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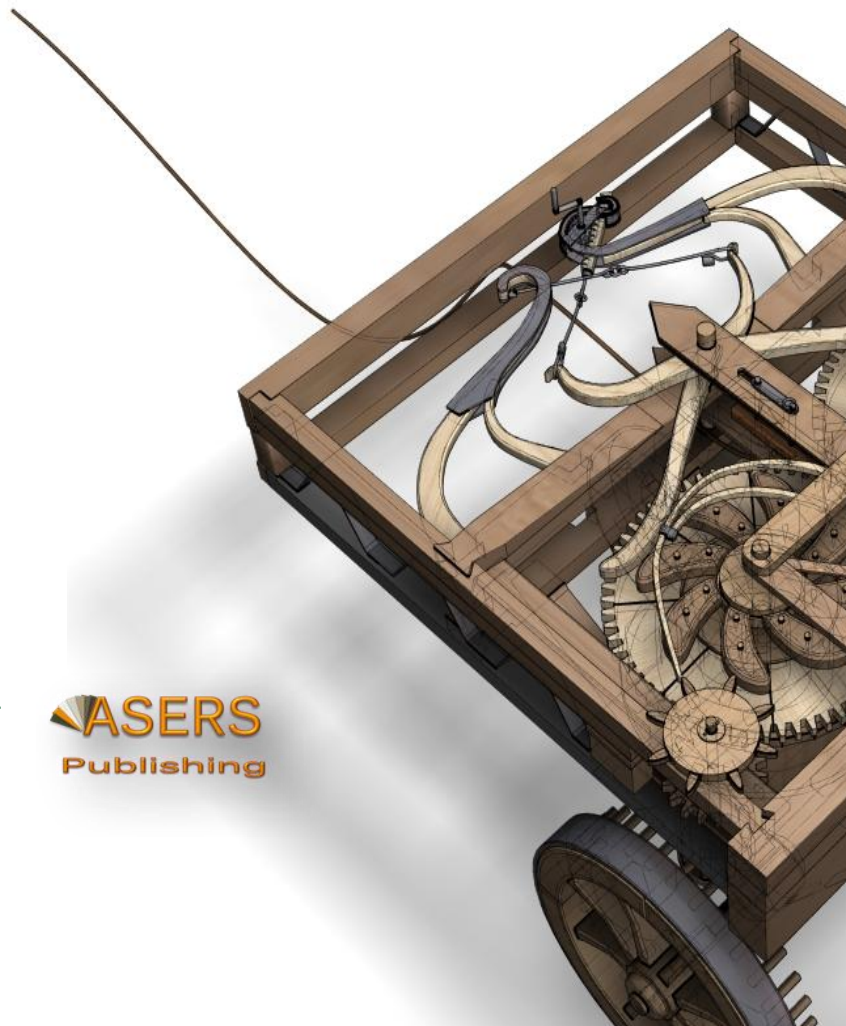
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Expo 2020 Dubai as Experiencescape to Build Image of Exhibiting Countries: Perspective of Polish Pavilion Personnel

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Abstract: The study aimed to explore world exhibitions (commonly referred to as Expos) as a place where image-related activities of exhibiting countries are performed – and the exploration was based on the experiencescape perspective. A reference was made to Expo, which in 2021 and 2022 was held in Dubai.

An individual in-depth interview was employed (a semi-structured interview), which covered 20 people serving visitors in the Polish pavilion for three months during Expo 2020 Dubai. Empirical material was developed following the rules applicable to reflexive thematic analysis.

The analysis of the empirical material made it possible to identify five topics (categories) characterising a contemporary Expo as experiencescape. The following topics were identified: (1) a unique presentation of almost all countries at one time and place; (2) multiple accompanying events; (3) promotion of countries through the latest means of expression; (4) a place with a unique atmosphere, where above-average experiences are delivered; (5) a space where event participants can be overstimulated. These categories should be the main areas of decision-making in the process of preparing and implementing national presentations, as well as provide directions for future scientific research dedicated to world exhibitions.

The study shows originality, as no other work has been published in the scientific literature to date that has considered world exhibition grounds as experiencescape.

Exhibiting countries were given guidelines to prepare national presentations meeting the expectations of Expo participants and ensuring the effectiveness of image-shaping activities.

Keywords: nation branding; mega-events; world exhibitions; customer experience; experiencescape; Expo 2020 Dubai.

JEL Classification: M31; Z32; Z33; Q01.

Introduction

Each country uses many forms of marketing communication as part of nation branding, focusing on different groups of recipients – tourists, previous and future residents, potential investors, politicians, journalists. World/universal exhibitions (commonly referred to as Expos), being an important space for countries' image-related activities for more than 170 years, have changed their character over time. World exhibitions have evolved from mere showcases of industrial achievements, through the era of cultural exchange to platforms for nation branding (Hughes, 2012, 71; Kovačević, Hristov-Stančić, and Zečević, 2024, 248). Contrary to the first editions of the exhibition, industrial products are no longer a novelty per se but Expos are still a showcase of the world with opportunities for communication, investments, development, trade and tourism (De Groote, 2005, 14). Contemporary Expos are pivotal occasions that allow both host and participating nations to present and cultivate a given image and to draw the attention and recognition of other countries (Dornscheidt, Groth and Reinhard, 2005, 904). In the context of world's fairs, some even refer to the era of performative branding practices (Ren and Gyimóthy, 2013). The continuous evolution of the world exhibition function, as well as changes in the ways in which exhibiting countries display their offers, entail the need to study and describe such events. In addition, changes in the expectations of modern people, who want to experience more and more in their lives, have

become one of the key challenges for brand managers and due to them, many levels of marketing communication are directed towards providing stimuli that strongly affect all the senses (Wiedmann *et al.* 2018, 101). Consequently, this creates in recipients the value they desire, triggers their involvement and makes them emotionally tied to a brand of the sender of a message (Pine and Gilmore, 1998, 97; Shaw, 2005, 51; Hultén, 2011, 269). This is particularly important in the context of building a long-lasting brand image. Nowadays, consumers crave experiences and increasingly demand immersion into them. The same also applies to world exhibitions (Björner and Berg, 2012, 40; Gebarowski, 2019, 42). For this reason, the purpose of this article is to evaluate the latest world exhibition (which was called Expo 2020 Dubai) as a space for providing a strong visitor experience and thus shaping in them the desired image of exhibiting countries. In order to achieve the author's objective, a qualitative study was conducted in the form of individual in-depth interviews with people working at Expo 2020 Dubai.

The topic in question is relevant because world exhibitions play an important role in nation branding. Indeed, Expos are often accorded – due to the enormous scale of organisational activities, a huge number of exhibitors and visitors attending the event and widespread global media coverage – the status of mega-events (De Groot, 2005, 12; Frost and Laing, 2018, 8; Minner, Zhou and Toy, 2022, 1). A mega-event is understood as a high-profile, short-term, one-time event that differs from ordinary life and is arranged at a unique moment, involving ceremonies and/or celebrations. Such events have an extraordinary status in society due to their periodicity and large scale (Björner and Berg, 2012, 31). Expos are seen as ones of the greatest global undertakings – apart from the Summer and Winter Olympics, Football World Cup, European Football Championship and Asian Games (Müller, 2015, 636). Keeping track of changes in the world exhibition formula, as well as recognising the needs of their participants, is important not only to those who make national presentations, but also to the scientists who intend to carry out their research in relation to future Expos.

It is generally accepted that the history of world exhibitions began with *The Great Exhibition* (the full name of this event is *The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations*), which was held in 1851 in London's Hyde Park. The rights to hold exhibitions are granted by the *Bureau International des Expositions* (BIE). This intergovernmental organisation was established in 1928 in Paris and currently has 184 member states. In addition to these major exhibitions World Expos (which are the centre of attention in this article), the BIE also allows for the organisation of three other smaller types of events, namely: *Specialised Expos*, *Horticultural Expos* and *the Triennale di Milano*. To date, there have been 35 events having the status of universal exhibition. In the past, world's fair was organised irregularly – every couple of years or even more rarely. In the current century, Expo is held every five years and lasts for six months. The last world exhibition was Expo 2020 Dubai, which was held from 1 October 2021 to 31 March 2022 (the original date of the exhibition was postponed by a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Dubai saw the offers of 192 exhibiting countries and 24.1 million people visiting the event. The motto of the exhibition was: *Connecting Minds, Creating the Future*.

This article, which examines the building of national images through the intentional design of world exhibition spaces in the context of the experiencescape concept, explores an innovative area of research. It begins to address a research gap (identified in the following section of the article), thereby encouraging further scholarly inquiry. The topic is both timely and important, as it considers world exhibitions as arenas for delivering unique experiences. Such experiences are increasingly expected by contemporary customers, including the target groups of national presentations at Expos.

1. Literature Review

The scholarly literature has so far linked world exhibitions to image-related effects only in selected, narrow aspects – despite the fact that the use of Expo in place branding has been considered one of the key research areas (Richards, 2023, 75). Previous explorations took into consideration the impact of the architecture of national pavilions on the image of exhibiting countries (Bonenberg, 2015; Wang, 2013; Abou-Shouk *et al.* 2018; Swift, 2024; Çelenk Çavdar and Tavşan, 2025). In the context of the image, activity undertaken in single presentations was also analysed (Dogan, 2018; Kovačević, Hristov-Stančić, and Zečević, 2024). Some researchers focused on the Expo's impact on the image of host cities (De Carlo *et al.* 2009; Dyonon, 2011; Kim *et al.* 2012; Yu, Wang and Seo, 2012; Carta, 2013; Larsen, 2014; Lv *et al.* 2017; Panwar, Chopra, and Haddad, 2024) or host countries (Chen, 2012; Xue, Chen and Yu, 2012; Lee *et al.* 2014; Aguerreberre *et al.* 2023; Yawen, 2023; Nicolescu and Barbu, 2024). What was also covered by research, is the question how world exhibitions are perceived by local residents (Yang, Zeng and Gu, 2010; Hereźniak and Florek, 2018; Magno and Dossena, 2020). As regards the image of exhibitions themselves, attention was paid to the selected elements that determined this image (Deng, Li and Shen, 2015; Yoo and Han, 2024).

The second key area addressed in this publication is the experiences of the people who attended the Expo. World exhibitions and visitor experiences were linked occasionally in not very in-depth analyses. The place of mega-events (including also world expositions) in the concepts of experiences, experiential marketing and co-creation of experience was identified, as well as the significance of experiences in the development of long-term relationships with exhibitors' brand (Björner and Berg, 2012). Researchers examined the internal and external factors influencing visitors' participation in world exhibitions (Arya *et al.* 2024). A reference was made to the need for holistic and coherent activation of the senses of people visiting national exhibitions (Gebarowski, 2019). The concept of "brand experience" was also described in the context of Expo, as well as it was determined how visitor experiences affect the overall evaluation of selected pavilions (Wang, 2013).

The experiencescape approach adopted for these considerations is derived from the servicescape model, the name of which was formed by combining the words "service" and "landscape". That primary model was developed by Bitner (1992), which was based on the effect of the physical environment that impacts on the behaviours of customers and employees in service organisations (Mari and Poggesi, 2013, 172). Servicescape refers to the total impression of a service encounter developed through the use of human senses (Sag, Zengul and Landry, 2018, 94). The experiencescape approach is an expanded version of servicescape (Tasci and Pizam, 2020, 999) and is centred around a comprehensive understanding of the consumption environment, involving not only the physical dimension but also other dimensions. This concept takes into consideration how experiences are staged and consumed (Kandampully, Bilgihan and Amer, 2023, 325). The experiencescape encompasses the entire experience environment where the production and consumption of experience occurs (Chen, Suntikul and King, 2020, 1048). However, it seems that experiencescape should be referred in particular to the environment in which strong stimuli interact with recipients, which as a result, evokes these recipients' lasting memories of and emotional connections with a brand (Kandampully, Bilgihan and Amer, 2023, 333).

Over time, the servicescape approach received attention among researchers in many different fields resulting in a line of terms containing the ending "scape", which extended the concept's use in different product and service settings. This includes, among other things, brandscape, retailerscape, sportscape, cyberscape, virtual servicescape, performancescape, consumptionscape, e-servicescape, designscape, dinescape and festivalscape (Pizam and Tasci, 2019, 26). A word which appeared in the trade fair literature was boothscape (Gilliam, 2015; Woo and Jun, 2017; Shinyong, Soyoung and Joon, 2023). The perspective described by this term is used when trade fair booths are seen as a space conducive to creating the atmosphere desired by exhibitors and strong stimuli are provided to visitors – in principle, in the form of such experiences which are unique, memorable, and even bring them into a state of immersion. As far as world exhibitions are concerned – given the fact that exhibitors utilise, instead of individual stands, large facilities (pavilions) – it seems reasonable to retain the term experiencescape or use the word exhibitscape in relation to Expo (adhering to the convention of creating neologisms by adding the suffix "scape").

In the light of a review of scientific publications, based on which the state of knowledge relating to the combination of nation branding and experiencescape during world exhibitions could be determined, a research gap has been identified. As a matter of fact, previous studies did not treat Expo grounds as a place of multisensory impact on people participating in the event; a place that enables exhibiting countries to evoke unique experiences in these participants.

2. Research Methodology

The empirical material was obtained using individual in-depth interview (a semi-structured interview). This method, classified as qualitative research, used a scenario consisting of several open-ended questions. The interviews were conducted using one of the remote communication platforms. Each interview was recorded from the beginning to the end, and the answers recorded were transcribed. Next, the material obtained was coded and a reflexive thematic analysis was carried out, following the rules applicable to this method (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The data processing used Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS).

The respondents were students of Krakow University of Economics (KUE), who went through a multi-stage recruitment process and were sent as members of the Polish pavilion personnel on behalf of the Polish Investment and Trade Agency (a governmental company responsible for the national presentation at Expo 2020 Dubai). The study involved 20 people (all KUE students sent to Dubai) who served paid internships, promoting the country at the World Expo in two rounds (each round lasted three months) – during which they were responsible, among other things, for tours of the pavilion for visitors or taking an active part in a variety of events. Given the specific nature of human memory, meaning that people forget certain details over time, it was assumed that the empirical material would be collected from the respondents within six weeks of their return from the

exhibition. The interviews were conducted in two rounds, depending on the time students returned from the internships served during the Expo. The first round of collecting the empirical material took place between 10 Feb and 14 Feb 2022, and the second one between 20 Apr and 09 May 2022. Each respondent gave informed consent to participate in the study and to the recording of their answers. The interviewees' profile is shown in Table 1. The respondents were marked with the symbols from S1 to S20, which were used in the presentation of the study results.

Table 1. Research Participants' Profile

Symbol	Gender	Age	Year of Study	Symbol	Gender	Age	Year of Study
S1	Male	22	Second	S11	Male	21	Second
S2	Female	22	Third	S12	Female	21	Third
S3	Female	26	Third	S13	Female	22	Third
S4	Female	22	Fourth	S14	Male	22	Second
S5	Female	23	Fifth	S15	Male	19	Second
S6	Female	23	Fourth	S16	Male	22	Second
S7	Female	24	Fifth	S17	Female	20	Second
S8	Female	22	Third	S18	Male	22	Third
S9	Male	22	Fourth	S19	Female	21	Second
S10	Female	21	Second	S20	Female	20	Second

Source: own elaboration.

The following research problem was formulated: what – in the opinion of those who thoroughly familiarised themselves with Expo 2020 Dubai – characterises the event as a space for providing strong experiences (experiencescape) in the context of creating the image of exhibiting countries? During the interviews, the researcher attempted to get, in the context of the aforesaid research problem, elaborate answers from the respondents to the following questions: (1) Does the Expo have a unique atmosphere that is conducive to the promotion of individual countries – and if so, what determines this atmosphere?; (2) How the program (accompanying events) of this mega-event can be evaluated?; (3) Which means of expression are the most effective in the promotion of exhibiting countries at the Expo?; (4) Do the experiences gained at the Expo differ from everyday (average) life experiences – and if so, what distinguishes such experiences (which realms of an experience do prevail)?; (5) Is there anything that is a barrier to the process of building exhibitors' brands during the Expo?

It must be noted that the time which the interview participants spent at the Expo 2020 Dubai grounds, as well as the roles they played there, were sufficient to gain a good understanding of the event. This is evidenced by the following respondents' answers, for example: *I often felt that I fully co-created the Expo (S1); To me, it was a place that we didn't just visited; we could get to know the exhibition thoroughly – not only from the side of countries' presentations, but also from behind the scenes (S4); Our friends (the staff we were friends with) showed us around many pavilions, so we got a close look at various aspects of exhibit marketing (S11).*

3. Results

The extensive empirical material underwent a process of reflexive thematic analysis (including precise coding). As a result, topics (categories) describing Expo 2020 Dubai were identified with reference to the research problem. The following categories were identified: (1) a unique presentation of almost all countries at one time and place; (2) multiple accompanying events; (3) promotion of countries through the latest means of communication; (4) a place with a unique atmosphere, where above-average experiences are delivered – mainly by entertainment and education; (5) a space where event participants can be overstimulated.

Many interviewees pointed out that the world exhibition is a one-of-a-kind event during which, at a fixed time and place, almost all countries make their presentations. This perception of the Expo was reflected in the following answers: *It was an amazing experience; the one and only event on such a scale – providing a unique opportunity to communicate in one place with representatives of different countries and learn about different cultures (S8); My first association with the Expo was internationality; there is no other place on earth where you can feel multiculturalism so deeply; you could talk freely with representatives of many countries and actually feel like a citizen of the world (S12); It was amazing to me that the whole world is able to meet in one place once*

every five years and present their achievements – encouraging people to visit individual countries (S9); It was surprising that nearly 200 different nationalities gathered under “one roof”; and it happened with one idea in mind (S16); you could feel as if our enormous globe had been closed on the area of just four square kilometres (S4). In the course of an in-depth analysis of the empirical material – in sub-categories (1A, 1B and 1C) – the consequences of the world exhibition characteristics included in the first category (namely that many countries are presented at one time and place) were identified. The following consequences were identified: (1A) an opportunity to conspicuously stand out from other countries and successfully attract tourists or investors; (1B) an opportunity to expand knowledge of individual countries; (1C) a place for increasing intercultural competence through interactions established by event participants. The following answers were classified under Category 1A: *My observations are that the Expo provides important experiences in the context of stimulating tourism (S3); The Expo brought the world closer to me; I’ve discovered the places I’m not able to travel to at the moment (for financial reasons); but I learned about the attractiveness of those places and maybe I’ll fly there someday (S9); Now I know that the world exhibition is an opportunity for each country to present its various achievements (e.g. economic ones); it seems to me that it is an opportunity for each exhibitor to stand out and promote itself (S17); It was a kind of a “marketplace” where visitors were persuaded to “buy” a given country; they tried to show the exhibitors’ offers as creatively as possible, thanks to which many visitors started to feel like visiting the countries they hadn’t known before (S18).* The following answers were classified under Subcategory 1B: *I remember my conversation with one student from the United Arab Emirates; he told me that he walked around the exhibition quite a lot for three days (local schools had holidays at the time) and learned more about different countries through the exhibition than he did during the entire period of attending school lessons (S3); Many pavilions educated and focused on entertainment – most often exhibitors provided a lot of information about them and offered various attractions (S5); Educating visitors of the exhibition was common – almost every country presented its culture extensively (in various forms) (S20).* The following interview excerpts were assigned to Subcategory 1C: *Everyone who stayed in Dubai had an opportunity to develop – to learn about other cultures (S8); The Expo offered possibilities for development by meeting people from different (often distant) countries; this allowed me to be extremely opened to other cultures (S10); The Expo is multiculturalism – thanks to this you could interact with visitors from distant cultural circles (S17).*

Interviewees often linked Expo 2020 Dubai with a multitude of accompanying events. In this context, the following answers were given: *The Expo is not only pavilions, but also a lot of events that serve as a separate level of communication (S12); I was surprised by the magnitude of the exhibition; I mean the number of cultural events – concerts and shows (S9); The Expo has filled me with admiration because of the extent to which its organisers are committed – the very fact that there were more than 90 events each day shows the extremely rich offer for visitors (S10); There was always something happening and something you could experience; every day there were artistic events that encouraged people to come to a particular pavilion or some other specific place (S8); Parades were staged almost all the time – whether with people from various countries or initiated by Expo organisers; wherever you went, you could hear some music or see someone dancing (S13); It was amazing that every time we came back from work in the Polish pavilion we could come across several concerts taking place at the same time; all the time we were surrounded by something interesting; there was always something going on that we wanted to see; many times, we were wondering where to go, because it was not easy to choose one event (S4); The biggest stars of the music scene, theatre, celebrities associated with dance, athletes were invited to the Expo – among these guests, you could see for example Robert Lewandowski, Cristiano Ronaldo, Luis Hamilton; rulers of various countries also arrived there (S18).*

The Expo 2020 Dubai space was filled with many national presentations based on the latest information and communication technologies (ICT). The in-depth analysis identified three subcategories: (3A) own promotion with videos – often shown on original and high-tech media; (3B) use of virtual reality (VR); (3C) bringing into a state of escapism (immersion) people affected by content presented by means of the latest solutions. As regards film-based presentations of exhibiting countries, the respondents said as follows: *Most exhibitors based their presentations on films, which – depending on the pavilion – were displayed on walls or ceilings, sometimes the screens had unusual shapes, sometimes they were moving; more or less original ideas were used, but video solutions were present in the vast majority of pavilions (S7); Once you got into pavilions, you could often watch some kind of film; sometimes interactive games were displayed on screens; both films and games allowed – in an atmosphere of entertainment – to learn something about a given culture (S8); Expo 2020 Dubai can be seen as a “television competition”; many pavilions had screens, screens, screens – millions of animations; it was impossible to watch everything (S15).* Virtual reality was referred to by three respondents, who said: *I’m not able to count the number of VRs I saw in various pavilions (S4); Elements based on virtual reality were integrated into the*

presentations of many countries – these were very advanced IT solutions (S9); Presentations were shown using VR platforms, multimedia films or special performance – in order to encourage people to visit a particular country (S18). As regards the issue of triggering escapism through ICT, the following opinions were given: It was definitely a technological Expo; innovative means of expression were evident in the most of pavilions (at least one of the presentation areas in almost every pavilion was based on such means); modern technologies were used to help escape from reality; in the most of the pavilions I indeed moved to another world (S12); It sometimes happened that you could forget about the whole world; as a matter of fact, the presentations were so beautiful – from animations on the screens and light illuminations, to concerts and other events (S18); We sometimes talked with each other about the fact that we perceived our stay at the Expo, thanks to the technological world created there, as a long dream – a dream that was intense and pleasant (S19).

Study participants indicated that the Expo was characterised by a unique atmosphere. In this context, the following answers were given: To tell about this exhibition seems to be a difficult task – I don't think it's possible to describe this unique atmosphere (S1); It was something you can't describe until you see it, I will recommend to all my friends to visit any of the future world exhibitions (S6); The Expo is amazing; I couldn't believe that I wasn't aware before that I could be a part of something so special (S10); It was such a magical micro-world for me – a little bit, like Disneyland (S3); When I walked through the Expo gate for the first time, I felt that it was a completely different world – something futuristic; something that I had never seen in any amusement park; it was really like science fiction (S16); The exhibition area was a completely different world; whenever I came there, I felt this unique atmosphere – I felt like I was in some kind of game or movie (S17); This “small world”, as I like to call the Expo, was something completely different from the reality I had always lived in; the exhibition was something I had never been able to imagine before; it was a completely new environment, so much different (S4). Many answers described the Expo grounds as a place where experiences were created in exhibition participants by giving entertainment (this was pointed out most often) and educating. The respondents pointed this out, saying: What mattered in the national presentations, was an element of entertainment – so that positive associations could be sparked off and thus the country be promoted – not only by giving dry facts (S2); I heard opinions that this was the best entertainment at that time in Dubai – because people could come to the Expo and have fun; the educational aspect was certainly important, too, because you could learn a lot about the exhibiting countries (S3); Many presentations provided a huge amount of information about the exhibiting country; however, what I've observed is that many countries also relied on entertainment, because it gave various opportunities to have fun (S5); Entertainment was most often used to encourage tourists to come over (S6); I would say that there was a lot of education during the Expo; but, in terms of the visitors' experience, I think that most of them, after a few hours of watching the exposition, no longer paid attention to information given in the pavilions; I would thus attach the greatest importance to entertainment (S11); It was impossible to leave the Expo without experiencing entertainment (S19); Entertainment certainly prevailed – because of the fact that most pavilions were multimedia pavilions (S20). It should be noted that some respondents linked the dominance of education or entertainment to the nature of the pavilion in which the country's presentation was taking place. This was because exhibitors presented themselves in facilities built in accordance with their own designs (having often original architecture) or in standardised pavilions, smaller and erected by the exhibition organiser. The former option was mostly used by rich and well-developed countries. In this context, the respondents said: In a situation where a country could afford to build its own pavilion, the presentation consists of many different components; whereas in the pavilions of poorer countries, education prevailed (S5); It seems to me that the African pavilions were very similar to each other; all of them had a lot of information with text, so education dominated in these presentations (S9); I think that in the smaller expositions knowledge was shared, because there everything was presented rather in such a way that you can see in a “museum” (there were a lot of photos with descriptions); it was a bit of a photo exhibition; I can link entertainment mainly with larger pavilions (S10); Contrary to large pavilions, smaller facilities didn't take that relaxed approach; there was too much content there; you walked in, you remembered something from the description, but in fact, when you entered the next pavilion, where there was the same form of communication, you had already forgotten what was there before (S8). The fact that the experiences of some people visiting the expositions were above average is evidenced by the following answers: Being at the Expo was a peculiar kind of experience – and that was not only from the tourists' perspective, but also for us, the pavilion personnel; it was just something you have to experience in order to know (S1); Expo 2020 Dubai was a great success of both the organisers and exhibitors; it was such an amazing experience, completely out of this world (S18). Several respondents, when describing their experiences, explicitly called it a “wow”, saying: What comes to mind in the context of the Expo is one big “wow” (S16); I think that wherever you went there, you could get something that captured your attention; everywhere, there was something different and something like a “wow”

(S13); *you could generally have that feeling of a “wow”; I all the time felt like visiting more and more; I just liked it there so much* (S17).

When experiences are provided with a lot of strong stimuli, sensory overload can occur. The respondents repeatedly implied that this phenomenon might happen to people taking part in world exhibitions. This view was corroborated by the following statements: *I associate the Expo with the enormity of everything; the multiplicity of stimuli and the crowds of visitors every day* (S11); *Overstimulation could be seen very clearly; we observed it ourselves, but we also saw it among the visitors;* (S1); *If you wanted to visit the entire Expo in one day, you might feel overstimulated* (S2); *It is a difficult task to see so much in a short period of time; especially when you learn about different cultures, meet very different people* (S5); *We were so overstimulated that I needed a lot of sleep to recover after returning from Dubai; at home it was so striking that nothing was happening* (S4); *There was an excess of everything during the exhibition; but you know, each exhibitor wanted to stand out* (S6); *Sometimes there were too many visual experiences for me: here something was flashing, there you could see something which appeared; here you had to look through glasses, and there, you had also to touch something at the same time; sometimes you weren't able to discover everything that a particular presentation had to offer; some pavilions were very large; going everywhere and seeing everything was too difficult, too engaging; many times you didn't know what “the author really had in mind”*; (S7); *I suddenly stood in the middle of a crossroads at the Expo and wondered what was going on – because: here, you could listen to someone speaking Arabic or English from loudspeakers; people were gathering close to me, pushing, taking pictures; right next to me there were queues for the pavilions; someone was talking to me; I simply told to myself: “somebody get me out of here”;* *sometimes, there were too many stimuli* (S16); *It seems to me that many pavilions had too many visitors at once; in such a crowd it was difficult to find one's way around, because here a child was crying, there a disabled person needed help, and somewhere else a couple of people came just to get some stamps [during each edition of Expos visitors can buy special passports in which they collect stamps from exhibitors] and what the country itself had to offer did not interest them; these people did not pay attention to presentations and were talking loudly* (S19). In the context of overstimulation, an interesting statement was made by respondent S1: *When I recall some of the pavilions, I can only say that there was too much of everything; I wasn't able to remember all the elements of the presentation; it seems to me that someone has to test what will be the reception of the exposition before a country goes to Expo; and the Polish pavilion, in the context of an excess of stimuli, was a kind of “relief”, an oasis of peace for visitors – such as the Chopin concerts; they were just such a brief respite; this is what distinguished our pavilion from other presentations* (S1). The need to find a space to rest was indicated by a study participant marked as S19: *When you wanted to go and rest, to lie down on that vast lawn, next to the main stage, it was impossible; something was going on there almost all the time – either rehearsals before big concerts, or concerts themselves; so there was no peaceful place at all.*

4. Discussions

As already noted, the scholarly literature does not present any view that would consider Expo grounds to be experiencescape for building the images of countries. However, one can relate the present study results to important conclusions of some researchers. According to Wang (2013, 109) the expo's national pavilions are constructed as branded spaces for winning the “hearts and minds” of a foreign public; what they offer is a form of “experiential goods”, like going to a movie or visiting an amusement park. Similar perceptions of the world exhibition grounds were manifested by interviewees. Some answers compared the Expo directly to amusement parks. It was also pointed out that national presentations were very often based on films – containing original content and displayed on unusual media. This is also evidenced by the findings announced by Smits and Jansen (2012, 173), who – based on their own research – argued that as the technology of display came to dominate in the twentieth century, nations during world exhibitions used film to project their identities through amusing experiences for visitors (movies became an integral aspect of displays). However, the study relating to Expo 2020 Dubai showed that countries' presentations were enriched, to a large extent, with digital components – in addition to films, the use of computer games and animations, especially virtual reality, is on the rise. It is the ICT area that the Expo is expected to grow in. Nevertheless, as one respondent noted, electronic communication cannot be improved indefinitely. That respondent said: *I think Osaka [the venue of the next world exhibition] or any other Expo can beat Dubai only in one aspect, namely that technology will change a lot in the coming years and it will be easier for countries to create something unbelievable; however, after what I saw in the United Arab Emirates I don't quite believe that in the next 10-15 years anyone will beat Expo 2020 Dubai* (S18).

For several decades now, researchers have been emphasising that modern consumers expect entertainment. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982, 132), embedding experiences in the emotional dimension, put it in

the form of “3F” – fantasies, feelings, fun. Moreover, as O’Dell (2005, 16) noted, experiencescape is a space of pleasure, enjoyment and entertainment. The analysis of the empirical material collected confirmed that world exhibitions are associated with entertainment that is engaging on an above-average level – primarily due to the experiences gained at national pavilions. As already noted, some respondents directly compared Expo 2020 Dubai to an amusement park. It is the opportunity to have fun that becomes the most important expectation of experiencescape. Entertainment is one of the components of customer experience, which were identified by Pine and Gilmore (1998, 102). These well-known researchers, the creators of the experience economy concept, taking into account the level of engagement of the recipients of marketing activities and their relationship with their environment, identified such realms of an experience as: entertainment, education, aesthetic, escapism. When asked about these dimensions, the respondents most often attributed two realms to the Expo – entertainment, as mentioned above, and education. Some answers mentioned escapism and the state of immersion a person could find themselves in when visiting national exhibitions or participating in events held on the exhibition grounds. According to Getz (2007, 241), in escaping everyday environment, people seek change and novelty, especially new experiences. Whereas as claimed by Goldblatt (1997) and Hiller (2000) in the context of world exhibitions, who were echoed by Björner and Berg (2012, 38), World Expos can offer unique experiences due to their high profile, short duration and distinguished difference from ordinary life, as well as their ceremonies and celebrations. That break from everyday life, through being in experiencescape, was mentioned by the respondents. They contended that the world created during the Expo was different (even as in a dream) and allowed them to forget about what was “outside”. In this case, they referred to getting into the state of immersion. As explained by Carù and Cova (2006), as well as Björner and Berg (2012, 40), this can be related to the process of “becoming one with the experience”. The respondents pointed out to the aesthetic value of national expositions the least often, which is in line with the results of other researchers dealing with world exhibitions (Wang, Lu, and Xia, 2012).

The literature on experience marketing, putting emphasis on how extremely important it is to appeal to human senses with intent, has been paying attention to sensory overload for some time (Pentz and Gerber, 2013; Doucé and Adams, 2020). The respondents also referred to this negative phenomenon. Not only world exhibition organisers, but also those who create the presentations of respective countries, cannot ignore the fact that overstimulation may occur. Indeed, as pointed out by Krishna (2012, 346), sensory overload can be overpowering so that any niceties of the experience are missed, which appears to be extremely relevant in the case of Expos. Sensory overload is a marked increase in the intensity of stimuli over the average level, which was characteristic of the Expo explored. This overload disrupts the cerebral processing of information and decreases the meaningfulness of the environment. This may entail a rise in perceived arousal and a decrease in perceived pleasantness (Ali and Srivastava, 2022, 114). This observation was reflected in the statements of Expo 2020 Dubai participants. The phenomenon of sensory overload, despite its vital importance for the proper building of experiencescape, has so far not been mentioned in publications on world exhibitions. Hence, it needs to be scientifically explored.

Conclusions and Further Research

Previous studies proved that participation in world exhibitions can effectively build the image of exhibiting countries (Abou-Shouk *et al.* 2018; Dogan, 2018; Kovačević, Hristov-Stančić and Zečević, 2024). However, to ensure that activities related to nation branding are effective, exhibitors’ presentations must keep up with the changing functions of Expos and meet the current expectations of visitors. The opinions provided by the interviews shape the image of today’s world fairs as performative events, during which strong stimuli and the latest means of expression are employed – to surprise and entertain pavilion visitors. Bringing them into a state of escapism (immersion) is becoming a task of overriding importance. Thus, world exhibitions have started to have the characteristics of experiencescape, which are described by five identified topics (categories).

The time spent by the personnel working in the Polish pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai, who were on the grounds of the event almost every day, was an opportunity to visit all the pavilions and observe the marketing activities of exhibiting countries. The findings revealed by the analysis of the answers received should be important implications for practitioners – those preparing national presentations, as well as managers responsible for preparing Expo grounds. In addition, these findings can be used to give recommendations for future research.

Several practical tips emerge from the respondents’ answers. In the context of overstimulation, which was mentioned by the respondents – both in the presentations of respective countries and in the events of expo organisers – one should be cautious about the number and intensity of stimuli provided. Given the limitations of human perception, exhibition organisers should encourage visitors to spread their Expo visits over a period of a

few days – to make sure that no single visit to the exhibition grounds is longer than several hours. It is also necessary to create “quiet zones”, that is places where people visiting an exhibition can rest. To avoid overcrowding, it is also advisable to control the number of people allowed to enter national pavilions and attend events held within the Expo area at the same time. In addition, what seems reasonable and was suggested by one of the respondents, each exhibiting country – using adequate marketing research methods – should check (anticipate) the reception of its presentation before building it at an Expo.

Contemporary world exhibitions are held every five years. With such long periods of time between these mega-events, a lot can change – both within the dimension of theoretical approaches to nation branding, and in many practical aspects of country presentations (e.g. new, even more immersive means of communication may emerge). Accordingly, each Expo edition should generate interest among researchers in different research contexts. Certainly, sensory overload, which was often referred to by participants to Expo 2020 Dubai, should become the area of exploration. Due to the increasing use of state-of-the-art IT solutions at Expos, it is advisable to carry out research dedicated to a phenomenon known as phygital, that is when reality is deeply intermingled with the virtual world. That phenomenon has been analysed in the scientific literature for several years (Johnson and Barlow, 2021; Batat 2024), but it has still not been linked to world exhibitions. The study presented herein focused on the immediate effects of actions taken in pavilions. Further explorations should also concentrate on the long-term impact of promotion in the experiencescape environment on the image of exhibitors.

The interview conducted has some limitations that should be eliminated in future research. First of all, the interviews covered only young people who were serving their internship in the Polish pavilion. In future explorations, researchers should also include in the group of respondents older people coming from different countries and being “typical” Expo visitors. In addition, the five themes identified can – as part of a more comprehensive approach (triangulation) – be explored using quantitative research; so as to gain a more in-depth understanding of experiencescape.

This article evaluates Expo 2020 Dubai as a space for providing experiences to visitors, and thus shaping the image of exhibiting countries. Hence, the adopted research objective has been attained. Given the above considerations, contemporary world exhibitions can be regarded as an environment that fully meets the requirements of experiencescape. Some respondents directly indicated that they had never participated in such an engaging, performative event before. The current Expo therefore has its own uniqueness, and the conditions created for marketing activities at modern world exhibitions should perhaps be referred to by a separate term – as exhibitscape. However, this uniqueness requires further scientific research.

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The author attests to having sole responsibility for the idea and layout of the paper, gathering empirical data, analysing, and interpreting the findings, and preparing the final manuscript preparation.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Declaration of Use of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

The author declares that he has not used generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process before submission, but only to improve the language and readability of their paper and with the appropriate disclosure.

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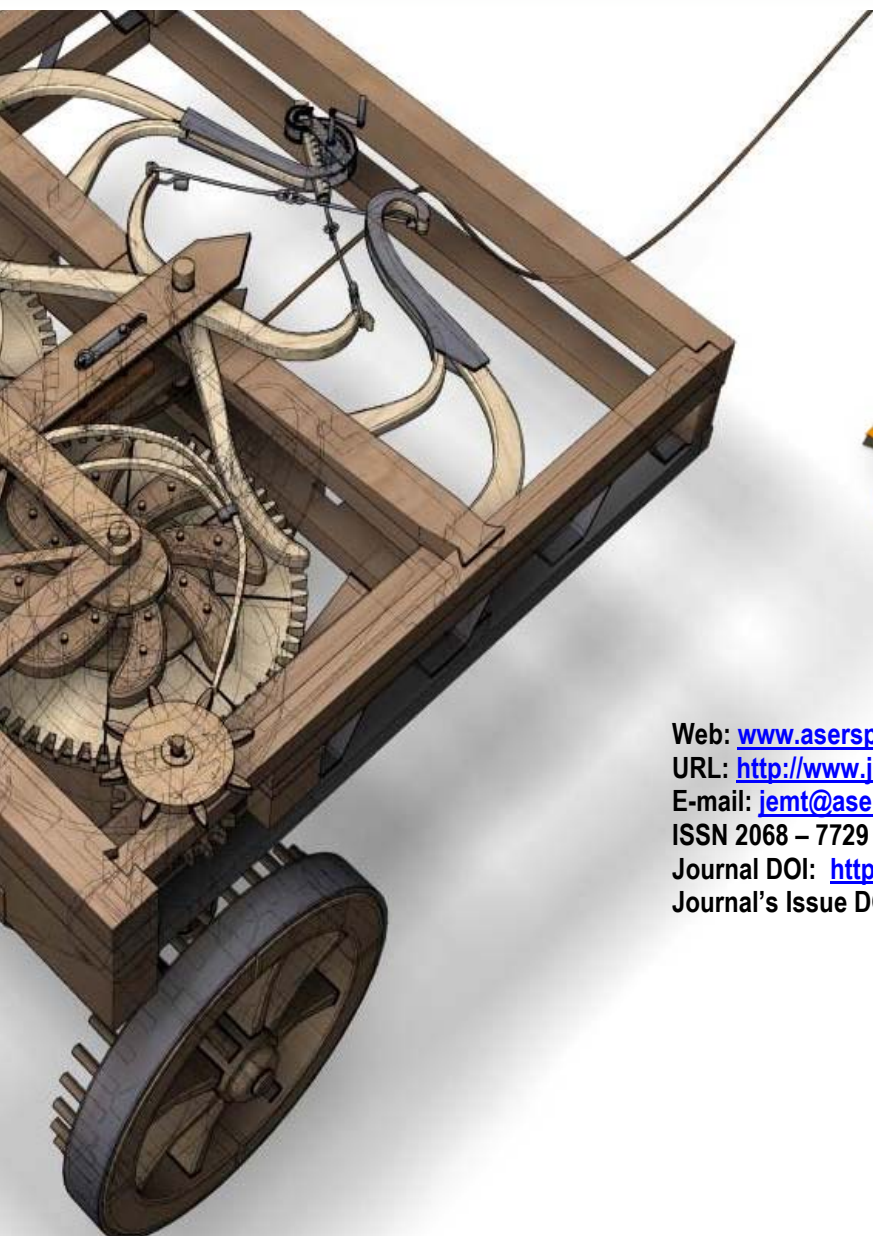
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