

## EVOLVING PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN THE UAE: ITS ROLE IN NATION BRANDING AND GLOBAL IMAGE BUILDING

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### Abstract

Public diplomacy is crucial in shaping a country's image and reputation. This study explores the development of the UAE's public diplomacy, its impact on nation branding and image-building, and the levels of practice applied. Golan's (2013) Integrated Approach to Public Diplomacy provides the framework, encompassing three levels: mediated level, nation branding and country reputation level, and relational level. Using a qualitative method, the research draws on in-depth interviews with 11 participants representing both state and non-state actors in the UAE. Findings reveal that UAE public diplomacy has progressed through three stages: before the Union, from the Union's establishment until the late 1980s, and from the 1990s to the present. The study highlights the UAE's transformation into a hub for global talent and workers, enhancing trust through education, culture, peace, and tolerance. It shows the relational level as the UAE's dominant approach, reflected in cultural diplomacy, humanitarian aid, and shared values.

**Keywords:** public diplomacy, image-building, nation branding, state actor, non-state actor, UAE

### Introduction

Public diplomacy enables countries to communicate with foreign publics through the support of both state and non-state actors. Thus, this diplomacy is open to more than just diplomats. It uses communication programs and two-way communication to attract the foreign publics and have mutual understanding (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992; Anholt, 2015). Many studies examined public diplomacy from a theoretical perspective, and few studies examine it through a communication and public relations perspective (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992; Yun & Toth, 2009; Fitzpatrick et al., 2013; Grigorescu & Fawaz, 2014; Golan & Yang, 2015; Vanc & Fitzpatrick, 2016).

This qualitative research draws on the Integrated Approach of Public Diplomacy of Golan (2013) as a theoretical framework consisting of three interrelated levels: the mediated level, the nation brand and country reputation, and the relational level to examine the UAE context. Integrating these three levels creates a positive long-term engagement outcome between the government and the foreign public (Golan, 2013; Golan, 2015; Golan & Yang, 2015).

Related to the UAE context, most of the studies examined the UAE's foreign policy, soft power, nation branding, trade attraction, and innovation interest (Abdulla, 2014; Zeineddine, 2017; Guéraiche, 2019; Alsuwaidi, 2021; Denwood, 2022; Albayrakoglu, 2023).

Therefore, this research study sheds light on determining the UAE's public diplomacy development, the impact of public diplomacy on the UAE's image-building and branding, and evaluates the levels of public diplomacy employed.

The UAE's practice of public diplomacy is built on the vision and values of the late Sheikh Zayed, the UAE's founder, such as peace, stability, and tolerance (Nusseibeh, 2020). Its passport is ranked first as the most powerful in the world ("United Arab Emirates Passport Dashboard", 2025). It attracted more than 200 nationalities to live and work on its land ("Facts and Figures", 2023). Also, in 2022, the UAE ranked first as a country where Arab youth want to live (Mansoor, 2022). Thus, the focus of this research study is on the UAE. The study's findings can help public diplomacy researchers understand how to build a strong and positive image on the global stage. By looking at the UAE's example, it shows how nations can use public diplomacy to foster trust, create international relationships, and promote their values through cultural exchange, innovation, and humanitarian efforts. It's a practical guide for countries aiming to enhance their reputation and influence in today's interconnected world. Ultimately, this research study attempts to answer the following key questions:

1. When did the UAE's public diplomacy start?
2. To what extent does the UAE's public diplomacy affect the country's image-building and nation-branding?
3. To what extent does the UAE public diplomacy implement the integrated public diplomacy model?

### **Literature review**

This literature review begins by defining the key concepts of public diplomacy and nation branding, exploring their individual characteristics and significance. It then delves into the relationship between the two, highlighting their overlapping objectives and distinct approaches in shaping a nation's image and influence in the global arena.

Related to public diplomacy, many researches illustrated the concept of public diplomacy and clarified its importance for governments to communicate with their foreign public (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992; Yun & Toth, 2009; Grigorescu & Fawaz, 2014; Anholt, 2015; Hunt, 2016).

Hunt (2016) stated that Gullion established the Edward R. Murrow Centre of Public Diplomacy in 1965, where the concept of public diplomacy was formally defined. According to this definition, public diplomacy addresses the role of public opinion in shaping and carrying out foreign policy. It broadens international relations beyond traditional government-to-government diplomacy to include efforts by states to influence foreign publics, the engagement of private groups across borders, and the impact of international news coverage on policy decisions. It also highlights exchanges among professional communicators—such as diplomats and foreign correspondents—alongside the wider processes of intercultural communication.

Traditional public diplomacy is a one-way transmission of information or political information for advocacy to foreign publics to influence their behaviour and the foreign government's behaviour. On the other hand, contemporary public diplomacy emphasises the role of the genuine actors, the migrants, since they are exposed to the country's soft power. Thus, contemporary public diplomacy confirms the importance of two-way information exchange, soft power, and mutual understanding in attracting the foreign public (Anholt, 2015). Thus, public diplomacy uses communication programs to change the attitudes of the foreign public and influence them to influence the foreign government. In addition, public diplomacy came as a shift from traditional diplomacy, which emphasises government-to-government communication, to public diplomacy, which emphasises direct and indirect participation of government, and non-governmental such as groups and individuals in the foreign policy decisions of a government. This shift toward public diplomacy resulted from

the emergence of communication technologies and public participation in foreign affairs (Signitzer& Coombs, 1992). Moreover, public diplomacy is considered government support for exchanging ideas and information on culture and education toward foreign audiences to protect the state's image and economic, cultural, or linguistic interests (Grigorescu& Fawaz, 2014).

Regarding nation branding, Simion et al. (2017) define it as the process by which a nation actively seeks to create a unique and competitive identity to establish itself, both locally and internationally, as an attractive destination for tourism, trade, and investment. This process intends to provide that nation with an identity by forming a true, positive, and attractive image (p. 17). According to Szondi (2010), nation branding occurs when a government or a private company uses its power to persuade those who can change a nation's image. It uses branding tools to positively alter or change a nation's behaviour, attitudes, identity, or image (p. 335). Thus, it is possible to argue that the terms 'place branding', 'city branding' and 'nation branding' are three concepts that are used interchangeably to refer to the same idea. They share similar characteristics in terms of process and goals. They all work on branding a specific area, place, city, emirate, or nation.

After defining and explaining the concepts of public diplomacy and nation branding, it is crucial to emphasize their similarities and differences in order to better comprehend their interconnected yet distinct roles in shaping a nation's global image and influence.

Melissan (2005) found that public diplomacy and nation branding conduct similar programs and activities to influence their target audiences. Additionally, he emphasised the relationship between these two concepts by stating, "Nation-branding and public diplomacy are sisters under the skin" (p. 19).

Public diplomacy focuses on identity, reputation, and reciprocal ties between countries and individuals, which calls for trust and helps develop a nation's brand (Molleda& Kochhar, 2019). However, public diplomacy and nation branding are different approaches (Melissen, 2005). According to Donfried (2017), the programs and activities of nation branding are various: research, conferences, publications, exhibitions, fairs, youth programs, and academic and scientific exchange.

Related to the target audience, public diplomacy targets foreign publics, specifically a group of political or cultural elites (Public Diplomacy & Nation Branding, 2012). While nation branding targets both the domestic public and the foreign public. The domestic public plays a vital role in branding their nation by serving as brand ambassadors, contributing to national pride. On the other hand, the foreign publics are mass audience targeted by nation branding (Szondi, 2008).

Nation branding requires a long-term strategy with financial and human resources. It aims to create the required image and reputation of the nation to the world. It applies the techniques of branding and marketing communications to promote the nation's image. Additionally, it is considered a strategic self-representation that a country employs to create its reputational capital through the promotion of social, political, and economic interests both nationally and internationally. It is a uniform concept, whereas a country's history and culture can influence public diplomacy (Szondi, 2008). The country is judged by what it does, not by what it says. Thus, the country should enhance its international image and reputation by focusing on its products and services (Anholt, 2015).

Related to the role of governments and non-state actors in public diplomacy, the role of governments is decreasing, while the role of non-state actors and NGOs is increasing. Additionally, it is shifting to the private sector, with a growing dependence on consultants who provide services to the government. In the context of nation branding, practitioners seek more governmental involvement to achieve a holistic view of the nation (Szondi, 2008).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on the integrated public diplomacy model, which provides three levels of engagement: the mediated level, the nation brand and country reputation level, and the relational level. By integrating these three levels, a positive long-term engagement outcome is created between the government and the foreign public (Golan, 2013; Golan, 2015; Golan & Yang, 2015).

The mediated level is a short to medium-term perspective with a country's interest in shaping and influencing its frames in global media news. The country aims to promote its agenda and frames to impact foreign audiences' opinions through mass media and social media. The country focuses on foreign mass media outlets since the foreign public gets information about other nations from mass media outlets. Therefore, many countries worldwide allocate specific amounts of money for international broadcasting channels.

Nation brand and country reputation level is a medium to long-term perspective. It is related to country's efforts in establishing and promoting its national brand information subsidies and speeches as one-way communication. Thus, the use of new media support countries in creating relationship communication with foreign audiences which enhances the country's efforts in building its brand and managing its perception. Also, the competitive identity presented by Anholt helps nations present themselves holistically to other nations by considering how the image of the country developed. This level requires a successful level of mediated public diplomacy to enhance a successful effort to brand the nation and country's reputation.

The relational level is a long-term perspective that focuses on the efforts of the government, corporations, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in managing, building, and maintaining relationships with foreign publics. It aims to maintain the mutual relationship between the country and the foreign public through soft power programs, such as development and exchange programs, and aid. The success of this long-term relationship is based on the success of the organisation, corporation, or NGO in communicating its culture, values, and policies to the target audiences.

### **The UAE as the Case of this Study**

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is located in the southeastern part of Asia, on the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula. The Arabian Gulf borders it to the north and northwest, Saudi Arabia to the west and south, and Oman to the southeast. It is a constitutional federation comprising seven emirates, with Abu Dhabi as its capital. Arabic is the national language, and Islam is the state religion. The UAE was established on December 2, 1971, under the leadership of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the country's founding President, who served until his passing in 2004. Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan succeeded him, leading from 2004 until 2022. The current president, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, became President on May 14, 2022, and also serves as the Ruler of Abu Dhabi. The UAE's foreign policy is moderate, emphasising peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and non-interference in other countries' internal affairs. Advocating for dialogue and international collaboration, the UAE participates in global efforts to combat human trafficking and terrorism and promote human rights ("Fact sheet", 2025). The UAE's passport is ranked first as the most powerful in the world ("United Arab Emirates Passport Dashboard", 2025). It attracted more than 200 nationalities to live and work on its land ("Facts and Figures", 2023). Additionally, the UAE hosted Expo 2020 for six months, with participation from 192 countries worldwide (Mansoor, 2022a). Moreover, it has branches of many reputable cultural and educational landmarks, such as the Louvre Museum, Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi, and New York University Abu Dhabi.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method with a historical design to explore the developmental stages of public diplomacy in the UAE since its union. Qualitative research focuses on understanding participants' meanings in natural settings through observation, interviews, and case studies (Arghode, 2012). This study utilises in-depth interviews as primary data to gather detailed information about the developmental stages of public diplomacy in the UAE since the union, as well as its impact on the country's image-building and nation branding.

The study's participants include state and non-state actors involved in UAE public diplomacy. The sample consists of 11 participants: five state actors from the government and private sectors, and six non-state actors from NGOs and individuals such as scholars and researchers. Snowball sampling was employed, allowing participants to recommend others with relevant expertise. This approach is effective for accessing difficult-to-reach participants or addressing sensitive topics (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). Participants referred the researcher to others, creating a chain of qualified contributors (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010).

Guided by Golan's integrated public diplomacy approach (2013), the selection of participants aimed to assess the approach's application in UAE public diplomacy. State actors included representatives from institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Office of Public and Cultural Diplomacy, UAE diplomats, Sharjah Institute for Heritage, and Barjeel Art Foundation. Non-state actors were selected from NGOs and individuals with knowledge of UAE public diplomacy, including members of UNESCO's Intangible Heritage Committee, professors, researchers, and Emirati students studying abroad.

Interviews were conducted in various formats based on participants' preferences: five were face-to-face, four were online (via MS Teams and Zoom), one was over the phone, and one was by email. To ensure participant comfort and candid responses, face-to-face interviews were held at locations chosen by the participants. All interviews were recorded with consent and lasted between 1.5 and 2.5 hours. The data collection spanned six months, from December 2023 to May 2024. Recorded interviews were transcribed, translated from Arabic to English, and analysed.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. This method identifies patterns, codes, and themes to craft a narrative and derive meaningful conclusions (Delve, 2020). The process involves five steps: transcription, coding, categorisation, interpretation, and thematic conclusion (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative studies typically generate five to seven themes. This method provided a structured approach to answering the research questions and uncovering significant insights into the UAE's public diplomacy.

## Results

### The Development Stages of the UAE Public Diplomacy

Interviews with state and non-state actors revealed that the UAE's public diplomacy has evolved through three stages: before the country's union, from the union until the 1980s, and from the 1990s to the present. NSA4 confirmed that the UAE has practised public diplomacy since its establishment, but noted it has undergone significant changes. He remarked,

"There is a big difference between the public diplomacy of the UAE in 2024 and what that diplomacy was like with the modest capabilities of the UAE in 1971."

### The First Stage: Before the Country's Union

State and non-state actors (SA1, SA2, NSA2, NSA3, and NSA6) indicated that the UAE's public diplomacy existed before the union. NSA3 highlighted the UAE's prehistoric heritage, emphasising that life and diplomacy in the region date back over 5,000 years. According to



NSA2, the UAE region comprised Arab tribes, coastal settlers, and mountain dwellers. Tribes worked together to face challenges, forming strong bonds that reflected trust, honesty, and generosity. NSA6 shared an example of trust, noting,

“The people in India gave to the people of this region any material they wanted and told them to give back the money when they had it.”

Trade relations with India, Iran, and East Africa were key precursors to communication with the outside world. NSA6 mentioned that 70% of the pearl diving sites were located in UAE waters, a testament to the region’s generosity and openness. This openness extended to Sheikh Zayed’s vision of building alliances with neighbouring countries. NSA2 explained,

“The late Sheikh Zayed had the aspiration to get to know the countries surrounding him first and foremost because he was an expert in establishing alliances.”

Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed shared a similar vision, focusing on trade and building bridges with Iran, India, and Zanzibar. Their efforts culminated in the UAE’s union on December 2, 1971.

### **The Second Stage: From the Country’s Union Until the End of the 1980s**

The UAE’s establishment in 1971 was grounded in values of tolerance, peace, and love instilled by Sheikh Zayed. SA1, NSA1, and NSA3 noted regional challenges, yet Sheikh Zayed’s diplomacy led to international recognition within a week of the union. NSA1 highlighted the role of Adnan Al-Bajaji, an Iraqi advisor to Sheikh Zayed, who represented the UAE at the United Nations.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the UAE prioritised internal development. NSA4 remarked,

“The UAE did not perhaps give public diplomacy great importance during the founding periods, due to our preoccupation with the interior.”

Efforts were focused on building institutions and fostering national identity. Simultaneously, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs implemented foreign policy, established embassies, and strengthened international relations. Sheikh Zayed’s diplomatic wisdom was often praised, with NSA1 noting,

“He was a wise man and called the wise man of the Arabs.”

### **The Third Stage: From the 1990s to the Present**

Since the 1990s, the UAE has progressed in sustainability, clean energy, space exploration, and humanitarian aid. Initiatives like hosting the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) headquarters and developing renewable energy projects have enhanced its global reputation. NSA4 emphasised,

“Public diplomacy today is perhaps as important as the official diplomacy practised by the embassy.”

Humanitarian efforts remain a central component of the UAE’s public diplomacy. SA5 highlighted the UAE’s commitment to providing aid without discrimination. This focus on global partnerships and aid showcases the UAE’s role as a rising regional power.

### **The Impact of Public Diplomacy on the Country’s Image-Building and Branding.**

Public diplomacy and the UAE’s image-building are intertwined. SA2 stated,

“The country’s brand is what its public diplomacy has led it to be.”

NSA4 echoed this, defining public diplomacy as any activity enhancing the UAE’s reputation. Five themes define this impact: strengthening the economy, being a donor country, acting as a peacemaker, becoming a destination for expat workers, and gaining global trust.

### **Strengthening the UAE’s Economy**

Public diplomacy has bolstered the UAE’s economy. SA2 noted its positive impact on economic and financial outcomes, highlighting strong ties with India. SA4 remarked that the UAE has become a tourism hub, attracting over 15 million tourists annually. NSA2

emphasised the success of events like Expo 2020 and COP 28, which have enhanced the UAE's global image.

### **A Donor Country**

The UAE's commitment to humanitarian aid has established it as a donor country. NSA4 noted that the UAE allocates a significant percentage of its GDP to assist nations in need. SA4 mentioned that over 147 countries benefit from the UAE's aid, free from political bias. NSA1 emphasised the humanitarian nature of these efforts, stating,

“Humanitarian operations always go to the heart of the people, the heart of the targeted human being.”

Since 1971, the UAE has sustained its humanitarian efforts. NSA1 shared examples of the UAE's aid in Gaza, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and other crises, adding that the UAE's reputation often precedes its diplomats.

### **The UAE as a Peacemaker**

The UAE positions itself as a mediator and global peacemaker. NSA4 explained, “The UAE seeks to present itself as a peacemaker, mediating in disputes and positioning itself as a pivot of global moderation.”

NSA3 noted that the UAE's efforts in promoting tolerance and peace attract global collaboration. Initiatives such as the Global Council for Tolerance and Peace, as well as the establishment of a Ministry of Tolerance, underscore this commitment.

### **A Destination for Expat Workers**

The UAE's values of tolerance and peace have made it a destination for expatriates. SA4 noted that Sheikh Zayed's strategy of fostering friendship among cultures laid the foundation for religious freedom and mutual respect. NSA2 added that humane treatment and legal protections for workers enhance the UAE's reputation. Laws ensuring workers' rights reflect the country's commitment to fairness and dignity.

### **Gaining Global Trust**

**Achieving First Place in Global Indicators.** The UAE's reliable diplomacy has earned it global respect. NSA1 highlighted the UAE passport's strength, allowing entry to over 170 countries visa-free. SA3 emphasised the Schengen visa exemption for Emirati citizens. NSA2 noted that these achievements reflect the UAE's commitment to security, happiness, and combating extremism. In 2020, the UAE ranked 18th globally in the Soft Power Index, showcasing its success in fostering innovation and tolerance.

**Membership in Prestigious International Organisations.** Despite being a young nation, the UAE actively participates in international organisations. NSA3 highlighted its role in the Gulf Cooperation Council and Arab League, promoting security and cooperation. NSA5 mentioned memberships in UNESCO, ICCROM, and other organisations, which enhance the UAE's cultural presence. NSA5 stated,

“Being part of these organisations enhances the UAE's positive image and gives the country a cultural presence.”

**Hosting Prestigious Institutions and Museums.** The UAE's public diplomacy has attracted world-class educational institutions and cultural centres, including Sorbonne University, New York University, and the Louvre Museum in Abu Dhabi. NSA2 noted the diversity of international universities in the UAE, providing global education opportunities.

**A Global Hub for Culture and Intellectual Exchange.** Sharjah's cultural initiatives have established it as a hub for intellectual and cultural activities. NSA5 highlighted the emirate's efforts in hosting cultural weeks and translating works into multiple languages. He noted that Sharjah's achievements, such as being named the Cultural Capital of the Arab World in 1998, have enhanced its global visibility. NSA5 remarked,

“Sharjah has become a destination for Arabs seeking to publish books, complete research projects, or stage theatre performances.”

These efforts collectively reflect the UAE’s commitment to public diplomacy, fostering its global reputation and positioning it as a leader in culture, tolerance, and international cooperation.

## Discussion

This study has aimed to define the start of implementing the UAE’s public diplomacy, investigate its effect on image-building and branding, and determine the levels of public diplomacy the UAE uses.

The first research question (RQ1) aimed to determine the start of implementing public diplomacy in the UAE. The results showed that the UAE’s public diplomacy has progressed through three stages, strategically aligning with its national priorities and international aspirations.

**Before the Union: Informal Diplomacy Rooted in Trust and Openness.** Public diplomacy in the UAE did not begin after the union; it started before it, as confirmed by state and non-state actors. As noted by NSA3, the UAE is an ancient country with a history of communication among its people. Informal and decentralised forms of diplomacy characterise the pre-union period. According to NSA2, the tribes of Al Nahyan in Abu Dhabi, Al Maktoum in Dubai, Al Qasimi in Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah, Al Nuaimi in Ajman, and Al Mualla in Umm Al Qaiwain collaborated to address the challenges posed by scarce economic resources. As NSA2 noted,

“All these tribes played positive roles in the cohesion and cooperation to overcome the difficulties of living in a region with scarce economic resources. They could withstand many of these challenges; over hundreds of years, they maintained their presence and belonging to this region over hundreds of years.”

In addition, the characteristics of the people, such as honesty, integrity, and fair dealings, fostered confidence in external communities, including India, in commercial interactions, marking one of the early stages of public diplomacy. Relationships were built on trade and interpersonal trust rather than formal institutional mechanisms. The UAE region, comprising tribal societies, maintained diplomatic and trade relationships with neighbouring regions such as India, Iran, and East Africa. These relationships demonstrated foundational values like honesty, generosity, and mutual trust. For instance, the pearl trade, a key economic activity, established the UAE’s reputation for fairness and integrity in commerce. Traders from the region were known to provide more than the measured weight in sales, guided by the Quran principles of fairness, which created long-lasting goodwill. Trade with India was conducted based on trust, with Indian merchants supplying goods to Emirati traders without requiring formal payment guarantees. This reflects the deep interpersonal and cultural bonds that predated the country’s formation.

These interactions helped establish the foundation for the UAE’s subsequent efforts to formalise and enhance its diplomatic practices, building on these intrinsic values.

Furthermore, the alliances with the Gulf countries, Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Oman, led by the late Sheikh Zayed and Sheikh Rashid, laid the groundwork for public diplomacy and ultimately contributed to the creation of the Union in 1971.

**From Union to the end of the 1980s: Building the Foundations of Modern Diplomacy.** The formation of the UAE in 1971 marked the beginning of a new era of diplomacy. According to SA4, the late Sheikh Zayed exemplified a diplomatic approach founded on tolerance, peace, and cross-cultural friendship. His efforts to reconcile disputes among tribes



and promote unity within the UAE established a stable foundation for the newly formed country. In the same vein, SA2 stated,

“The founder of the Union, Sheikh Zayed, is an example of how public diplomacy should be formed. When he meets with presidents or ordinary people from other countries and welcomes guests, he does so with tolerance, love, and a sense of human brotherhood. This aligns with the public diplomacy index because it leaves people thinking that Emiratis are good. As a country, the UAE welcomes its guests and foreigners who live there.”

The UAE gained swift international recognition, with support from the United Nations and the Arab League, for its status as an independent state. Figures like Adnan Al-Bajaji, who hoisted the UAE flag at the UN, represented the country's early diplomatic achievements.

As noted by SA4, SA5, and NSA2, the primary focus during this period was on internal nation-building and establishing institutional frameworks. The government prioritised infrastructure, education, and the creation of a coherent national identity, relegating public diplomacy to a supportive role. This aligns with the work of Abdulla (2014), who mentioned the country's focus during the Zayed era on establishing a new small country with Emirati, Arab, and Islamic identity.

It is worth mentioning that the UAE focused on institutionalising its foreign policy through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The ministry facilitated the establishment of embassies globally and managed diplomatic relations, as confirmed by SA5. Even though public diplomacy was not a central focus during this stage, these efforts laid the groundwork for more extensive engagement in the years to come.

**From the 1990s to the Present: Comprehensive Diplomacy.** The third stage marks the UAE's increasing interest in public diplomacy at the international level. This phase is characterised by a broader range of public diplomacy efforts closely aligning with the country's national priorities. It emphasises key initiatives such as sustainability and innovation, humanitarian aid, and global ambitions, as confirmed by SA2, SA5, NSA4, and NSA6.

SA2 said the UAE hosted the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) headquarters and launched global renewable energy projects, including Masdar's solar energy initiative in Fujai. Moreover, he said,

“These initiatives reflect the UAE's commitment to sustainable development and its use of soft power. Also, it has increased the country's reputation.”

Concerning humanitarian aid, SA5 confirmed the country's support for nations and individuals worldwide, irrespective of race, religion, gender, or colour. NSA4 highlighted the UAE's accomplishments and global aspirations by focusing on space exploration, such as the UAE Mars Mission, emphasising its vision to lead in science and innovation.

The second research question (RQ2) aimed to explore the impact of the UAE public diplomacy on the country's image-building and branding. The findings of this study highlight the influence of public diplomacy in shaping the UAE's image and brand. Integrating the perspectives of state and non-state actors underscores the multidimensional role of public diplomacy in fostering economic growth, cultural exchange, humanitarian initiatives, and global trust. NSA4 explained that public diplomacy encompasses any activity or action conducted to promote the UAE's status, reputation, credibility, and image, whether in sports, environmental, security, economic, or investment contexts. This definition of public diplomacy by NSA4 aligns with the definition of Grigorescu and Fawaz (2014), which involves exchanging information about a country's education and culture with the foreign public to protect its image and cultural and economic interests. The goal of both definitions is

the country's image and reputation. SA3 also emphasised how public diplomacy helps earn respect and appreciation from the international community while enhancing the nation's prestige and admiration on the global stage.

This discussion explores the key themes regarding the impact of UAE public diplomacy on its image-building and branding. These themes include establishing the UAE as a destination for global talent and workers, fostering global trust through education and culture, advocating for peace and tolerance, and enhancing its global economic and humanitarian leadership as a donor nation.

**A Destination for Global Talent and Workers.** The UAE's welcoming attitude towards expatriates is another cornerstone of its public diplomacy. By upholding values of tolerance and respect, the UAE has become home to over 200 nationalities. SA4 noted, "The UAE treats everyone with love and respect," a sentiment that resonates globally, encouraging skilled workers and professionals to contribute to the nation's development. The country's comprehensive labour laws and humane treatment of expatriates further enhance its reputation as a destination of choice for global talent.

**Building Global Trust Through Education and Culture.** The UAE's public diplomacy has fostered trust and credibility on the international stage, as evidenced by the establishment of branches of prestigious universities and cultural institutions. The presence of institutions like Sorbonne University and the Louvre Museum in Abu Dhabi exemplifies the UAE's commitment to educational and cultural excellence. NSA2 highlighted the unique diversity of educational opportunities, stating, "Those who cannot travel to the USA, Canada, or Australia can come to the UAE." This accessibility, coupled with the UAE's ranking as a top global passport holder, underscores its effective diplomacy and global influence.

Concerning culture, Sharjah's cultural initiatives have further enhanced the UAE's global presence. As a hub for translation and intellectual exchange, Sharjah has fostered connections with global capitals, enhancing the UAE's cultural visibility. NSA5 noted that Sharjah's efforts in translation and cultural activities have made it a destination for Arabs seeking to publish books, complete research projects, study, or stage theatre performances. These initiatives exemplify the UAE's broader commitment to cultural diplomacy, which enhances its nation brand through intellectual and artistic endeavours.

**Championing Peace and Tolerance.** Public diplomacy has also positioned the UAE as a global advocate for peace and tolerance. NSA3 observed, "The world is in dire need of tolerance, love, and peace," highlighting the UAE's efforts to mediate conflicts and promote moderation. The establishment of initiatives such as the Global Council for Tolerance and Peace, as well as the Ministry of Tolerance, further demonstrates the nation's commitment to promoting harmony on the international stage. These endeavours contribute significantly to the UAE's image as a peacemaker and a promoter of global stability.

**Enhancing Global Economic.** Public diplomacy emerges as a cornerstone of the UAE's strategy to strengthen its economic and cultural presence. Through robust diplomatic efforts, the UAE has cultivated strategic relationships with key global players, including India, resulting in tangible economic benefits, such as expanded market access. SA2 remarked, "Without a strong relationship with India, Emiratis would not have access to 12 to 14 airports there," emphasising the economic dividends of such partnerships.

Furthermore, the UAE's positioning as a global tourism hub, hosting over 15 million tourists annually (SA4), and its success in organising international events like Expo 2020 and COP28 illustrate the synergy between public diplomacy and cultural engagement. These efforts not only enhance the UAE's global reputation but also drive economic growth through cultural and intellectual exchange, reinforcing the nation's brand as a global leader.

Moreover, SA4 affirmed that public diplomacy has bolstered the UAE's global standing, enhancing its competitiveness and fostering regional and international cooperation.

**Humanitarian Leadership: The UAE as a Donor Nation.** The UAE's humanitarian contributions have been pivotal in fostering its image as a compassionate and proactive donor country. NSA1 eloquently stated, "Humanitarian operations always go to the heart of the people, the heart of the targeted human being, because it is completely linked to giving." By allocating a significant portion of its GDP to humanitarian aid, the UAE has extended its assistance to over 147 countries, transcending political and cultural divides. This unwavering commitment, deeply rooted in the principles of Sheikh Zayed, has solidified the UAE's reputation as a beacon of generosity and inclusivity.

The third question (RQ3) aimed to examine the extent to which the UAE implements the integrated public diplomacy model, which consists of the mediated, nation brand, and country reputation level, as well as the relational level.

The results indicate that the most applied level is the relational level. This level involves a long-term relationship grounded in the efforts of the government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to build and maintain connections with the foreign public through soft power programs, such as humanitarian aid and exchange programs. The success of this level relies on effectively communicating local values, culture, and policies to the foreign public. As previously presented, the UAE effectively conveyed its values to the foreign public before the union during the period of pearl diving and trade travels to India. The Emirati people exemplified tolerance, generosity, and trust, which attracted individuals to the UAE region. Indian merchants would lend goods to Emiratis without requiring their addresses, as confirmed by NSA6.

Furthermore, this relational level is implemented at the second level of UAE public diplomacy, extending from the country's union until the end of the 1980s. This was evident in the nation's commitment to fostering relationships with the foreign public, exemplified by its pursuit of UN membership and support from Arab nations such as Morocco and Egypt, as confirmed by SA1, NSA1, and NSA3.

Moreover, it has applied this level at the third stage since the 1990s. This is evident in the establishment of international partnerships, such as having the headquarter of the International Renewable Energy Agency in the UAE and working on a project in Fiji that utilises solar energy to generate electricity, thereby providing the island with a reliable and sustainable power source, as confirmed by SA2.

In relation to humanitarian aid, the UAE's provision of assistance to over 147 countries, free from political bias, exemplifies its relational diplomacy. These efforts demonstrate its commitment to global solidarity and are regarded as genuine expressions of its values. Examples include COVID-19 relief, infrastructure support in Gaza, and long-term partnerships with African, Asian, and Arab countries.

Also, the UAE promotes tolerance and cultural exchange through initiatives like launching the Ministry of Tolerance in 2016, being a member of the Global Council for Tolerance and Peace since its establishment in 2017 and choosing an Emirati to be its president, and its role as the cultural capital of the Arab and Islamic world in 1998 and 2014 (e.g., Sharjah's UNESCO recognition). These efforts foster goodwill and enhance its relationships with diverse global communities.

The nation brand and country reputation level is also relevant in the UAE. This approach adopts a medium to long-term perspective as the country promotes its brand information to foreign audiences. It reflects the UAE's efforts to establish its brand for joining the United Nations and gaining international recognition, as confirmed by SA1, NSA1, and NSA3. Similarly, in the early 1980s, the UAE prioritised foreign policy, built global ties through

agreements and visits, and established embassies worldwide for consistent representation. It is worth noting that hosting the International Renewable Energy Agency's headquarters and earning Fiji's trust for project collaboration could not have been accomplished without the UAE's branding efforts. Moreover, the UAE's strategic focus on global rankings, such as achieving the strongest passport in the world and leading in the Global Soft Power Index, underscores its commitment to cultivating a prestigious and competitive national identity. These achievements of the UAE align with the concept of Anholt (2015), who stated that a country can be judged by its actions and what it does. The UAE showcases its openness, modern infrastructure, and hospitality by becoming a leading global tourism destination, hosting millions of visitors annually, and organising events like Expo 2020. These efforts strengthen its brand as a cosmopolitan and innovative nation.

Additionally, hosting global cultural landmarks such as the Louvre in Abu Dhabi, along with prestigious educational institutions like Sorbonne University in Abu Dhabi, and New York University in Abu Dhabi, demonstrates the UAE's investment in cultural diplomacy. These institutions enhance its image as a global cultural and intellectual hub. It is worth noting that the UAE's symbolic achievements, such as its leadership in renewable energy (headquarters of IRENA in Abu Dhabi and Masdar City), space exploration (the Hope Mars Mission), and humanitarian initiatives, reflect its commitment to addressing global challenges, thereby enhancing its long-term reputation. Through nation branding, the UAE positions itself as a bridge between cultures, a leader in innovation, and a trusted global partner.

Regarding the mediated level, which encompasses a short to medium-term perspective, this level concentrates on shaping the country's image in global media reports. Based on the findings of this study, this level is not directly applicable to the UAE case. However, it can be indirectly implemented through the country's efforts in face-to-face communication, particularly during the pre-union stage, as demonstrated by the initiatives of the UAE founder, the late Sheikh Zayed, in forming alliances. His focus on securing alliances contributed to the formation of the union, as confirmed by NSA2. These alliances primarily involved the Emirati tribes and are regarded as local partnerships. The regional allies included Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Oman. Although this study did not illuminate the UAE's emphasis on the media, the country's successes represent its work on the mediated level, exemplified by earning the trust of prestigious institutions to establish branches, such as the Louvre Museum, New York University, and Sorbonne University in Abu Dhabi.

## Conclusion

Although public diplomacy enables governments to connect with their audiences through two-way communication for mutual understanding (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992; Anholt, 2015), no study has explored this concept in the UAE context. This study, therefore, pioneers an examination of UAE public diplomacy, whereas previous research has focused on its foreign policy, nation branding, and soft power (Abdulla, 2014; Alsuwaidi, 2021; Albayrakoglu, 2023).

The study identified three stages in the evolution of UAE public diplomacy. The first stage, before the union, emphasised relational diplomacy through Emirati values like kindness and openness. These values shaped interactions with Indian merchants during pearl diving and trade, laying the groundwork for cultural exchange and trust-building. The second stage (1971–late 1980s) focused on nation-building, expanding infrastructure, and establishing diplomatic ties through global embassies. The third stage, from the 1990s onward, emphasises sustainability, innovation, and humanitarianism. This aligns with Guéraiche's (2019) work on the UAE's modern ambitions and unique Arabic identity.



UAE public diplomacy has significantly influenced its global image, positioning the country as a hub for over 200 nationalities and a leader in education, culture, and humanitarian efforts. Landmark initiatives, such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi and Sharjah's cultural recognition, further reflect its relational diplomacy, based on trust, openness, and honesty.

In conclusion, UAE public diplomacy, rooted in values and innovation, exemplifies a strategic tool for nation branding, promoting sustainable development, and fostering global trust.

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