

World Expo 2020 In Dubai UAE Case Study

Posted on May 12, 2020

Introduction

Expo 2020 Dubai was the first World Expo held in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia region. Although it retained the name “Expo 2020,” the COVID-19 pandemic caused the Bureau International des Expositions to approve new dates: 1 October 2021 through 31 March 2022. Its theme, “Connecting Minds, Creating the Future,” was organized around Opportunity, Mobility, and Sustainability. The event provides a useful case for studying culture, cross-cultural misunderstanding, international business, and the long-term transformation of a temporary exhibition site into Expo City Dubai. (“Bureau International des Expositions”, n.d.)

The original assignment also connects the UAE case with advice for a Western company entering Saudi Arabia and with the experiences of Best Buy and eBay in China. These questions share a central lesson: international organizations cannot assume that practices successful in one market will transfer unchanged to another. Culture is not a list of stereotypes; it is a changing system shaped by history, religion, institutions, migration, technology, law, and economic development.

Q1. What forces shaped the culture of the UAE and Dubai in particular?

The United Arab Emirates is a federation of seven emirates, not seven nations. Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Ras Al Khaimah, and Fujairah joined in a federal state in 1971, with Ras Al Khaimah joining in 1972. Each emirate retains a ruling family and substantial authority, while federal institutions coordinate national policy. This combination of hereditary emirate leadership and federal governance is one of the forces shaping public life.

Islam and Arab traditions influence law, holidays, family life, dress, hospitality, and social expectations. Tribal relationships, maritime trade, pearl diving, oasis agriculture, and contact across the Gulf and Indian Ocean shaped the region before oil. Dubai’s historical role as a trading port encouraged openness to merchants from Persia, India, East Africa, and elsewhere. Its modern identity therefore did not begin with recent migration, although rapid globalization greatly increased diversity.

Oil revenue transformed the UAE’s infrastructure and state capacity, but Dubai developed a more diversified model centered on trade, aviation, tourism, logistics, real estate, finance, and services. Government-led development, free zones, major airlines, ports, and large infrastructure projects positioned the city as a global hub. The population includes a very high proportion of foreign

residents, including large South Asian, Southeast Asian, Arab, African, European, and North American communities. Migrants contribute labor, entrepreneurship, language, cuisine, and professional expertise, but citizenship and legal status remain unequal.

Western nations were not shaped only by indigenous populations or democracy. Europe and North America were also formed through migration, empire, religion, industrialization, class conflict, slavery, indigenous displacement, trade, and constitutional change. The difference is not that the West has culture while the UAE has imported culture, or that one side is democratic and the other lacks institutions. A more careful comparison examines how political legitimacy, citizenship, religion, individual rights, family obligations, and economic organization developed in different historical settings.

Q2. What misunderstandings could arise between Western visitors and UAE residents?

An international expo creates common goals but does not eliminate misunderstanding. Visitors may differ in expectations about dress, public affection, alcohol, photography, religious practice, gender interaction, personal space, humor, punctuality, and criticism of government or religion. A behavior considered ordinary in one country may be disrespectful or unlawful in another. UAE residents may also misunderstand Western visitors when they assume that all Western cultures share identical values.

Communication style can create difficulty. Some business cultures reward direct disagreement, while others prefer indirect language that preserves relationships and dignity. A visitor may interpret politeness as agreement, whereas the host may view a direct refusal as unnecessarily confrontational. English is widely used in Dubai, but differences in accent and idiom remain. Multilingual signs and trained staff reduce confusion, yet respectful questions are still necessary.

Religious literacy matters. During prayer times or Ramadan, schedules and social expectations may change. Non-Muslim visitors are not expected to imitate Muslim practice, but they should respect worship, designated spaces, and local regulations. Photography should be approached carefully, particularly around people, government facilities, and private events. Consent is more reliable than assumption.

Expo 2020 was designed around international participation and handled millions of visits, so most interaction was routine and positive. The appropriate conclusion is not that misunderstanding could occur only through malicious intent. Good intentions can still produce offense. Cultural orientation, clear rules, empathy, and willingness to correct mistakes are the practical safeguards.

Expo 2020's Legacy

The event's importance continued after its closing ceremony. Expo City Dubai retained much of the infrastructure and reopened as a mixed-use district. The official legacy report states that approximately 80 percent of the built infrastructure was retained. The site later hosted COP28 and became part of the Dubai 2040 Urban Master Plan. This legacy approach attempted to avoid the common problem of expensive event facilities becoming unused after visitors leave. (Dubai, n.d.)

The project supported tourism, hospitality, logistics, construction, cultural industries, and international partnerships. Its long-term value should nevertheless be evaluated through actual occupancy, public access, transport use, energy performance, and economic inclusion rather than promotional statements alone. Mega-events can produce employment and global visibility, but they can also create cost overruns, temporary work, and uneven benefits. Sustainable legacy requires transparent measurement.

Q3. Advice for a Western company entering Saudi Arabia

The company should begin with legal and market research rather than cultural generalization. Saudi Arabia has a large, increasingly diversified economy shaped by Vision 2030, public investment, energy, infrastructure, technology, tourism, health care, and consumer markets. Regulations concerning foreign ownership, licensing, taxation, employment, data, standards, and local content vary by sector and can change. Qualified local legal and financial advice is essential.

Relationship-building is important, but "Saudis do not rush" is too broad. Decision speed depends on industry, organization, authority, and urgency. The company should identify who can make commitments, prepare for formal procurement procedures, and allow time for trust. Meetings should be professional, patient, and followed by clear documentation.

Respect for Islam and local social norms is necessary. Scheduling should consider prayer, Ramadan, and public holidays. Business visitors should use appropriate dress and forms of address. Gender participation has changed substantially, and Saudi women hold important professional and leadership roles; companies should not rely on outdated assumptions. Hospitality should be accepted graciously, while compliance policies should remain firm.

The claim that the region lacks manpower because citizens refuse manual labor is inaccurate and disrespectful. Saudi labor markets include citizens and a large expatriate workforce, while national policy encourages employment and skill development for Saudis. A foreign company should understand Saudization requirements, invest in training, and create credible career paths rather than treating local hiring as an administrative burden.

Political history can influence perceptions of Western companies, but firms should not assume uniform resentment toward Americans or other nationalities. Corporate behavior matters: product quality, employment practices, pricing, data protection, environmental responsibility, and respect for consumers build reputation more reliably than attempts to manage vague cultural hostility.

Best Buy and eBay in China Case Study

China's development shifted from low-cost, export-oriented manufacturing toward a more complex economy that includes advanced manufacturing, services, digital platforms, domestic consumption, research, and global investment. Rising wages do not mean that manufacturing simply disappears. They encourage automation, productivity improvement, movement into higher-value products, and relocation of some labor-intensive activity to lower-cost regions or countries.

China remains a major manufacturing center because of infrastructure, supplier networks, logistics, engineering capacity, workforce scale, and a large domestic market. The implications of growth include higher consumption, urbanization, environmental pressure, inequality, technological competition, and stronger Chinese brands. Foreign companies face opportunity and intense local competition.

Q1. Can China continue as a manufacturing floor for the world?

China can continue as a central manufacturing power, but not solely through cheap labor. Its role increasingly depends on integrated supply chains, advanced equipment, skilled production, batteries, electronics, machinery, and rapid scaling. Some assembly has moved abroad, yet many new factories still depend on Chinese components and industrial ecosystems. Companies should avoid a simple prediction that rising income will automatically turn China into a copy of the United States or United Kingdom.

Q2. What can investors learn from Best Buy and eBay?

Best Buy's difficulty cannot be explained only by a universal Chinese dislike of large stores. Its model faced strong local retailers, different shopping patterns, price competition, landlord and location issues, and a value proposition that customers did not find sufficiently distinctive. Consumers could inspect products in an organized store and then purchase them more cheaply elsewhere. A foreign brand must understand how customers compare price, service, authenticity, convenience, and after-sales support.

eBay entered through acquisition and initially held a strong position, but Taobao built a locally adapted marketplace. Taobao emphasized free listings, direct communication, trust-building tools,

and payment arrangements suited to concerns between buyers and sellers. eBay's global platform decisions, fee structure, and centralized approach weakened local responsiveness. The lesson is not merely that Chinese consumers like instant chat. It is that platform design, trust, pricing, and network effects must fit the market.

New investors should research local competitors before entry, give local teams genuine authority, protect intellectual property without assuming all competition is counterfeit, and adapt while preserving the company's core advantage. Localization is not cosmetic translation. It includes payment, logistics, service, partnerships, data rules, marketing channels, and product design.

Conclusion

Expo 2020 Dubai demonstrates how the UAE combines Arab and Islamic traditions, federal and emirate institutions, trade history, migration, and state-led globalization. International events create opportunities for exchange but still require cultural awareness. Western companies entering Saudi Arabia need legal preparation, respectful relationships, workforce investment, and avoidance of stereotypes. Best Buy and eBay show that scale and global brand recognition do not replace local knowledge. Across all three cases, successful international engagement depends on learning how institutions, consumers, and social expectations actually operate rather than assuming that one business model or cultural explanation applies everywhere. (Dubai, n.d.)

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