2021).

The UAE's transformation into a modern global actor has been both rapid and profound. As Alteneiji (2015) documents, the nation has evolved dramatically from a traditional society into a highly modernized, internationalized state in a remarkably short timeframe. This accelerated development makes the Emirates' strategic use of international communication platforms particularly worthy of scholarly attention. The country has consciously cultivated an image as a moderate Islamic nation with prudent economic investments, creating an environment attractive to foreign investment, tourism, and expatriate professionals (Antwi-Boateng & Alhashmi, 2021). Within this broader nation-branding strategy, major events have emerged as centerpieces of the UAE's international communication approach.

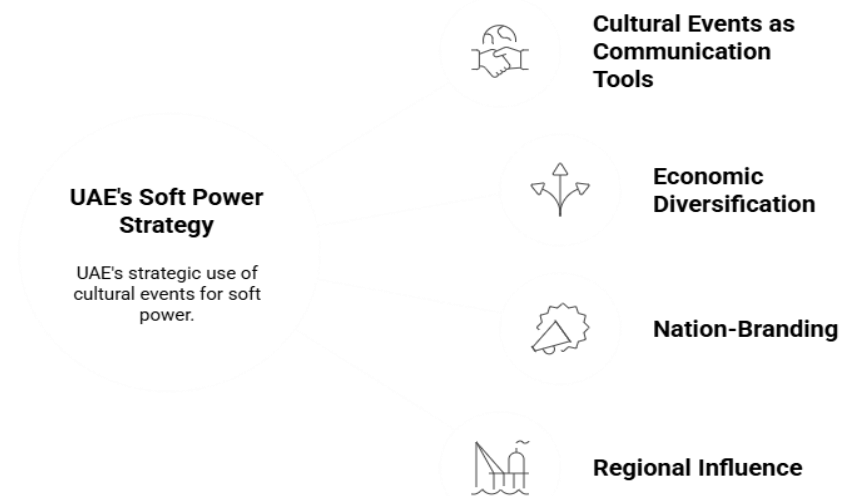


Figure 1. UAE'S soft power strategy pillars.

This study focuses specifically on two emblematic events that represent different facets of the UAE's communication strategy: Expo 2020 Dubai and the Sheikh Zayed Festival. Expo 2020 Dubai, operating under the theme "Connecting Minds, Creating the Future" (Askri et al., 2025), represented a large-scale, globally-oriented mega-event that brought together 192 nations—the first World Expo in the MEASA region (Askri et al., 2025). In contrast, the Sheikh Zayed Festival embodies a recurring cultural celebration focused on honoring national heritage and the legacy of the country's founding father. While both events serve international communication purposes, they operate through different mechanisms and emphasize distinct aspects of the UAE's national identity.

The central research problem this study addresses involves understanding how these different event formats—a global mega-expo versus a national cultural festival—function as complementary yet distinct instruments of international communication. By examining their differing communication objectives, strategic implementations, and outcomes, this research seeks to illuminate the multifaceted nature of the UAE's approach to shaping its international image and influence through cultural and mega-events.

1.1. Methodological Approach

This research employs a qualitative comparative case study design to examine how Expo 2020 Dubai and the Sheikh Zayed Festival function as instruments of international communication for the UAE. The methodology utilizes comprehensive document analysis of primary and secondary sources, including official government publications, event reports, strategic vision documents, and relevant academic literature. This approach enables a systematic examination of the official narratives, objectives, and documented outcomes associated with both events.

The analytical framework for this study incorporates Nye's (1990, 2004) conceptualization of soft power as a theoretical lens through which to understand how these events generate international attraction and influence for the UAE. The comparative analysis is structured around four key thematic areas: communication objectives, target audiences, strategy and execution, and stated outcomes. This framework facilitates a structured comparison of how each event's unique characteristics contribute to the UAE's broader international communication goals while maintaining methodological simplicity appropriate for the scope of this study. Of course. Here is the revised literature review with page numbers removed from the in-text citations and a complete reference list at the end.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Accessibility Studies and Accessible Tourism

The multidisciplinary fields of accessible tourism and accessibility studies are relatively nascent but rapidly evolving. While foundational works in accessible tourism emerged over the last fifteen years (Buhalis &

Darcy, 2010), accessibility studies have coalesced as a distinct research field more recently, focusing on the critical investigation of accessibility processes and the design of inclusive methodologies (Greco, 2018). A significant paradigm shift has occurred in this period: accessibility is no longer viewed through a particularist lens, concerned only with specific groups like people with disabilities (PwDs). Instead, a universalist account has taken hold, recognizing access as a fundamental right for all humans, encompassing a wide range of access requirements including mobility, vision, hearing, and cognitive dimensions (Buhalis & Darcy, 2010).

This holistic view is methodologically underpinned by the central role of users, their knowledge, and their contribution to the design process. Concepts like universal design, inclusive design, and user-centered design have become crucial in creating accessible products, services, and environments as seen in figure 2 (Matamala et al., 2018).

In tourism, accessible tourism is defined as enabling people with access requirements "to function independently and with equity and dignity through the delivery of universally designed tourism products, services and environments" (Darcy & Dickson, 2009). Crucially, scholars and international organizations position accessible tourism as an integral component of sustainable tourism (Darcy et al., 2010; Nigg & Eichelberger, 2021; Sica et al., 2021). It is considered a prerequisite in policy development and the formulation of sustainable tourism strategies, aligning with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals 2030, particularly the promotion of "tourism for all" (UNWTO, 2018). This study adopts the social model of disability, which frames disability not as an individual deficit but as a consequence of a socially constructed environment that excludes people with impairments from full participation (Buhalis & Darcy, 2010). This model implies a societal responsibility to remove barriers and create enabling environments.

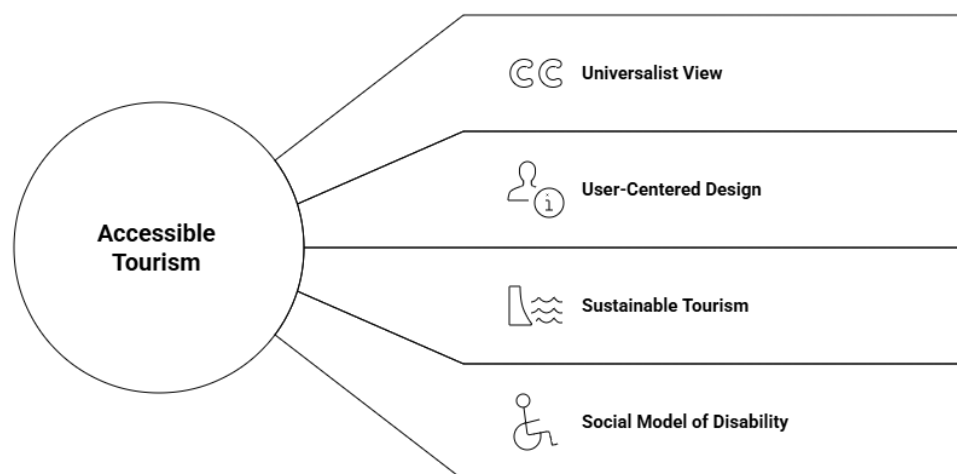


Figure 2. Dimensions of accessible tourism

2.2 Accessible Events and Cultural Experiences

Creating an accessible event is a complex endeavor due to the wide spectrum of human abilities. As identified by scholars, barriers to access can be categorized as physical (e.g., infrastructure, inaccessible information) and social (e.g., untrained staff, discrimination) (Martinez Carrillo, 2020). While guidelines exist to help organizers address these barriers (Matausch & Miesenberger, 2010; Cornell University, 2023), mere access does not guarantee meaningful participation.

(Mundy, 2017) succinctly captures this distinction: "access is walking through the door, inclusion is sitting at the table, and participation is eating the meal and talking about it." To achieve true participation, a more nuanced model is required. The Russian Doll model (Neves, 2018), developed for cultural experiences, places the visitor at the center, surrounded by layers representing different stages of their journey. For participation to occur, every stage—from knowing about the event and getting there, to navigating the space and engaging with the content—must meet the visitor's specific requirements.

To fulfill these requirements, event organizers are increasingly turning to technology. This includes both assistive technologies (e.g., audio description, hearing enhancement systems, tactile maps) and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Smartphone apps, social media, and interactive systems (e.g., voice assistants, self-check-ins) have been identified as key components in creating successful, accessible tourist experiences (Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011; Eichhorn et al., 2008).

Despite the growth in event studies, research focusing specifically on the accessibility of large-scale mega-events remains scarce. The primary article identifies only two major preceding studies, both on the Olympic and Paralympic Games (Darcy & Harris, 2003; Dos Santos et al., 2019). The Sydney 2000 study highlighted challenges such as underestimating the number of PwD attendees and a lack of pre-event

accessibility information. The Rio 2016 study demonstrated that the impact of an accessible event extends beyond its duration, leaving a tangible legacy (improved urban infrastructure) and an intangible legacy (increased public awareness about accessibility). This underscores the potential of mega-events to act as catalysts for broader societal change.

2.3 The Context of Mega-Events, Nation Branding, and Dubai

The World Expos as mega-events are more than just large events; they represent important soft power tools for country-branding efforts (Kanna, 2022; Alhashmi et al., 2024). The hosting of such an event as Expo 2020 Dubai represented a conscious effort for a country like the UAE to create an impression that it stands for modernity and world leadership. This represented an important "platform for the UAE to showcase its achievements and future aspirations as it impacts the country's brand internationally (Alhashmi et al. in 2024). The pursuit of accessibility as an important mega-event principle in such a context thus relates to aspirations of being seen as a progressive country.

The UAE, and Dubai in particular, has actively built a regulatory and infrastructural framework to support this image. The government refers to PwDs as "People of Determination," a term that reflects a strength-based perspective. This is backed by Federal Law No. 29 of 2006, which guarantees their right to participate in cultural and leisure life. More recently, the Dubai Universal Design Code (2017) established mandatory standards for the built environment, and initiatives like the Wosool service were launched to support compliance (Dubai Municipality, 2017; Government of Dubai, 2023).

In addition, keeping in mind the significance of accessible tourism as an important sphere of market engagement, Dubai has made it a high-priority target of its economic agenda (TradeArabia, 2022). The commitment to capitalize on it as an opportunity can be evidenced by the establishment of an Accessible Travel and Tourism Team and holding global summits on it (Figure 3). Consequently, Expo 2020 cannot be seen as an isolated phenomenon but as a dwarf within Dubai's broader ambition of becoming "one of the world's top travel hubs as well as one of the most accessible cities globally" (Lindo, 2020). Analysis on it provides an important perspective to appreciate the integration of accessibility, mega events management management, and country brand management due to being a pilot experience towards the destination.



Figure 3. UAE's Accessibility-Focused Country Branding

III. Case Study B: Sheikh Zayed Festival - Cultural Diplomacy & Heritage

3.1. Preserving Legacy: Communication Objectives and National Identity

The Sheikh Zayed Festival serves as a living embodiment of the UAE's founding values, with its core mission centered on honoring the legacy of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. The festival operates as what has been described as a "living museum of UAE heritage" (Al Hammadi, 2024), actively promoting the late leader's principles of tolerance, heritage conservation, and national unity. This commemorative function extends beyond mere celebration to become a strategic tool for shaping contemporary national identity.

The festival's communication strategy demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of cultural diplomacy, balancing internal nation-building with external image projection. Through dedicated pavilions showcasing traditional Emirati practices like falconry, crafts, and folklore, the festival serves what (Prager, 2015) identifies as a crucial role in the "display of origins" and construction of national narratives for domestic audiences. Simultaneously, it projects these cultural elements internationally, framing Emirati heritage within a

context of cultural exchange and openness. This dual approach enables the festival to strengthen national identity among citizens while presenting the UAE to the world as a nation with deep historical roots and a progressive, tolerant outlook (MacLean, 2021).

3.2. Cultural Showcase: Strategy and Audience Engagement

The festival's international communication approach employs a model of inclusive cultural presentation that transforms it from a local celebration into a global cultural platform (Figure 4). The integration of international pavilions, featuring participation from numerous countries (Body and Soul International, 2025), creates a multicultural environment that positions the UAE as both a preserver of its own heritage and a facilitator of global cultural dialogue.

Audience engagement follows a carefully calibrated strategy that addresses multiple demographic segments. While maintaining strong appeal to regional visitors and the substantial expatriate community, the festival has increasingly targeted international tourists seeking authentic cultural experiences. The choice of Al Wathba as the festival location supports this strategy by promoting tourism dispersal beyond urban centers and offering what (MacLean, 2021) characterizes as a more genuine heritage encounter. The communication methodology blends traditional elements like heritage villages and camel races with modern spectacles including fireworks and drone displays, creating an immersive experience that makes Emirati culture accessible and engaging to diverse international audiences.

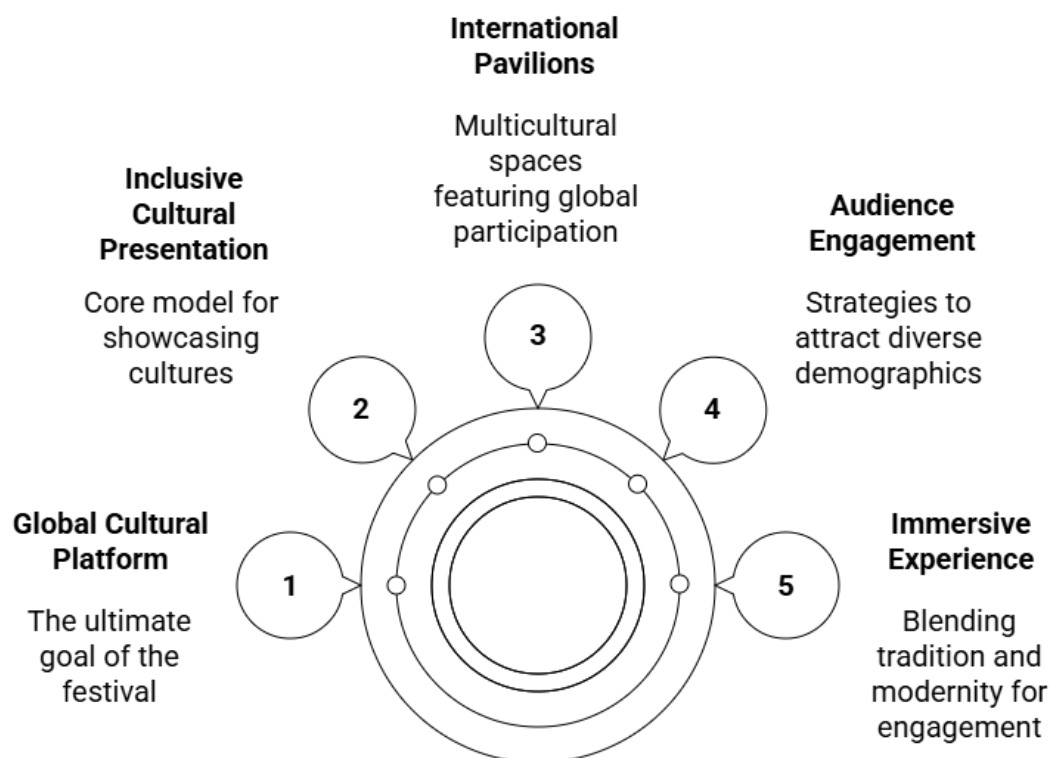


Figure 4. Festival's International Communication Strategy

3.3. Sustained Influence: Impact and Diplomatic Value

The festival generates significant impact through its contribution to experiential tourism development beyond Abu Dhabi's metropolitan core (Figure 5). By establishing Al Wathba as a major cultural destination, it supports the diversification of tourism offerings and represents the type of heritage-based development seen in other projects like the Al Ain Oasis master plan (ADACH, 2010). This geographical strategy enhances the festival's authenticity while supporting broader regional economic development goals.

As a recurring annual event, the festival's most distinctive value lies in its capacity for sustained cultural diplomacy. Unlike the concentrated impact of mega-events like Expo 2020, the Sheikh Zayed Festival provides continuous, rhythmic reinforcement of the UAE's cultural narrative. This regular repetition enables the gradual accumulation of soft power through consistent messaging about the nation's heritage and values. The festival functions as (MacLean, 2021) might characterize as a persistent diplomatic platform, offering opportunities for ongoing relationship-building and narrative development that single-occurrence events cannot provide, thereby establishing a durable foundation for long-term international perception management.

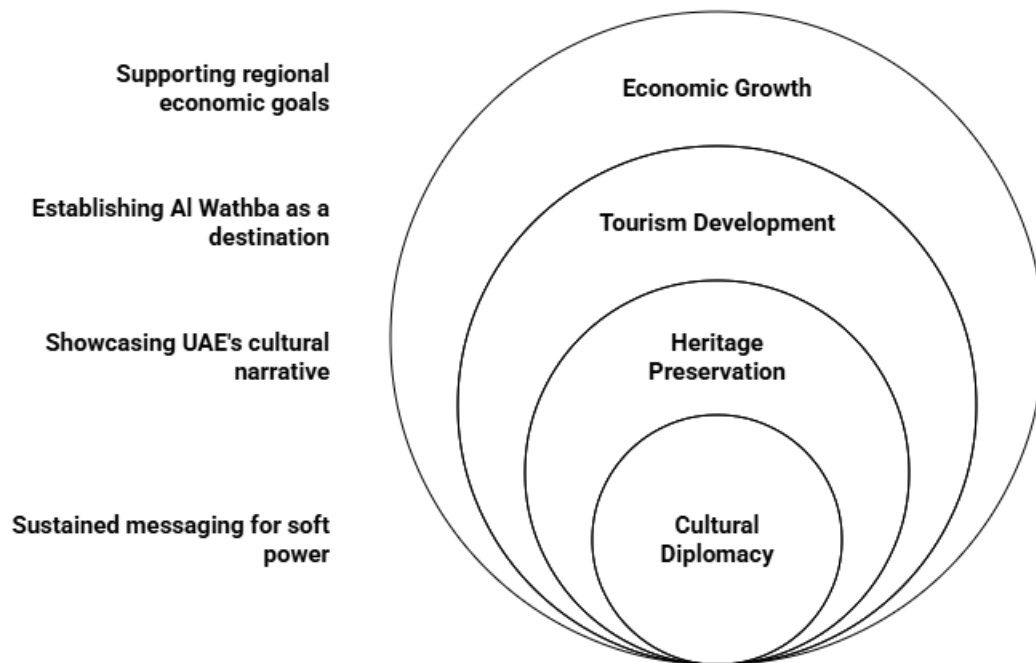


Figure 5. Sheikh Zayed Festival's Impact

IV. Comparative Analysis: Research Findings in the Context of Expo 2020's Broader Legacy

The empirical research by (Doński-Lesiuk, 2023) on the development of student competences at the Polish Pavilion provides a valuable micro-level case study that resonates powerfully with the macro-level objectives and observed outcomes of Expo 2020 Dubai. Placing these findings in dialogue with official UNESCO, BIE, and UAE cultural sources reveals a coherent narrative about the event's role as a catalyst for human and social capital development.

4.1. From Media and Information Literacy to Practical Intercultural Communication

A core theme of Expo 2020 was the advancement of Media and Information Literacy (MIL). UNESCO highlighted the event as a platform to "equip youth with the skills to critically engage with information and foster intercultural dialogue" (UNESCO, 2021). While the Polish study did not measure MIL in a formal sense, its findings on language and communication skills represent a direct, practical application of these principles.

The research notes a dramatic improvement in students' self-assessed ability to operate in foreign languages, with the proportion rating their proficiency as "very good" after the internship rising significantly compared to before departure (Doński-Lesiuk, 2023). This goes beyond simple vocabulary acquisition; it reflects the MIL objective of using communication tools effectively in a multicultural context. The students were not just learning languages; they were learning to decode cultural cues, navigate diverse social norms, and present information effectively to a global audience—a real-world enactment of MIL that aligns with UNESCO's vision for youth empowerment in the digital and global age.

4.2. Concrete Realization of Social Capital and Network Building

The Bureau International des Expositions (BIE) framed Expo 2020 as a monumental effort in "sowing social capital," defining it as the "networks of relationships that foster trust and cooperation" (BIE, 2022). The data from the Polish Pavilion offers compelling evidence that this objective was successfully met at the participant level.

The study's results show that students highly valued the networking opportunities, with a strong positive correlation reported between participating in the event and the chance to meet influential figures from governments and global enterprises (Doński-Lesiuk, 2023). This aligns perfectly with the BIE's emphasis on Expo as a "networking hub" that connects individuals across sectors and nationalities. Furthermore, the development of teamwork skills and a heightened sense of comfort in international environments reported by the students are the very building blocks of social capital. These "soft" competences are essential for fostering the trust and cooperation the BIE identified as a central legacy of the Expo.

4.3. Expo 2020 as a Precursor and Model for Sustained Cultural Diplomacy

The cultural ecosystem of the UAE, exemplified by events like the Sheikh Zayed Festival, provides a crucial context for understanding the environment in which the Polish students were immersed. The Sheikh Zayed Festival is described as a "global celebration of culture" that "showcases the UAE's rich heritage and promotes cultural exchange" (WAM, 2024). It attracts millions of visitors, creating a "vibrant platform for international engagement" (Al Etihad, 2024).

The Polish students' internship was, in essence, a deep, sustained engagement with this very model of cultural diplomacy. Their primary role was to represent Poland within this vibrant, multicultural space. The research finding that a large majority of respondents considered understanding another culture "very important" after their return—a significant increase from before departure—demonstrates the profound impact of this immersion (Doński-Lesiuk, 2023). Their experience was a microcosm of the Festival's goal (The National, 2022), to "shine a light on Emirati culture" while facilitating a two-way exchange. The Expo internship provided a structured, professional context for the same kind of cross-cultural learning that the Sheikh Zayed Festival promotes on a mass scale.

4.4. Enhancing Employability and Global Mindset: A Shared Outcome

A consistent thread across all sources is the focus on preparing youth for the future. The research paper identifies a clear increase in students' professional readiness, problem-solving skills under stress, and mobility (Doński-Lesiuk, 2023). This is not an isolated outcome. (BIE, 2022) explicitly connected Expo 2020 to "future skills" and "employability," while the Sheikh Zayed Festival is also linked to community engagement and youth development (Eye of Dubai, 2024).

The study's finding that a majority of students were willing to work abroad or were open to the idea is a powerful indicator of a shifted mindset (Doński-Lesiuk, 2023). This aligns with the broader ambition of mega-events to cultivate a generation of globally-oriented, adaptable individuals. The "added value" that the study predicts will determine the graduates' future competitiveness is a direct contribution to the human capital legacy that both the Expo and the UAE's ongoing cultural strategy aim to build.

4.5 Effectiveness as Soft Power Tools

The fundamental distinction between the soft power strategies of Expo 2020 Dubai and the Sheikh Zayed Festival lies in their core objectives: one sought to actively change the world's perception of the UAE, while the other works to establish and confirm its foundational cultural values.

Expo 2020 Dubai was a transformative soft power instrument designed to reposition the UAE in the global imagination. Its primary goal was to shift the international narrative away from the nation's origins as a hydrocarbon economy and towards its future as a hub for innovation, a global partner, and a center for multilateral collaboration (Askri et al., 2025). By showcasing cutting-edge technology under the theme "Connecting Minds, Creating the Future," the Expo actively worked to alter perceptions, presenting the UAE as a forward-thinking, knowledge-based economy ready to help shape global progress. This aligns with a soft power approach that leverages enterprise, digitalisation, and global engagement to build a new, modern identity (Antwi-Boateng & Alhashmi, 2021).

In contrast, the Sheikh Zayed Festival functions as a consolidating soft power tool. Its effectiveness is not measured by a change in perception, but by its success in establishing and reinforcing the perceived authenticity of the UAE's cultural values—heritage, tolerance, and unity. As a "living museum of UAE heritage" (Al Hammadi, 2024), the festival provides tangible, experiential proof of the nation's deep-rooted history and its commitment to preserving it. By integrating international pavilions within a celebration of Emirati traditions, it embodies the value of tolerance, demonstrating it through action rather than mere rhetoric. This sustained, annual reinforcement builds a durable form of soft power rooted in cultural authenticity and reliability, assuring the international community of the nation's stable and welcoming character (MacLean, 2021).

In essence, Expo 2020 was a strategic campaign to re-brand the nation for the 21st century, while the Sheikh Zayed Festival is an ongoing project to authenticate the nation's character for both global and domestic audiences.

4.6 Comparative Overview

In summary, the development of professional and social competences among Polish students at Expo 2020 Dubai is a validated, empirical demonstration of the high-level goals set by international bodies and cultural institutions. People documented growth provides tangible proof of Expo 2020's success in "sowing social capital," fostering MIL in practice, and deepening cross-cultural understanding within a framework that mirrors the UAE's own cultural diplomacy model. Table 1 below provides a concise comparison of these aligned outcomes.

Table 4. Comparative Analysis of Micro-Level Competence Development and the Broader Legacy Frameworks of the UAE's Cultural Diplomacy Initiatives.

Dimension	Micro-level outcomes	Macro-level outcomes	Comparative Insight
4.1 Media & Information Literacy - Intercultural Communication	Marked improvement in language and communication skills; effective engagement in multicultural contexts.	UNESCO (2021): Expo 2020 promoted youth Media and Information Literacy and intercultural dialogue.	Student outcomes reflect UNESCO's goals, translating MIL principles into practical intercultural competence.
4.2 Social Capital & Networking	High value placed on networking; strong gains in teamwork and cross-cultural collaboration.	BIE (2022): Expo 2020 aimed to build global social capital and cooperation networks.	Participant experiences confirm BIE's vision of Expos as hubs for trust and global connectivity.
4.3 Cultural Diplomacy & Exchange	Increased cultural awareness and ambassadorial role for Poland.	UAE cultural initiatives (WAM 2024; Al Etihad 2024): foster cultural exchange and heritage promotion.	Internships mirrored UAE's soft-power model, serving as micro-level cultural diplomacy.
4.4 Employability & Global Mindset	Growth in professional readiness, adaptability, and global mobility.	BIE (2022); Eye of Dubai (2024): stress future skills and youth employability.	Expo participation advanced human capital goals, aligning with broader development strategies.

V. Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that the UAE utilizes a dual-track strategy for international communication through its flagship events. Expo 2020 Dubai and the Sheikh Zayed Festival, while structurally different, are complementary tools that project distinct yet harmonious aspects of the national brand. Expo 2020 functioned as a transformative platform to reposition the UAE as a future-oriented global hub for innovation and partnership. Its goal was to change international perception towards a modern, knowledge-based economy. Conversely, the Sheikh Zayed Festival acts as a consolidating force to authenticate the nation's cultural values. As a "living museum of UAE heritage", its recurring nature builds a durable reputation for tolerance and deep-rooted tradition. In essence, one event projected a vision of the future, while the other provides the authentic cultural narrative that underpins it. Together, they communicate a powerful, holistic identity for the UAE on the world stage.

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