The UAE's tourism competitiveness: A business perspective

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ABSTRACT

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is one of the most popular tourism destinations and the most competitive in the Middle East and North Africa region. Currently, the country aims to reach its full potential to better compete on a global scale. This paper examines factors influencing the competitiveness of the UAE as a tourism destination from the business perspective. The data were collected from a convenience sample of 311 business entrepreneurs and analyzed using a hierarchical regression. The results suggest that destination resources, destination infrastructure and support services, and the general business environment have a significant influence on the UAE's tourism competitiveness. The implications of the study's results are discussed.

1. Introduction

The increased reliance of various places and regions on tourism development highlights the need to determine their tourism competitiveness to be able to successfully compete in global markets. It is important for tourism stakeholders, especially government and business managers, to identify factors determining their country's tourism competitiveness in order to appropriately match available resources and management strategies and create value for tourists. Since there is a gap in studies in the area of tourism competitiveness in developing countries, this study examines the tourism competitiveness of the emerging United Arab Emirates (UAE) economy. The study adopts a business perspective.

Tourism plays a vital role in the growth of the UAE's economy, and its importance appears likely to continue in the years ahead (John, 2018). In the last four decades, the UAE and other GCC (Gulf Co-operation Council) countries have depended on oil revenues as a primary source of income. The UAE used oil revenues to build advanced infrastructure and finance industry projects. However, in order to secure its socio-economic development and guarantee its progress and prosperity in the long run the country decided to diversify its income sources and develop service sectors, including tourism (UAE Business, 2016). In the last two decades, Emirates of the UAE are progressing to become top tourism destinations that are now attracting millions of tourists from all over the world every year (Gulf News Business, 2018; Sutton, 2016). For example, in 2016 the country welcomed 14.4 million international visitors, which represented an increase of 4 million when compared to 2013 (TTCI, 2017).

Presently, tourism is the most important non-oil economic sector in the UAE. In 2016, the travel and tourism sector contributed $44 billion to the country's GDP. It generated 10.4% of total employment or 617,500 jobs, including indirectly-supported jobs, and directly created 317,500 jobs, which was 5.4% of the country's total employment. Investments in the travel and tourism sector totalled AED 26.2 billion (US$7.1 billion), 7% of total investment. Leisure travel dominated tourism spending, which accounted for 77.4% of direct travel and tourism GDP (AED 115 billion), compared with 22.6% for business travel spending (AED 33.6 billion) (Dubai Tourism News, 2017).

The importance of tourism to the UAE's economy is expected to increase further in the coming decades. Tourism expenditure is expected to rise by > 4% per annum, from 2018 to 2028 (WTTC, 2018) and account for 12.4% of the country's total GDP in 2027, equating to a monetary value of $72 billion (WTTC, 2017). The total contribution of tourism to employment is expected to rise by 2% per annum to 770,000 jobs in 2027 (11.1% of the total). Investments in the travel and tourism sector will rise by 11% per annum over the next 10 years to reach AED 74.5 billion ($20.3 billion) in 2027, 11.2% of total investment in the country. Leisure travel spending is expected to rise by 4.8% per annum to AED 191.5 billion ($52 billion) in 2027, and business travel spending to rise by 4% per annum to AED 49.2 billion ($13.4 billion) in 2027 (Dubai Tourism News, 2017). By 2020 the city of Dubai on its own plans to attract 20 million international visitors (UAE Government, n.d.).

Currently, the UAE is the most tourism-competitive country in the

Middle East and North Africa region (TTCI, 2017). However, the country lags behind the world's most competitive tourism destinations such as Spain, France, Germany, United Kingdom, Italy and Switzerland which attracted 620 million of the 1.2 billion international visitors worldwide in 2016 (TTCI, 2017). The country ranks 29th ·in terms of tourism and revenue and 21st in terms of tourism expenditure (UAE Ministry of Economy, n.d.). It also ranks 27th in terms of tourism's total contribution to GDP (23rd in terms of tourism's direct contribution to GDP), 57th in terms of tourism's total contribution to employment (47th in terms of tourism's direct contribution to employment), and 22nd in terms of tourism investment (WTTC, 2018). In addition, an important feature of tourism that has not fulfilled its potential is the small number of citizens working in the tourism sector. Currently, Emiratis account for just 1% of the tourism workforce in the UAE (Insight Magazine, 2016). Although more nationals join UAE-based airlines and occupy leading positions in various tourism sectors, it appears not many UAE nationals apply for jobs in hotels and other hospitality-related facilities (Sahoo, 2014). In the light of the above, the UAE seeks to improve its competitive position in the international tourism market. Tourism businesses and entrepreneurs are crucial in the development of the country's attractiveness and competitiveness.

2. Study objectives

The purpose of this paper is to identify factors that determine the tourism competitiveness of the UAE and explain the country's competitiveness as a tourism destination from the business perspective. In particular, the purpose is to determine how much each factor explains the UAE's tourism competitiveness and which factors should be given priority in the UAE's future tourism development. The aim is to identify the most important factors of the UAE's tourism competitiveness that tourism businesses could use to prioritize the allocation of their resources.

The paper focuses on the tourism businesses that consist of industries and sectors and provide a variety of activities and services, and create and deliver a quality travel experience to the tourist (Goldener & Ritchie, 2012). The major tourism businesses include transportation, accommodation, attractions, travel trade, events, adventure and outdoor recreation, food, and entertainment sectors (Anuar, Ahmad, Jusoh, & Hussain, 2012; Goldener & Ritchie, 2012). Other businesses include local community/government, local businesses, organizations, and associations (Anuar et al., 2012), municipal, regional and national government organizations, the tourism information industry (e.g. advertising agencies, the Internet, magazines), tourism boards, and destination marketing organizations (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

3. Theoretical framework

The examination of the factors that influence destination competitiveness reported in past studies (e.g. Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Enright & Newton, 2004; Ritchie & Crouch, 2000) revealed the four clearly identifiable groups of factors such as destination resources, destination infrastructure and support services, destination human related factors, and destination business environment. In this study it is assumed that these four groups of factors predict destination competitiveness. Previous research found a positive relationship between destination competitiveness and destination resources (Bull, 1995; Mihalič, 2013), destination infrastructure and support services (Jovanović & Ilić, 2016), destination human-related factors (Vengesayi, 2003), and the business environment (Azzopardi & Nash, 2016; Enright & Newton, 2004). Thus, it is argued that the destination resources, infrastructure and support services, human-related factors, and the business environment are the four main predictor groups of the UAE's competitiveness.

4. Literature review

4.1. Tourism competitiveness and its models

The term competitiveness refers to "how nations and enterprises manage the totality of their competencies to achieve prosperity or profit" (Bris & Caballero, 2015, p. 496). Tourism is an important generator of economic growth (WTTC, 2017), which helps to achieve prosperity. Tourism competitiveness refers to:

the ability of the place to optimize its attractiveness for residents and non-residents, to deliver quality, innovative and attractive (offering good value for money) tourism services to consumers and to gain market shares on the domestic and global market places, while ensuring that the available resources supporting tourism are used efficiently and in a sustainable way (Dupeyras & MacCallum, 2013, p.7).

Many studies examined the concept of tourism destination competitiveness (TDC) (e.g. Manente, 2005; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Zehrer & Hallmann, 2015; Zehrer, Smeral, & Hallmann, 2016). Several TDC models were developed (e.g. Azzopardi & Nash, 2016; Crouch, 2011; Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Enright & Newton, 2004; Heath, 2003; Mihajlović, 2014; Pavlović, Avlijaš, & Stanić, 2016; Ritchie & Crouch, 2000, 2003, 2010). For example, Crouch and Ritchie (1999) argued that a destination's competitiveness depends on its *comparative advantages* (the resource endowments with which a destination is blessed) and *competitive advantages* (how a destination utilizes its resources). They identified four major groups of supply factors that contribute to a destination's competitiveness: *a) core resources and attractors* (e.g. physiography, culture and history, activities); *b) supporting factors and resources* (e.g. infrastructure, accessibility); *c) destination management* (e.g. resource stewardship, marketing, information); and *d) qualifying determinants* (e.g. location, dependencies, safety, cost). They claimed that the destination's competitiveness is also influenced by its global macro-environment (e.g., demographics, technology) and microenvironment (e.g. travel agents, suppliers, specialty channels, stakeholders, destination residents, industry's employees, financial institutions).

Ritchie and Crouch (2003) further developed Crouch and Ritchie's (1999) TDC model. In addition to the original four groups of factors they added an extra group called *tourism policy* (e.g. philosophy/values, vision, positioning/branding, monitoring, evaluation). They renamed the group of 'qualifying determinants' as qualifying and amplifying determinants, and included factors in it such as safety/security, cost/value, interdependencies, awareness/image, and carrying capacity. They also added the hospitality factors and political forces to the 'supporting factors and resources' group. They included the entertainment factor and renamed the physiography factor as physiography and climate in the 'core resources and attractors' group. Moreover, they added new factors to the 'destination management' group such as finance and venture capital, human resource development, visitor management, and crisis management. In the same group, they renamed the service factor as 'quality of service/experience,' and the information factor as 'information/research' (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). They claimed that the new factors contribute to important insights of the destination's ability to perform competitively in a changing environment. However, Ritchie and Crouch's (2003) model was criticized for not considering the key success drivers of destination competitiveness such as people and communication and information management (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Heath, 2003), not highlighting the effects of and interaction between comparative and competitive advantages (Hong, 2009), and not being properly tested and adjusted to specific situations (Azzopardi & Nash, 2017).

Next, Dwyer and Kim (2003) developed a demand oriented TDC model. They renamed the core resources and attractors as endowed and created resources. They also retitled the amplifying factors to

Table 1
Factors influencing destination competitiveness.

Author/year	Country/city/destination investigated	Method	Factors/themes examined	Factors affecting destination competitiveness
Aqueveque and Bianchi (2017)	Chile	Semi-structured personal interviews with marketing managers, vice-presidents and general managers, government tourism boards, transportation managers, tourism trade union executives, directors of tourism schools and travel agencies.	Main drivers and inhibitors of competitiveness, the role of different stakeholders.	Services and destination offers (connectivity, infrastructure, safety, attractions, excursions, hotels, restaurants, etc.); Differentiation and superior experiences make tourists to return and recommend a destination to others; Renowned worldwide location; New and improved offerings; Unique experiences that differentiate destinations; Experience providers; Product development harmonized with the destination assets and brand; Niche products developed based on the strengths of local assets; Innovative products and services oriented for customers; Public–private partnership; Recreation and leisure for locals; Long-term planning; Networks that increase business efficiencies and improve communication between stakeholders; Investment in tourism and international promotion; Quality and sustainability programs (setting standards for hotel quality and tourism service providers).
Dwyer et al. (2016)	Serbia	Questionnaires distributed to the accommodation and transportation sectors, tour operators/agencies, national/regional governmental organizations, media, research and education institutions, non-governmental organizations, tourism destination organizations.	Sustainable tourism development, marketing, risk management, climate change, innovation and product development, tourism and hospitality education.	Knowledge of e-commerce and the use of IT; New technologies that improve the interpretation of tourism attractions.
Azzopardi and Nash (2016)	Island of Malta	In-depth interviews with editors of the leading newspapers, tourism and marketing academics, small island states, tourism ex-ministers, directors/chairmen, chief executives and general managers/directors.	Tourism attractors and business factors.	Core tourism resources and attributes: inherited resources (natural environment, cultural and historical, islands) and created resources (tourism superstructure, hospitality, activities, events); Environmental management and demand orientation: destination value, business environment, supporting general infrastructure, conditional factors.
Ndivo and Manyara (2016)	Kenya	Interviews with senior executives from three to five star hotels.	Entrepreneurship legislation and regulation, planning, coordination, stimulation.	Entrepreneurship; legislation and regulation.
Zehrer and Hallmann (2015)	11 Alpine tourism destinations in Austria	Self-completed questionnaire administered to private stakeholder groups which included hotels, restaurants, destination marketing organizations (DMOs), transport companies, retailers, activity suppliers.	Macro-business perspective (policy and planning, vision, philosophy, development, collaborative analysis, monitoring and evaluation, interdependencies, market ties, superstructure).	Vision; development; monitoring; interdependencies; market ties.
Komppula (2014)	Rural tourism destination in the Lakeland area, Finland	Narrative interviews with the owners-managers of privately owned fulltime enterprises. Semi-structured telephone interviews with rural tourism accommodation providers, small hotels, campsites, and holiday villagers.	No specific factors used; themes emerged from the narrative data.	Quality, compatibility and price level; Customer care and tailored services; Innovative new niche products; Capabilities of market intelligence; Stable demand; Cooperation between accommodation providers and activity operators; Investments in the facilities and willingness to expand the businesses; Commitment to the industry; Commitment to the tourism business through investments.

situational conditions (e.g. socio-economic, cultural, regulatory, competitive trends) that impact the way firms in the destination do business. They argued that demand is influenced by created resources (e.g. events, activities, entertainment) and supporting resources (e.g. infrastructure, accessibility, hospitality). Tourists' preferences and motivation influence the types of products and services that are offered in a destination. Dwyer and Kim's (2001, 2003) model was criticized for the poor reliability and validity of its results (Azzopardi & Nash, 2017).

Due to the theoretical and practical shortcomings of the developed TDC models, scholars attempted to identify the importance and the relationships of different determinants of destination competitiveness (Abreu-Novais, Ruhanen, & Arcodia, 2016). For example, Azzopardi and Nash (2016) argued that destination competitiveness depends on the integration of tourism attractions and business factors that determine the total tourism experience. Hong (2009) claimed that the competitiveness of a tourism destination depends on several elements together: a) comparative advantages or resource endowments (e.g. exogenous and endogenous resources); b) competitive advantages (e.g. infrastructure, strategic planning, market ties, performance effectiveness); c) tourism management (e.g. marketing, organization, information provision, services); and d) environmental conditions (domestic and global events, terrorism, epidemics, economic sanctions, wars).

Today, there is no single and universal set of factors that determines destination competitiveness and applies to all destinations at all times (Goffi, 2013). The existing TDC models were developed for large regions and countries, (e.g. North America, Australia, Brazil, Korea, South Africa) and therefore may not be applicable to small, developing economies that have limited resources (Azzopardi & Nash, 2016). Further, the relative importance of factors determining destination competitiveness may not be the same within a destination or across destinations (Crouch, 2011). Thus, there is a need to investigate the importance of the major factors affecting competitiveness in specific destinations (Azzopardi & Nash, 2017; Crouch, 2007, 2008; Dwyer, Mellor, Livaic, Edwards, & Kim, 2004; Gooroochurn & Sugiyarto, 2005; Hudson, Ritchie, & Timur, 2004; Komppula, 2014; Mazanec, Wöber, & Zins, 2007), especially in new, geographically different, and small destinations (Dwyer & Kim, 2003). This study identifies factors that determine tourism competitiveness of the emerging economy such as the UAE.

4.2. Tourism competitiveness: business perspective

From the business perspective, destination competitiveness is affected by tourism-related businesses and measured by tourism receipts in terms of visitor numbers and expenditures (Tsai, Song, & Wong, 2009). The business perspective is better to use than the tourist perspective because stakeholders are the real experts, have experience with tourism businesses in their own and other countries, and their opinions are more realistic (Bahar & Kozak, 2007). Although the business perspective has been criticized for creating a potential bias in exaggerating the competitiveness of one's own country against others (Dwyer, Livaic, & Mellor, 2003) and different groups of stakeholders (e.g. hotels, restaurants, bars) having distinct opinions, the examination of business perspective leads to important assessments of destination competitiveness.

Several studies examined the concept of destination competitiveness and its influencing factors from the suppliers' perspective (e.g. Jin & Weber, 2016; Mihajlović, 2014; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). The importance of these factors differs in various sectors of the travel and tourism industry. For example, for event organizers, the major factors of destination competitiveness are the economic status, general business environment, market demand, international standing, accessibility in terms of travel time, convenience and cost, leisure environment, and government support (Jin & Weber, 2016). For tour operators these factors include the ability to adapt to new technological trends, specialization, and quick access to products and services, effective product placement, availability of information, efficient communication, and support in visit destinations (Mihajlović, 2014). Despite the above, different sectors of the tourism industry emphasize the importance of the same factors such as the quality of destination offerings, tailored services, the willingness and ability of tourism enterprises to cooperate on several levels and contexts, and the ability to offer additional services (Anuar et al., 2012).

Furthermore, it was suggested that all destination stakeholders, including tourists, and hosts must work together in promoting a tourism destination to create a tourist friendly destination (Anuar et al., 2012) that reflects a value of hospitality, quality of tourism infrastructure, reasonably priced packages, and distributing products and services to the correct target group. Examples of recent studies that investigated factors influencing destination competitiveness from the business perspective are presented in Table 1. The importance of these factors and their effects vary across destinations (Dwyer, Dragićević, Armenski, Mihalič, & Cvelbar, 2016).

4.3. Tourism competitiveness: emerging destinations

Only a few studies investigated the suppliers' perspective on destination competitiveness in emerging destinations (Zehrer & Hallmann, 2015). The role of the firms that supply the services and products received scant attention in the developing countries (Aqueveque & Bianchi, 2017). The role of entrepreneurs and businesses as contributors to tourism destination competitiveness was neglected in tourism research, because most studies overemphasize the importance of destination marketing and/or management organizations (DMOs) (Komppula, 2014; Ryan, Mottiar, & Quinn, 2012). Thus, studies identifying how different stakeholder groups (e.g. government, tourism boards and business associations, travel agencies, airlines, hotels) evaluate destination competitiveness are needed to better understand this concept.

Next, no research investigating the supply-side perspective examined destination competitiveness of the countries within the Gulf-Cooperation Council (GCC) region that comprises Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Such a study is needed in order to understand the factors that drive or inhibit the GCC region's tourism competitiveness. Therefore, this study examines tourism competitiveness of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The aim is to suggest how tourism executives should allocate their resources in the UAE to create more attractive value for tourists so the country can more successfully compete for tourism dollars on a global scale.

5. Hypotheses

Based on the resource-based view (Melián-González & García-Falcón, 2003) this study suggests that from the business perspective the competitiveness of a tourism destination is primarily dependent upon the resources available at the destination. Destination infrastructure and support services, human resources-related factors, and business environment play a secondary role in destination competitiveness and provide only support to the destination resources in making a destination competitive. Therefore, this study predicts that the power of destination resources in explaining destination competitiveness will be much higher than the explanatory power of destination infrastructure and support services, human-resources related factors, and the business environment.

6. Context of the study

The study was conducted in the UAE - a new and emerging tourism destination in the Gulf region. In mainstream business media, the UAE has been touted as one of the most fascinating places to visit in the world (Maceda, 2017) with enviable leisure infrastructure and support services and an in comparable network of quality hotels, restaurants

and facilities within the Middle East countries (Arabian Business, 2017). In the last decade, the UAE has become a regional hub for global cultural events, trade shows, technology exhibitions, meetings and conventions, sports, and entertainment (Hamdan, 2018). The country's outstanding shopping malls, water parks, beaches, unique flora and fauna, and heritage sites lure visitors from around the world. Government launched mega tourist projects such as development of the Saadiyat Island, Yas Marina Formula One Circuit, and the French Louvre Museum enhanced the role of the tourism sector in the national economy and reflect the country's interest in the further development its tourism sector (The UAE Government Portal, n.d.).

National carriers, such as Emirates Airlines and Etihad (full-cost) and Air Arabia and Fly Dubai (low- cost) offer an efficient fleet and flight connections as they link the UAE to a large network of global cities, stretching from Japan in the East to the Americas in the West (FlyDubai.com, n.d.). They are making the country a global center for transportation and a very attractive place to tourists to visit that is easy accessible from all parts of the world.

The country makes strong efforts to develop its unique tourism image and takes serious initiatives to attract new and repeat visitors (Mohammed, Zahari, Talib, & Suhaimi, 2014). It is unfortunate that only a few studies have been conducted in the context of the UAE's tourism (e.g. Kotsi, Balakrishnan, Michael, & Ramsøy, 2018; Pike & Kotsi, 2016).

7. Methodology

7.1. Sample

The sample consisted of the 196 tourism businesses operating in the UAE (see Table 2). Tourist business operators' opinions of what makes the UAE competitive are important. A convenience sample was chosen because it was more affordable and accessible and less time consuming for the researchers. However, in order to increase the degree of sample representativeness, an attempt was made to survey tourism businesses at different geographical locations and in different sectors. The sample also included 115 non-tourism general businesses e.g. oil, gas, banking, insurance (see Table 2). These businesses indirectly impact the tourism industry. For example, they need to monitor rising costs in fuel that affect air fares and car hire rates, as well as rising interest rates for the banking and construction industries; all these costs affect the discretionary income of travelers.

7.2. Instrument and measures

A structured questionnaire was used to measure the constructs. Destination competitiveness was conceptualized as tourism

competitiveness of the UAE relative to other competitive tourism destinations, as perceived by business entrepreneurs. The questionnaire clearly stated "the UAE as a tourism destination, not the country". A 'destination' was conceptualized and operationalized at the level of the study site.

Since a close examination of the destination competitiveness determinants revealed four groups of factors (destination resources, infrastructure and support services, human resources-related factors, and business environment) the measuring items were also clustered into the same four groups. Each construct was measured using multiple items derived from previous destination competitiveness studies (see literature review) and 14 pillars of destination competitiveness developed by the World Economic Forum along with the Tourism and Travel Competitiveness Index (TTCI, 2017), which include the general business environment, safety and security, health and hygiene, human resources and training, travel and tourism education, information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure in travel and tourism, prioritization of travel and tourism, international openness to tourism, starting a travel and tourism business, labor market efficiency, price competitiveness, environmental sustainability, air transport infrastructure, ground and seaport infrastructure, tourist infrastructure and services, natural resources, cultural resources, tourism and travel business sophistication, tourism research and innovation, and affinity for travel and tourism business.

The overall tourism competitiveness of the UAE against other directly competing destinations was also measured by several items (e.g. the UAE's tourism image and reputation, availability of information, ability to attract foreign investment, tourism role in the UAE community development). Respondents were asked to indicate the degree of their disagreement or agreement with various statements on how competitive various aspects of the UAE are as a tourism destination. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). The use of an odd number of responses options provides a midpoint, which represents a point of neutrality on a scale. Finally, characteristics of the tourism businesses (e.g. the type of tourism business, years of business operations, size of the business) and the individual respondents' education and length of stay in the UAE were also examined.

7.3. Procedure

The questionnaire was initially developed in English and then translated into Arabic and back into English by a bilingual expert. The content validity of the measuring scales was evaluated by university research professors and the scales were pre-tested on a convenience sample of 20 businesses. Several improvements to the questionnaire and its structure were made as a result. From the results of the pre-test,

Table 2
Business profiles.

General Business		%	Tourism Business		%	Business Size		%	Education		%
Oil and gas	3	0.97	Hotels	44	14.15	< 50	193	62.06	Elementary	–	–
Basic materials	1	0.33	Transport	44	14.15	50–99	60	19.3	Middle	1	0.33
Industrials	1	0.33	Catering	48	15.44	100–149	28	9.01	High	16	5.15
Consumer goods	8	2.58	Attractions	19	6.11	150–299	10	3.22	College- no degree	21	6.76
Consumer service	61	19.62	Entertainment	17	5.47	300–349	8	2.58	BA	206	66.24
Healthcare	10	3.22	Sports	4	1.29	350–399	2	0.65	MA	57	18.33
Telecommunication	3	0.97	Retail	20	6.43	400–449	2	0.65	PhD	10	3.2
Utilities	2	0.65	Total	196	63.03	450–499	2	0.65	Length of Stay		
Banks	10	3.22				500–999	4	1.29	< 1 year		
Insurance	–	–				1000–1499	1	0.33	1–2 years		
Real Estate	3	0.97				1500–1999	1	0.33	3–4 years		
Financial services	4	1.29				Years in Business		%	5–6 years	1	0.33
Investment instruments	2	0.65				7–8 years	2	0.65	7–8 years	2	0.65
Technology	7	2.25				9–10 years	72	23.16	9–10 years	289	92.93
Total	115	36.98				10 years +	237	76.2	10 years +	19	6.11

Table 3
Descriptive statistics.

Factor	Mean	SD
Destination resources	3.7732	0.73890
Natural resources	3.7711	0.93212
Cultural resources	3.8909	0.79066
Environmental sustainability	3.6653	0.81255
Destination infrastructure and support services	3.8904	0.66031
Health and hygiene	3.5069	0.75633
ICT infrastructure in travel and tourism	3.9654	0.75193
Air transport infrastructure	3.9886	0.85768
Ground and seaport infrastructure	3.9571	0.88433
Tourist infrastructure and services	4.0204	0.89220
Tourism research and innovation	3.8113	0.78591
Destination human resources	3.3908	0.61404
Safety and security	2.6694	0.84286
Human resources and training	3.8422	0.83157
Travel and tourism education	3.5871	0.91025
Labor market	3.4748	0.83942
Destination business environment	3.9038	0.62260
General business environment	3.8925	0.76018
Prioritization of travel and tourism	3.9471	0.80877
International openness to tourism	4.0231	0.78163
Starting tourism and travel business	3.6838	0.73966
Price competitiveness	3.6239	0.81526
Tourism and travel business sophistication	3.8754	0.83540
Affinity for travel and tourism business	3.9924	0.83084
Destination competitiveness	4.1745	0.86356

Note: SD-standard deviation.

the instrument was assessed for its reliability by means of the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The final version of the questionnaire was administered during a period of four months (from February 2017 to May 2017) with the help of Dimensions, a research company located in the Dubai, UAE. Business entrepreneurs were approached in the cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi and asked to complete the questionnaire. Out of 350 distributed questionnaires, 311 fully completed questionnaires were collected and used for final analysis, giving an effective response rate of about 90%. Confidentiality of responses was emphasized in the cover letter.

7.4. Analysis

Descriptive statistics such as the means of the examined variables, standard deviations, outliers, skewness and kurtosis were evaluated to identify missing values and possible errors during data entry. Scatter plots were used to check data for non-linear relationships. A series of regression models were run to determine the predictive ability of each factor to explain the UAE's tourism competitiveness and assess how much the identified factors added to explaining the UAE's tourism competitiveness. A hierarchical regression analysis was used to test the effects of destination resources, destination infrastructure and support services, destination human resources-related factors, and business environment on the UAE tourism competitiveness and assess whether these four major variables explained a statistically significant amount of variance in a dependent variable (UAE's tourism competitiveness).

Hierarchical regression rather than stepwise regression was used as an analytical tool because it does not have the drawbacks of stepwise regression. Hierarchical regression results in the better set of predictors. It is not conditioned on the previously included predictors: it evaluates the contributions of predictors above and beyond previously entered predictors. The order of variables entry is based on theory and the researcher instead of a computer thus resulting in a smaller sampling error. Degrees of freedom for hierarchical regression are correctly displayed in many of the statistical software packages, as opposed to stepwise regression. Also, hierarchical regression analyzes the effect of a predictor variable after controlling for other variables. This "control" is achieved by calculating the change in the adjusted R^2 at each step of

the analysis, thus accounting for the increment in variance after each variable is entered into the regression model (Padhazur, 1997). In the study, the specific aim was to determine whether newly added variables show a significant improvement in R^2 (the proportion of explained variance in a dependent variable by the model). Several regression models were created by adding variables to a previous model at each step. The first model included business characteristics in order to control the analysis for their profiles and ensure that they would get "credit" for any shared variability that they might have with the tested predictors. Important variables of interest were added in the next steps.

8. Results

8.1. Respondents' profile

The majority of the respondents was from the tourism and travel industry (63.3%), followed by the other consumer services sector (19.62%). Out of the tourism and travel industry, the majority of the respondents were from the catering (15.44%), accommodation (14.15%), transportation (14.15%), and retail (6.43%) sectors. The largest number of responses (62.06%) came from small businesses (< 50 employees). Most of these businesses (76.2%) had operated for > 10 years. More than half (66.24%) of the respondents had a Bachelor's degree and 18.33% had a Master's degree.

8.2. Reliability and validity

The coefficients of alpha scores for all scales used in the study ranged from 0.682 to 0.898, indicating that the items adequately captured the key constructs and confirming the instrument's reliability (deVaus, 1995; Nunally, 1967). The measuring scales with mean scores and standard deviations are presented in Table 3.

A Herman's single factor test was also used to examine the research instrument's validity. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test showed the sample was adequate to extract the results. The Bartlett's test of sphericity was also significant ($p < .05$) for all instruments used, indicating the unidimensionality of the solution. The independent variables were also examined for collinearity prior to the hierarchical regression analyses. The variance inflation factor (all < 2.0) suggested that the estimated *Betas* were well established in the regression models.

8.3. Hierarchical regression

First, business characteristic variables were used to make sure that they did not explain all the association between predictors and destination competitiveness (Model 1). Second, destination resources were added and together with destination competitiveness were run in a regression to assess their predictive power on destination competitiveness (Model 2). Third, destination infrastructure and support services were entered into a regression to determine their predictive power on destination competitiveness (Model 3). Fourth, destination human resources-related factors were added creating Model 4 and, finally, destination business environment was added creating Model 5. These regressions were carried out to investigate the power that each group of factors explained the UAE's destination competitiveness. Regressions (to obtain coefficients) and ANOVAs (to compute R square and compare models) were run and F-statistics and p-values examined.

Table 4 shows the percentage of the variability in the dependent variable that can be accounted for by the predictors (this is the interpretation of R^2) that is whether adding a new variable increases R^2 and explains additional variation in the dependent variable. The change in R^2 evaluates how much predictive power was added to the model by the addition of another variable.

Table 4 shows that the first model (business characteristics alone) did not predict scores on the dependent variable to a statistically significant degree; they were not significant at the 0.05 level and only

Table 4
Hierarchical regression model summary.

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error of the estimate	Change Statistics				Sig. F change	Durbin Watson
					R^2 change	F change	Df1	Df2		
1	0.212	0.045	0.010	0.93844	0.045	0.818	6	104	0.558	
2	0.712	0.507	0.473	0.67774	0.462	96.401	1	103	0.000	
3	0.804	0.646	0.619	0.57667	0.140	40.267	1	102	0.000	
4	0.806	0.649	0.618	0.57695	0.003	0.899	1	101	0.345	
5	0.817	0.667	0.634	0.56517	0.018	5.255	1	100	0.024	2.041

1. Predictors: (Constant), educ, business, long, people, gbusiness, lived.
2. Predictors: (Constant), educ, business, long, people, gbusiness, lived, destres.
3. Predictors: (Constant), educ, business, long, people, gbusiness, lived, destres, infrastru.
4. Predictors: (Constant), educ, business, long, people, gbusiness, lived, destres, infrastru, humanres.
5. Predictors: (Constant), educ, business, long, people, gbusiness, lived, destres, infrastru, humanres, busenvir.
Dependent variable: acom.
Note: R^2 shows the percent of the variability in the dependent variable that can be accounted for by all the predictors together; *Adjusted R^2* is a modified version of R^2-that is adjusted for the number of predictors in the model; *S.E.:* standard error of the estimate; *R^2change* shows how much predictive power was added to the model by the addition of another variable in steps 2–5. *Sig F change* shows if the variable added significantly improved the prediction; *Durbin Watson test* is a test statistics that detects the presence of autocorrelation in the residuals (prediction errors) from a regression analysis.

explained 0.5% of the change in destination competitiveness (see R^2 in Model 1). This means that business profiles had no effect on destination competitiveness. In Model 2 destination resources were added because previous research found a positive relationship between destination competitiveness and destination resources (Bull, 1995; Mihalič, 2013). This increased the explanatory power of the model to nearly 51%. This change was significant at p < .001. In Model 3 destination infrastructure and support services were added, based on the reports of a positive relationship between destination competitiveness and infrastructure (Jovanović & Ilić, 2016). This increased the explanatory power of the model to 64.6%, which was significant at the p < .001 level. In Model 4 destination human resources-related factors were added, based on reports of a positive relationship between destination competitiveness and human related factors (Vengesayi, 2003). Human resource-related factors increased the explanatory power of the model to 64.9% and explained only 0.3% of the change in explanatory power of Model 4. This was insignificant at p < .05. In Model 5 business environment was added based on reports of a positive relationship between destination competitiveness and business environment (Azzopardi & Nash, 2016; Enright & Newton, 2004). Business environment increased the explanatory power of the model to nearly 67% and explained around 2% of the change in explanatory power of Model 5. The change was significant at p < .05. The final model accounted for nearly 67% of the variability in destination competitiveness. In summary, destination resources had the largest explanatory power of destination competitiveness, followed by infrastructure and support services and business environment.

Table 5 (coefficient table) shows which variables were entered in each step and also displays coefficients for statistically significant predictors. The betas (β) are the weights for each individual's scores for the independent variables, used to obtain predicted scores for the dependent variable. The results indicate that destination resources (β = 0.692), destination infrastructure with support services (β = 0.904), and destination business environment (β = 0.418) had large significant effect on destination competitiveness, Destination human resource-related factors (β = 0.107) had insignificant effects on destination competitiveness.

The Durbin-Watson test, which detects the presence of autocorrelation in the residuals (prediction errors) from a regression analysis (2.041), closely approximated 2 thus demonstrating there was no autocorrelation. This added to the validity of the regression model.

9. Discussion

The results revealed three main predictor groups of the UAE's

Table 5
Hierarchical regression standardized Beta coefficients and 95% C.I.

Model	Standardized Coefficients	t-value	Sig.
	Beta		
1. (Constant)		2.656	0.009
gbusiness	−0.176	−1.597	0.113
tbusiness	−0.043	−0.403	0.688
lived	−0.055	−0.255	0.799
long	−0.051	−0.240	0.811
people	0.065	0.660	0.511
educ	−0.069	−0.698	0.487
2. (Constant)		3.302	0.001
gbusiness	−0.171	−2.145	0.034
tbusiness	−0.093	−1.200	0.233
lived	−0.247	−1.583	0.116
long	0.093	0.599	0.550
people	0.000	−0.002	0.998
educ	−0.092	−1.292	0.199
destres	0.692	9.818	0.000
3. (Constant)		0.571	0.569
gbusiness	−0.092	−1.333	0.185
tbusiness	−0.139	−2.087	0.039
lived	−0.005	−0.033	0.974
long	0.005	0.038	0.970
people	−0.023	−0.368	0.714
educ	−0.045	−0.731	0.467
destres	−0.118	−0.835	0.406
infrastru	0.904	6.346	0.000
4. (Constant)		0.300	0.764
gbusiness	−0.094	−1.365	0.175
tbusiness	−0.147	−2.192	0.031
lived	0.035	0.242	0.809
long	−0.019	−0.142	0.887
people	−0.012	−0.185	0.854
educ	−0.048	−0.784	0.435
destres	−0.175	−1.140	0.257
infrastru	0.869	5.900	0.000
humanres	0.107	0.948	0.345
5. (Constant)		−0.014	0.989
gbusiness	−0.073	−1.076	0.284
tbusiness	−0.153	−2.331	0.022
lived	−0.002	−0.014	0.989
long	0.043	0.314	0.754
people	−0.017	−0.275	0.784
educ	−0.073	−1.201	0.232
destres	−0.254	−1.646	0.103
infrastru	0.616	3.390	0.001
humanres	0.035	0.301	0.764
busenvir	0.418	2.292	0.024

a. Dependent variable: acom.
Note: β (betas coefficient).

competitiveness. By looking at the largest absolute values for the standardized coefficients one can conclude that the most important predictors of the UAE's tourism competitiveness are infrastructure and support services (*Beta* = 0.904) followed by destination resources (*Beta* = 0.692) and business environment (*Beta* = 0.418). However, by looking at the greatest increase in R^2 that each variable produces when it is added to a model that already contains all the other variables one can conclude that the most important predictors are destination resources (increase of nearly 51%), infrastructure and support services (increase of nearly 14%) and business environment (increase of about 2%). By using the authors' subject area expertise it appears that the most important and easy to change and/or improve factors are destination resources and infrastructure and support services followed by business environment.

The tourism businesses' views of the importance of the destination resources in contributing to the UAE's competitiveness can be the result of a variety of reasons. The businesses can see the UAE as a country with a variety of destination resources. They believe that the country offers a wide variety of cultural attractions (e.g. the Centre for Cultural Understanding, Etihad museum), historical attractions (e.g. souks, palaces), modern man-made attractions (e.g. Dubai Frame, the Louvre, the Burj Khalifa), and creative industries (e.g. arts, crafts, fashion design, film, music), which can be further developed for tourism. They can see the investment opportunity in cultural and heritage places as well as nature-based tourism products, especially nature-based accommodation (Mihalič, 2013). They can see the investment opportunity in special events such as sporting events, horse racing, Formula 1, and shopping festivals. Businesses believe the above attractions determine the appeal of the country and many other attractions are yet to be built and explored by tourists. Mihalič (2013) noted that if the supply-side creates tourism-built resources of strong quality there is a high probability that they become big attractors for tourists.

The tourism businesses also believe that environmental sustainability is of importance to the UAE's competitiveness. Moreover, they believe that environmental sustainability should be a major focus of the UAE as a country (Raouf, 2018). Although it could be argued that environmental sustainability and its quality is fundamentaly important for ensuring the future existence of most types of tourist destinations, one should note that the concept of environmental sustainability is relatively new and currently gaining traction among the Middle East countries. Tourism managers in the UAE are currently learning to incorporate environmental measures into their management strategies and methods to stay competitive in the tourist market and are becoming increasingly environmentally conscious. The tourism businesses have only recently begun to promote environmental sustainability. The UAE is known for its environmental quality and can help to create an environmental image and thus can be a powerful tool in increasing the competitiveness of the country.

A vast vacant land available beyond the main city centers provides the UAE businesses with an opportunity for creating new eco-friendly attractions beyond the city boundaries and for tourism to grow further. The local tourism authorities of each Emirate invest in new spaces away from the city center. New theme parks, cycling tracks, and parks are being developed around the big cities and their borders. A major example of eco-tourism development beyond the city center is the upcoming development site for EXPO 2020 (n.d.), which is under construction 45 km out of Dubai's main city center.

The UAE businesses support sustainability by also reducing their operational footprint, developing renewable materials and safer products, creating sustainable solutions, adopting 'green' standards across various infrastructural projects, and hosting various events that promote environmental sustainability. For example, Dubai encourages and rewards pioneering hotels and hotel apartments to support environmental awareness initiatives. The city of Abu Dhabi encourages 'green' tourism and hotel initiatives and regularly holds environment-related exhibitions and conferences (Department of Culture and Tourism, Abu Dhabi, 2016). The local governments, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and private and public organizations in the UAE aim at developing a long lasting sustainable legacy for the country and the surrounding region (UAE Ministry of Economy, n.d.).

The results of the study are not surprising as the destination's core resources and its sustainability represent the fundamental desire to travel and are an important element of the tourism product (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Hanafiah, Hemdi, & Ahmad, 2016). The high quality of the natural and cultural/heritage resources affects the success of a tourism destination (Deng, King, & Bauer, 2002; Hassan, 2000; Huybers & Bennett, 2003) and destination selection (Assaf & Josiassen, 2011).

However, one needs to note that there are significant differences among supply-side stakeholders' perception of destination competitiveness with reference to a destination's core resources. For instance, tour and sport operators consider destination core resources significantly more important as compared to retail stakeholders (Hallmann, Müller, Feiler, Breuer, & Roth, 2012). Businesses' perceptions of the importance of destination resources also differ depending on the destination. For example, in a city destination in the Asia-Pacific region, the most important destination resources are cuisine and well-known landmarks (Enright & Newton, 2004). In addition, some of the infrastructure in the UAE can be or is used as resources for competitiveness as well as attractions to tourists. For example, hotels like the Burj Al Arab, Burj Khalifa, the Atlantis, and the Emirates Palace hotel are not only accommodation places but are tourist attractions in their own right. Next, in order to achieve and enhance a destination's competitiveness (Azzopardi & Nash, 2017) the strategic interaction between the destination's core resources and supporting factors are crucial; the image of a destination is shaped through a variety of different factors (Crouch, 2011). Thus, the combination of various elements, not just destination resources, leads to the destination's long-term competitiveness (Díaz & Rodríguez, 2016).

The infrastructure and support services also stood out as being a very important factor influencing destination competitiveness, possibly due to general infrastructure being seen by businesses as an important factor for destination attractiveness and sustainability (Crouch & Ritichie, 2000) and and essential basis on which tourism and other industries depend (Crouch, 2011). It appears that businesses believe that the diverse and complex supply-side for tourists depends largely on the performance and the availability of hotels, restaurants, transport companies, and retailers and these are all seen as supporting factors that provide the tourists with the opportunity to explore a destination's core resources (Ritchie & Crouch, 2000). Both general and tourism infrastructure contribute to the country's attractiveness (Zaidan, 2016), which increases tourist numbers and thereby makes the destination more competitive. In particular, the number of airports and air connections; the availability, efficiency and variety of the ground and sea transportation, and the various tourist-oriented services (e.g. information services, banks, information technology) are important factors supporting a destination that facilitate foreign tourist arrivals thus leading to a destination being competitive in the world arena (Crouch, 2011). The hotel, gastronomy, tour, and sport operators found supporting infrastructure to be important.

The third factor that was perceived by businesses to contribute to the UAE's competitiveness included a friendly business environment, which offers investment opportunities, facilitates trade and unconstrained flow of goods and services, and supports tourism. Although the UAE ranked first among Arab countries in the terms of the ease of starting a business in the country (Augustine, 2017) currently, the country is striving towards enhancing its position as a global leader in doing business, and being attractive to tourists.

Destination human resources-related factors, such as high quality of service personnel, training and education, and an efficient labor market were not perceived by businesses as being the major factor of the UAE's tourism competitiveness. The reason, perhaps, could be that respondents felt that most people in the workforce are professionals and

the respondents did not need to think about the consequences of having an uneducated and untrained workforce. According to Randall (2016), the UAE has a thriving business environment and values hiring talented individuals from abroad. In fact, the expatriate population makes up 95% of the workforce (The Economist, 2014). Besides, many of the respondents may have felt that the tourism and hospitality sector is a constantly and rapidly evolving industry in terms of technology development, innovation and customer service, thus prior and on-going education and training is essential and a requirement for this sector to be competitive (see Dwyer, Edwards, Mistilis, Roman, & Scott, 2009). Since many employees working in the tourism and hospitality sector are expatriates and their work standards may vary as they come from different countries, tourism and hospitality organizations ensure to recruit qualified personnel and provide on-going training e.g. in soft skills, communication, leadership, empowerment, creativity and innovation to new and existing employees, in order to develop a competent workforce and meet/exceed customer expectations (Khan, 2018).

Most recently, tourism government bodies like Dubai and Sharjah Tourism have launched training initiatives to support the development of a highly qualified workforce. For example, Dubai's Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing (DTCM) provides a certificate program to industry employees covering topics related to tourism key regulations, locations of tourist attractions, and major events happening in the emirate (Khaleej Times, 2004).

10. Theoretical implications

The study supports the argument that destination resources are the core factors contributing to the tourism experience that provide the most fundamental appeal for the potential visitor (Ritchie & Crouch, 2010), and are the main reasons attracting tourists (Hanafiah et al., 2016). Environmental sustainability is a part of the destination resources contributing to the destination's appeal and competitiveness. The study also supports the argument that destination infrastructure contributes to the destination attractiveness (Assaf & Josiassen, 2011; Díaz & Rodríguez, 2016; Khadaroo & Seetanah, 2007) and is an important driver of the tourism industry performance that facilitates the tourist movement, and is an integral part of destination competitiveness. Also, business environment contributes to destination competitiveness (Azzopardi & Nash, 2016; Enright & Newton, 2004). This is unrealistic to expect that destinations with poor resources, infrastructure and services, and not supportive businesses can remain competitive. In addition, the study shows that destination human resources-related factors appear not to contribute to the destination's tourism competitiveness as previously claimed by Vengesayi (2003). This seems to be surprising but is justified in the context of the UAE.

11. Practical recommendations

Based on the study's findings, it appears there are some areas in which the UAE should improve its tourism competitiveness and make itself a more sustainable destination. In the destination resources area, although the country is making several efforts to enhance its tourism product, the UAE is still unable to adequately leverage its natural assets and create products that showcase its culture. Except for Sharjah, which has a rich cultural heritage and promotes itself as the cultural capital of the UAE, the other emirates seem to focus on creating this image with state of the art modern attractions like theme parks, luxury hotels, and artificially built island attractions. Many new tourism and hospitality developments are managed by expatriates who have experience in using quality technology. However, they lack the ability to recreate the cultural and traditional experiences thus making it difficult to promote the destination as unique (Al Ameri, 2013). Therefore, in order to promote the country's cultural assets the emirates need to do more to encourage its local population with cultural knowledge to participate and take up front-line tourism and hospitality employment. Cultural

education and training should be provided to expatriates who have direct contact with tourists. Also, the country's environmental sustainability received a relatively lower rating than other factors in this group (see Table 3) needs to be enhanced. Spraggon and Bodolica (2014) support this recommendation. For example, the businesses should focus on green tourism through hotel green initiatives, eco-friendly tours, and environment-related exhibitions and conferences. Environmental packages specifically designed for eco-travelers should be developed.

In terms of its infrastructure and support services, the health and hygiene sector received a relatively lower rating than other factors in this group (see Table 3) should be more appreciated. The destination's hygiene, reliability of medical services, and availability of medication is very important when considering a vacation destination (Crotts, 1996). Polluted environment and unclean facilities represent a health risk to tourists (Poolklai, 2015; Zhang, Zhong, Xu, Wang, & Dang, 2015). Since by 2020 Dubai itself aims to attract 500,000 medical tourists each year and wants to increase medical tourism's contribution to the economy by AED 2.6 billion (USD 708 million) the high standard of health facilities and hygiene, and quality medical care should be intensively promoted to improve the country's tourism competitiveness. Although the Emirates and Etihad airlines are expanding their routes and buying new aircrafts, and the country is investing in new infrastructure technologies like the 'Hyperloop', the current public transport system causes congestion on the roads and makes it tourist unfriendly. Therefore, in order to make tourists safe the road density and road traffic accidents should be reduced (Spraggon & Bodolica, 2014). On should note that by 2030 the city of Dubai plans to introduce driverless cars and move towards reducing road congestion and pollution (John, 2018). In addition, more three and four-star hotels should be built since tourists with lower travelling budgets cannot always visit the country (Swan, 2014).

In the business environment group, price competitiveness received a relatively low rating. This is surprising because destination's competitiveness depends upon a competitive price (Dwyer, Forsyth, & Rao, 2000). Increasing value of currencies in the host countries and increasing prices of goods and services at the destination, high taxes and cost of living in the destination can affect visitor desire to travel to a destination (Dwyer et al., 2000; Göral, 2016) and perception of a destination's competitiveness (Cvelbar, Dwyer, Koman, & Mihalič, 2016). Since the UAE is perceived and ranked as one of the most expensive destinations in the world, attention should be paid to the pricing policies that would enhance tourist purchasing power (Spraggon & Bodolica, 2014). Specifically, careful attention should be paid to the destination affordability and hotel prices (Spraggon & Bodolica, 2014). Prices of goods and services, taxation and inflation that impact cost of living should be kept to a minimum. Since Dubai is often perceived as being too expensive and unaffordable to many tourists who find European merchandise to be cheaper (Halligan, 2015) better pricing regulations within the retail sector are required (Samuel, 2017). There should also be more variety of products available to consumers with better price offers (The Report: Dubai 2014, 2014).

In addition, the UAE needs to become more internationally open. It should provide more opportunities for starting businesses in the tourism industry (this factor received a relatively low rating, see Table 3), especially for those from the neighboring countries that encourage foreign investment and infrastructure development. The country should ease restrictive visa policies and issue on-arrival visas to citizens from strategically important generating countries (Latif, 2017), provide tourists with an easier access to the country's different regions, improve attitudes to foreigners, and encourage more trade. More competition among providers of the Internet and telephone services should be induced (Spraggon & Bodolica, 2014).

As to destination human resources group, which was not regarded by businesses as a significant competitiveness factor, the UAE must continue to focus on its high quality human resources that provide the country with safety and security. It is surprising that tourism suppliers rated the issue of safety and security relatively lower than other human-

related factors in this group (see Table 3) in a time of global uncertainty and travel risk. It is widely known that when planning vacations tourists carefully consider the destination's political instability/unrest, probability of terrorism, crime rates, and general safety (Crotts, 1996). They are most likely to choose safe and secure destinations (Bhat, 2013). Only safe destinations can successfully compete for tourists. Safety and security are the primary requirements for destination competitiveness (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998). Thus, the importance of safety of the UAE's infrastructure and security of its residents and tourists, as well as high standard of police services should be promoted. The country's social, economic and political stability should be heavily advertised.

Next, the UAE must focus on its labor market and travel and tourism education. The country must develop more effective human resource strategies to make service employees more productive and motivated. In particular, the country should pay serious attention to the image portrayed by its hotel frontline employees. Hotel operators should broaden job descriptions of frontline employees and develop their commitment and work motivation through better human-resource practices (Mohammed et al., 2014). There is a need for hotels to engage in on-going improvement of their products and services to help hotel guests and international tourists further value these offerings in their search for unique experiences and to create an image that will encourage them to re-visit (Julaimi, Talib, & Suhaimi, 2016). Although some cities started to provide vocational and skills based training, the city of Dubai requires greater investment in the training of retail employees in product knowledge and better customer service (The Report: Dubai 2014, 2014).

The UAE government should also make efforts to employ local citizens (Emiratis) in the economic and social development of the country through various initiatives (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2014) and encourage employment of locals in the tourism industry (Moukhallati, 2015). Emiratis account for just 1% of the tourism workforce in the UAE (Insight Magazine, 2016). This could be due to the misperception about tourism and hospitality jobs being unsuitable and demeaning among the Emirati society. There is a growing need to create awareness and educate Emirati families and society about the importance of working in the tourism industry (Moukhallati, 2015) (tourism education received a relatively low rating) and thereby creating the best possible image of their country. Due to religious and cultural differences between international tourists and the local Emiratis the challenge is to balance the demands of the country's Islamic religion and international tourist requirements (Zaidan, 2016). The focus should not only be on advancing tourism development and marketing but also taking into consideration the cultural differences, values and norms between the Emiratis and international tourists and reduce the locals' dissatisfaction with the behavior of tourists (Zaidan, 2016). Since the UAE attracts a diverse range of employees coming from varied backgrounds and nationalities (Zarim et al., 2017) one of the strategies could be to create better awareness and respect of the local culture, which would ultimately improve the host-tourist interaction. Zaidan (2016) argues that the government, tourism operators, and the local community should determine the maximum number of tourists to attract to the destination and how tourists could contribute to the enhancement of the locals' lifestyles. Such strategy would minimize negative cultural impacts (Zaidan, 2016) and support sustainable development (Allen, Hafer, Long, & Perdue, 1993).

Finally, the DMOs should aggressively promote and induce positive image of the country among potential visitors by providing adequate information about the UAE as a tourist destination, which is a pre-requisite to destination selection and visitation. Kotsi et al. (2018) suggested developing clearly branded messages for the cities of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, and Balakrishnan (2009) advised the importance of communicating stories about local heroes and heritage.

12. Contribution

From a theoretical perspective the study adds to the growing literature on destination competitiveness and identifies and measures the factors that determine the tourism competitiveness of the UAE, a new and emerging destination. The study explains the country's competitiveness as a tourism destination from the business perspective. The contribution of destination resources, infrastructure and support services, and business environment to destination competitiveness was not empirically examined in this context prior to this study. The hierarchical regressions models indicated that destination resources, infrastructure and support services, and business environment are the main factors determining the UAE's tourism competitiveness as perceived by businesses and are more highly regarded than destination human resources-related factors.

In terms of practice, this study identifies the most important factors of the UAE's tourism competitiveness that executives and managers from government enterprises, tourism businesses and other related organizations could use to prioritize the allocation of their resources. The results show that in order to become more competitive the UAE should focus on developing high quality destination resources, providing the best infrastructure and a variety of support services, and making its environment more friendly to businesses and investment. This particularly applies to the emerging market such as the UAE. The biggest constraint facing by the UAE in terms of achieving its true tourism potential lies with not appreciating by businesses its human related-factors and their influence on destination competitiveness. Placing strategic priority on a quality of human workforce is becoming increasingly critical; the ability to succeed and the future performance of the tourism industry depends upon the professionalism, quality and authenticity of its human resources. The findings provide a valuable benefit for government departments and destination marketing organizations (DMOs) by highlighting areas for future development and resource allocation.

13. Limitations and future studies

The study's findings are country specific and thus the results may not be generalizable. The authors admit that the UAE is not a uniform country with respect to its characteristics and there are economic, socio-cultural and business differences among the Emirates. However, the issue of the regional differences was not analyzed. Rather, the aim was to examine the country from a broad national perspective. One may also argue that the three groups of factors may include a bigger variety of indicators. However, the indicators in these groups appear logical. Although the percent of the explanatory power of destination human-related factors and business environment in Models 4 and 5 may appear too low, capturing such explanatory power appears adequate when considering other factors influencing destination competitiveness and its multiple nature. Other factors influencing destination competitiveness, which might have significant explanatory power could be included. Stakeholders from different sectors of the travel and tourism industry may focus on different aspects of destination competitiveness and attach a different importance to the examined indicators. The study can be replicated in other emerging destinations, in different economic, political, socio-cultural and environmental settings and results compared. A comparative analysis of the tourist and business perspective on destination competitiveness should be performed.

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