



## Research note

## A pre-event assessment of residents' reactions to Dubai Expo 2020

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Residents' reactions to mega events and human–place bonds have received limited attention in the tourism literature.
- Overall residents' attitude positively influences their intention to support place marketing and tourism development.
- Place identity mediates the relationship between place dependence and reactions to mega-events.
- Length of residence and gender do not have any moderating influence.
- Resident-place bonds may hinder resistance to the development of urban tourism surrounding mega events.

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## ABSTRACT

This study uses a sample drawn from 317 residents (Emiratis and expatriates) of the city of Dubai and a two-step procedure based on structural equation modelling and a conditional process analysis to investigate 1) the direct and/or indirect effects of place dependence and place identity on residents' reactions to mega events; 2) to provide the boundary conditions for these relationships by examining the role of length of residence and gender. The findings reveal the mediating role of place identity in the relationship between place dependence and residents' reactions to mega events, while there is no evidence of the moderating role of length of residence and gender. The proposed model visualises important interrelations between human–place bonds and how they may be converted into positive and supportive reactions.

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## 1. Introduction

Emerging metropolises such as Dubai, as opposed to older established ones, have become increasingly interested in the role that mega events can play in enhancing their development or consolidating their leadership at a regional, if not a global level (Hiller, 2000). Indeed, events contribute to increasing the destination's attractiveness, but they act primarily as key marketing propositions in the promotion of places to attract visitor spending, given the high level of global competition between cities (Getz & Page, 2016). The city of Dubai (UAE) bid and won the World Expo 2020 (October 2020–April 2021) which aims to connect more than 180 nations and to catch an international audience of 25 million visitors.

Tourism and urban researchers have recognized that hosts' interaction and support may create a special atmosphere and spontaneously transform an elitist mega event into an urban festival or celebration, which is likely to make it a significant urban experience for residents and guests alike (Hiller, 1990). Therefore, it is important not only to assess the residents' reactions to a mega event, but also to understand the factors that shape such reactions for local policy makers and businesses alike. Overall attachment to a place which comprises two components that are place dependence and place identity, has been linked to various positive outcomes (e.g. Ramkissoon, Smith, & Weiler, 2013; Tartaglia, 2012). Moreover, the determinants of hosts' attitudes towards mega events and particularly sporting events (e.g. Mihalik, 2001; Prayag, Hosany, Nunkoo, & Alders, 2013) and their support to tourism development (e.g. Sinclair-Maragh & Gursoy, 2016; Styliadis, Biran, Sit, & Szivas, 2014) are well researched. Nevertheless, the bonds that residents develop with the place they live in (i.e. place dependence and place identity) have been insufficiently taken into

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account in explaining their reactions and support to mega events. Moreover, the boundary conditions for these relationships (i.e. the potential moderating role of length of residence and gender) require further investigation. This study aims to address these gaps.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Mediating role of place identity

Place dependence refers to “when the occupants of a setting perceive that it supports their behavioural goals better than an alternative” (Williams & Roggenbuck, 1989, p. 1). According to Proshansky (1978, p. 155), place identity contains “those dimensions of self that define the individual’s personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, goals and behavioural tendencies and skills relevant to this environment”.

As place identity derives from the experiences individuals accumulate with a place (Ramkissoon & Mavondo, 2015), it is assumed that the meanings residents assign to a place are developed through the process of living in it. Consequently, place identity would be predicted by place dependence, in a functional-emotional causal chain. This view is supported by Moore and Graefe (1994) who found that place identity is predicted by trail users’ level of place dependence. Thus, we suggest that the greater the residents’ dependence on a place, the stronger the place identity.

Prayag et al. (2013) showed that attitudes and support are distinguishable but related. In this regard, Lee (2013) found that community attachment affects residents’ support for tourism development. This study endorses these views and propose that positive attitudes lead to generally supportive reactions to mega events and pro-tourism development behaviours.

However, the respective influence of place dependence and place identity on residents’ reactions remains unclear. Inferring from the preceding discussion, we speculate that place identity mediates the relationship between place dependence and residents’ reactions to mega events. Hence, the following four hypotheses are proposed:

- H1.** Place dependence positively influences place identity.
- H2.** Place dependence positively influences residents’ reactions to mega events.
- H3a.** Place identity positively influences residents’ reactions to mega events.
- H3b.** Place identity mediates the relationship between place dependence and residents’ reactions to mega events.

### 2.2. Length of residence and gender as potential moderators

By drawing on prior studies, the theoretical model (see Fig. 1) suggests that length of residence and gender moderate the relationship between place dependence and place identity. With regards to length of residence, several scholars empirically found that length of residence is a key factor in developing attachment bonds (e.g. Lewicka, 2005; Rollero & de Piccoli, 2010). However, how length of residence interacts with both place dependence and place identity is unknown. Arguably, residents who have been living longer in a city, are likely to establish more intense links, whether of dependence or identity, with the place they live in. This is hypothesized as follows:

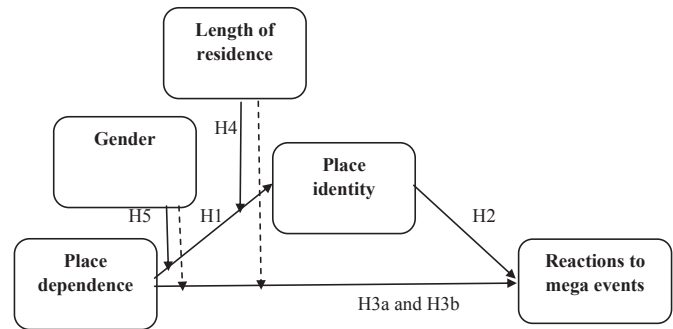


Fig. 1. Proposed theoretical model and the hypotheses.

**H4.** Length of residence moderates the relationship between place dependence and place identity.

Literature reveals that the degree of attachment varies with sex (e.g. Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001; Ramkissoon & Mavondo, 2015), while diverging results are reported (Rollero & de Piccoli, 2010). Thus, the role of gender requires additional investigation (Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012), particularly regarding how it may influence both place dependence and place identity. Hence, the following hypothesis is stated:

**H5.** Gender moderates the relationship between place dependence and place identity.

## 3. Methodology

In order to examine the hypothesized relationships, residents (i.e. individuals age 18 or above, who have been residing in Dubai for at least one year) were surveyed with a self-administered questionnaire in shopping areas, coffee shops, various workplaces, and the Dubai International Airport. Inhabitants were approached using a respondent-driven sampling method which derives from snowball sampling (see Heckathorn, 2002). This method may help to overcome the difficulties in accessing non-Emiratis.

The usable sample size was 317 respondents, consisting of Emiratis/locals and non-Emiratis/expatriates (individuals were defined as expats if they possessed foreign nationality), and ensured roughly a 10/90 share, which aimed to reflect the proportion of the total population of the city. Sample descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.

Place dependence was assessed using four items adapted from Williams and Vaske (2003). Place identity was measured with ten items borrowed from Jorgensen and Stedman (2001), Williams and Vaske (2003), and Felonneau (2004). The latter items aimed to embrace an explicit social dimension of the resident's relation to

Table 1  
Sample descriptive statistics.

Socio-demographics	Frequency	Percentage		
<b>Gender</b>				
Female	142	44.8		
Male	175	55.2		
<b>Level of education</b>				
Undergraduate	217	68.5		
Graduate	88	27.8		
Post graduate	12	3.8		
	Mean	Standard deviation (S.D.)	Minimum	Maximum
<b>Age</b>	28.46	8.58	18	74
<b>Length of residence</b>	12.80	8.69	1	39

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