

# **Night Shopping a Tourist Attraction: A Study of Night Shopping in Dubai**

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## **Abstract**

Dubai is one of the major tourist destinations with several shopping attractions for different segments of tourists from various parts of the world. It attracts around nine million tourists per annum. The purpose of this study is to understand the night shopping behavior/pattern of tourists in Dubai. The focus is on understanding the tourists' motivations for night shopping in Dubai and their shopping behavior. In the process the study also examines the scope of night shopping as a potential attraction for a destination that will positively impact repeat visitation. The study has included in its scope various special night markets that are regularly organized on specific occasions such as during the holy month of Ramadan. The research is exploratory in nature. The data has been collected through observation and interviews using convenience sampling. The research findings suggest that the major motivation for going to night markets are exploration, leisure activities and shopping experience in comparatively relaxed environment. Many tourists preferred night shopping to avoid heavy crowds of day time. The major facilitators for tourists' night shopping were identified as transportation facilities, amenities and safe environment. The study indicates that the trend of night shopping is rising with growing number of tourists and increasing shopping opportunities in the city.

**Key Words:** Night Markets, Night Shopping, Tourism Destination, Dubai,

**JEL Classification** – Z 390

## **1. Introduction**

Shopping is one of the major factors for tourism, a large number of tourists go to various destinations across the world for shopping. The growing importance of shopping as a tourist activity is clearly demonstrated by the boom of the retail trade, in tourism destination areas and all along the tourist trail (Verbeke, 1998).

Shopping is one of the top-most searched keywords for travel information seekers on destination web-sites (Pan and Fesenmaier 2006) Shopping has been recognized as the most popular activity for both domestic and international tourists. With many destinations adopting shopping as a positioning strategy, the development of shopping products is central to tourism promotion (Lehto, Chen, & Silkes 2014). As a visitor attraction and a major economic activity and income generator (Henderson et al., 2011), shopping is crucial to tourism, and there is a growing literature on shopping tourism (Timothy, 2005; Henderson et al. 2011). In the context of

tourism, shopping behavior is more complex and intriguing as a subject area of exploration. People shop and behave differently while on vacation compared to their normal patterns at home. Some non-enthusiastic shoppers at home have been found to invest significant amounts of time and money on shopping during vacation trips (Christiansen and Snepenger 2002).

In a study related to the impact of night markets on the foreign visitors, Tsai observed that “Whether experiences at night markets influence the lifestyle of foreign visitors depends on the individual visitor. Some may think about similar or different cultures in their own hometowns or feel led to examine their own lifestyle in light of their experiences in Taiwanese night markets. Others who ponder the originality of the night market concept may think of something that could be done that has not yet been implemented. Still others may experience improved relationships as a result of shopping in a night market, where they get to know the owners better and have the opportunity to interact more frequently with other customers.” (Tsai, 2013)

Tourists’ shopping includes shopping by all kinds of tourists at any point of time. Night shopping, though, refers to all the shopping activities done at night. A night market is a venue for local people to eat out, to shop and to entertain themselves in a relaxed state of mind. It is a conglomeration of native culture; applying Urry’s well-known viewpoint of the tourist gaze, street vendors perhaps become an appealing tourist attraction and it is also considered the most effective way for tourists to experience an authentic lifestyle of the local culture (Hsieh, Chang 2006). Lee et al. (2008) defined night markets as “street markets operating at night, mainly in urban or suburban areas that generally tend to have more leisure, shopping, and eating areas”.

Dubai a major tourist hub as it has grown into is known for its shopping attractions. It is one of the seven emirates in the United Arab Emirates. It’s the fastest growing city in the entire Gulf Region and despite being an Islamic state its modernized accommodative and tolerant environment attracts large number of tourists from different parts of the world. Hotels in Dubai attracted over 9 million guests in 2013, representing close to 10 per cent increase over 2012 (UNWTO-Highlights 2014). In 2016, there were 14.87 million international overnight tourists to Dubai, up from 14.2 million in 2015 (Dubai tourism, 2017). Dubai has come a long way from being a trading post in the 1960s to a modern tourist destination with the entire infrastructure in place for becoming the most favored retail destination too. The rulers of Dubai have proved to be trendsetters in an unstable part of the world and engaged themselves proactively in the infrastructural development of a modern tourist and retail destination (Peter & Anandkumar 2011). Dubai has many competitive advantages as a luxury shopping destination and has developed distinctive shopping venues and events to exploit on the importance of shopping. Creatively, Dubai has established a novelty in combining shopping and entertainment options in order to attract and relate consumers to a broad-based shopping experience. Dubai for instance, may be the only destination in the world where tourists are just a few yards away from the world’s top retail brands, can enjoy swimming with sharks and can have a break from shopping and enjoy a ski down a snowy mountain (Zaidan 2016).

Night markets are a regular feature in Dubai, round the year however hectic activities are witnessed more, during certain periods of the year that celebrate religious and or national festivals. The Holy Month of Ramadan and Dubai Shopping Festival, are a few such occasions when night markets become so attractive that visitors come to Dubai especially to shop and enjoy. There have been reports that people unaware of these festivals have prolonged their stay by cancelling their return tickets and extending their visas when they had planned to return to their home countries on the dates closer to beginning of these festivals. Large numbers of retailers from different countries come to participate in these events.

## 2. Objectives of the study

The major objectives of the study are to explore:

- Night shopping motivations in Dubai
- Night shopping trends in Dubai
- The role of auxiliary activities arranged at night markets in Dubai
- The challenges of night shopping in the context of Dubai

### 2.1 Research Question

The research questions for this study thus are:

1. What are the night shopping attractions for Dubai tourists and does the activity pose any challenges?
2. Can night shopping play a role in repeat visitation?

## 3. Review of Literature

Shopping is gradually becoming a significant component of the tourist trip (Henderson et al., 2011; Moscardo, 2004). It is a decisive factor in tourism destination selection, a vital component of the inclusive experience of travel and sometimes the principal motivation for postmodern tourists to travel. Furthermore, the linkage between vacation planning and retail experiences is becoming more evident particularly in the increased investment in shopping complexes, mega malls, and outlets across the world, which indicates that shopping is now a main theme throughout global tourism (Shankman, 2012). The World Tourism Organization Report on shopping tourism reveals that the average tourist expenditure for shopping is US\$ 920 (accounting for 22.2% of all tourist expenditure), represents the second largest tourism expenditure after accommodation (UNWTO, 2014).

There are just a few significant studies related to night shopping available in literature that too specific to a destination. Latif and Barua in their study of night markets and its environment in Selangor Malaysia found that night market has the potential to be offered as tourism attraction. The night market offers cultural uniqueness in terms of food and local craft; display of various cheaper products; time flexibility; local shopping and cultural experience (Latif & Barua, 2012). In another study, exploring the potential of night market as tourist attraction in Malaysia, Abdaziz & Lye suggested various measures like re-arranging of parking facilities to make new arrangement to standardize the entire stalls layout in term of their uniform, apron, umbrella and tablecloth (Abdaziz & Lye, 2011)

In yet another study, aimed at finding Development Strategies for Improving the Services of Tourist Night Markets through Hybrid MCDM Technique, Huang, Liou and Tzeng concluded that in the future, if night markets in Taiwan want to attract more tourists locally and internationally, they should not only maintain their strong local characteristics and human touches but also need to strengthen environmental preservation, sanitary conditions, and traffic safety. To achieve this, they proposed to set up ‘authenticity-systems’ to ensure their quality of services (Huang, Liou & Tzeng, 2009). The most important images of the night markets in Taiwan are local specialty food items, products, and price that are characteristically local in nature besides other fashionable products, diverse food and drink, low-price products, and

distinctively flavored international foods having the potential to attract international visitors (Lee et.al. 2008).

Highlighting the gradually increasing relevance of the night markets, an important study by Hassan, Rahman & Sade concluded that “Due to the modern lifestyle, many consumers prefer to go shopping at the weekend and late evening since the majority of the shoppers work and/or study during the weekdays and daytime. It is highly recommended for the hypermarket retailers to provide a wider variety of perishable products on peak days and during peak hours.” (Hassan, Rahman & Sade, 2015).

In a study related to tourist shopping habitat, authors suggested that favorable environmental climate is associated with customer emotions and macro environment-induced pleasure is a powerful determinant of approach behavior (Yüksel, 2007). As a visitor attraction activity and generator of income (Law & Au, 2000), shopping is central to tourism, and there is a growing literature on the subject (Timothy, 2005).

In a similar study done about the role of *renao* (Chinese word for “bustling with noise and excitement”) at night market, researchers concluded that “Night markets provide a space in the community where shoppers relax with others and interact with sellers while they explore and browse for unique items at the right price. The sense of *renao* is meaningful as a mediator to the form and function of night markets and enhances the excitement and unplanned nature of shopping behaviors and satisfaction” (Ackerman & Walker 2012).

Separate studies related to night shopping have been carried out across the globe because there are visible differences in the nature of shopping including shoppers’ attitude towards shopping, kind of products being purchased, marketing-mix for night markets, retail infrastructure, and customer profiles for night shopping and so on. In one of the literature review for night market studies, Feng & Wu identified four factors of night market selection as “tangibles”, “convenience”, “food”, and “psychological fulfillment”. The top factor, “tangibles”, included attributes such as “comfortable environment”, “cleanliness”, “bustling atmosphere”, “public security”, “stall arrangement”, “friendly service”, and “reasonable price (Feng & Wu, 2016).

In a recent study about the entrepreneurial dimension of night markets, authors concluded that, in the current high unemployment society, it is difficult to find a job, so that people are motivated to open their own shops or stalls to distribute self-wholesaled merchandise. The night markets are these vendor managers’ best options, with the advantages of low costs and accumulated crowds. Everyone dreams of running their own businesses and being the boss (Liu & Fang, 2016).

There are very few studies available in literature that discuss night shopping as a catalyst to repeat visitation of tourists however there are a few significant studies exploring the relationship of shopping with that of destination loyalty and destination image. Earlier studies have attempted to understand importance of tourist loyalty for a destination (Lau and McKercher, 2004) and the correlation to a longer stay at the destination (Oppermann, 2000) however studies scrutinizing tourist loyalty towards shopping destinations are difficult to find in available literature more so reference to night shopping as an attraction that induces loyalty is almost non-existent.

#### 4. Methodology

The research design for this study is a combination of exploratory and descriptive design. The data about the locations and retail outlets were initially collected through secondary sources including promotion materials for Dubai Shopping festivals, newspapers and literature from various malls and other establishments. To confirm these locations, visits were made to these locations both during normal night hours and during the festivals when special night markets are set up.

For collecting the primary data related to motivations for night shopping, buying patterns and problems encountered by night shoppers, observations and interviews with tourists were arranged. The time period for data collection was intermittent keeping in mind the shopping festivals and occasions when night markets are specially organized by authorities and traders. Hence, a one year period during July 2016 to June 2017 was used for data collection and major portion of data were collected during Dubai Shopping Festival in months of January and February and on the occasion of Art Dubai in March and during Holy Month of Ramadan in June 2017.

The data was collected by both the main researchers with the help of two investigators. The length of the interviews with shoppers were 10 to 20 minutes with a few exceptions when interviews went for a longer period with shoppers showing interests in discussing various dimensions of shopping in Dubai.

The questions in interviews centered on geographic (mainly nationality), socio-demographic information (profession, ethnic background, education, age etc.), motivation factors for night shopping, buying patterns and problems encountered if any during night shopping and suggestions to improve night shopping experience in Dubai.

The first stage of research was to identify various locations and retail outlets through secondary data and on-site visits. The second stage was to ascertain factors that motivate people for night shopping. The third stage was to know the products and services availed by tourists at night markets, and the last stage was to analyze the problems faced in night shopping.

## **5. Findings & Discussion**

### **5.1 Locations and retail outlets for night shopping**

The locations and outlets for night shopping in Dubai can be categorized in two broad divisions-The regular night shopping areas and the occasional night shopping areas:-

The regular night shopping areas in Dubai are mostly in malls such as The Dubai Mall, Mall of Emirates, Mirdif City Centre, Deira City Centre, Dubai Festival City, Ibn Battuta Mall, Arabian Centre, Lamcy Plaza, BurJuman etc.

The occasional night shopping areas are those locations which provide ultimate shopping experience with myriad range of entertainment. These are most active during Dubai Shopping Festival (DSF), Ramadan and other special events. Some of these areas are Al Seef Street, Al Riqqa Street, Global village, Jumeirah Beach Residence, Sheikh Mohammad Bin Rashid Boulevard. Various types of cultural programmes including music, folk dances, light shows, fireworks are organized and these events are widely publicized through various online and offline media. Various fashion shows, mushairas (poetic event in Urdu), DSF Carnival are some other attractions during the festive season.

The shopping hours for regular retail outlets in malls and outside are also increased till late in night and sometimes for twenty four hours during festivals, so these regular outlets also become night shopping trade areas during these festivals.

## 5.2 Tourists' motivations for night shopping

The data regarding motivation for night shopping is based on interviews of 324 respondents. Out of these 240 were males (74%) and 84 (26%) were females. Their diversity in terms of nationality was as below in Table 1.

Table 1

### Nationality wise Distribution of Survey Respondents

Nationality	Number of respondents	Percentage
Saudi Arabia	23	07
Oman	23	07
Lebanon	10	03
India	110	34
Pakistan	45	14
Iran	6	02
Iraq	3	01
Jordon	3	01
Kuwait	3	01
USA	6	02
UK	6	02
CIS	13	04
Canada	6	02
European countries (other than UK)	19	06
African countries	26	08
Others	19	06
Total	324	100

Source: Authors (for this study)

Thus, the major motivation factors for night shopping were exploration, leisure activities and shopping experience in comparatively relaxed environment (Table-2). Other factors were opportunities to see cultural activities, special attractions organized for night shopping, experiencing local culture and customs, use of time, eating out and entertainment.

Table 2

**Motivational Factors for Night Shopping**

<b>Motivation factor</b>	<b>No. of respondents citing as the most important reason</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Exploration	68	21
Leisure activities	58	18
Cultural activities	36	11
Special attraction	29	9
Shopping experience in comparatively relaxed environment	52	16
Night life in Dubai	19	6
Use of time	19	6
Eating out	16	5
Night offers and discounts	13	4
Others	13	04
Total respondents	324	100

Source: Authors (for this study)

The brief descriptions of these motivation factors in the context of night shopping in Dubai and interview sessions with night shoppers can be summed up as following:

**Exploration** - Tourists felt that visiting various locations and stalls at night will help them in exploring the other dimensions of Dubai, which is known as the business hub full of business and professional activities.

**Leisure activities** - People come to Dubai for business, as the city is very much geared towards the business traveler. More than one million people come to Dubai from other emirates and outside the country every day, which means the emirate's population during the day is far higher than at night, according to official data. (<http://www.emirates247.com/>, 2016). And those who stay in Dubai at night look for night shopping as part of their leisure activities.

**Cultural activities** - During shopping festivals, various cultural programs like folk dances, music from Arab countries, India, Pakistan and African countries are organized at various locations. The area of 'Bastakia' near Bur Dubai is famous for these activities thru the entire evening. Tourists flock the area video recording and photographing these events.

**Special attraction** - Light shows and fireworks are arranged at various locations during these shopping festivals. Daily fireworks at Al Seef Street and special fireworks at other locations along Dubai Creek create special attractions. Special stages are made and usually at 9 pm these shows begin creating special attractions for visitors. Many visitors go to different locations in the evening daily to watch these shows. Similarly, special shows for families and children by The 7

Sopranos of Australia, Bubble Gum Show, Ice Rink Show “THE SWANS”, and FURRY LIVE SHOW are other attractions.

**Shopping experience in comparatively relaxed environment** - One of the major attractions for night shopping according to respondents is the shopping experience in comparatively relaxed environment. Shoppers are free from the tensions of reaching homes or other places and the surrounding crowd is also relaxed. Hence, shoppers want to use this opportunity to buy the items where they don't want to make any hasty decisions. The products can be designer clothes, footwear, home decoration items and electronic goods etc.

**Night life in Dubai** - The non-Arab tourists that were interviewed mentioned that they want to know and experience night life in this country, and that because of the big difference between here and night life in their countries. Hotels are too close to the malls which motivate them to do their shopping at night and go back to their hotels easily. Many shows and events can take place at night in Dubai malls to entertain people and allow them to live different experiences.

**Use of time** - The common answers between most of the tourists was that they exploit morning times by doing all other activities like: visiting tourist attractions, specialty restaurants & cafes, experiencing UAE desert for dune bashing and safari and maybe attend to some business, because they are sure that the shopping malls will stay open till late night especially during festival seasons and in holidays like: Christmas and Eid.

**Eating out** - Night market is the best place for eating out. Eating out has become an important part in many people's lives (Koo, Tao, & Yeung, 1999). During the Ramadan, Eid and Shopping Festivals the night markets are full of traditional cuisines from various countries. The specialty of these events is that food is prepared by people belonging to respective countries where the cuisine belongs to. The preparation is done in open environment in front of tourists pulling shoppers to *Emirati Luqaimat, Omani Halwa, Turkish Lokum, Indian Jalebi, and Irani Felude* besides so many others.

**Night offers and discounts** - Late night shopping is quite attractive there are several bargain offers and discounts. People enjoy cinemas, entertainment, restaurants and not only retail shops fulfilling several needs of tourists at just one destination.

**Others** - The other reason that came up during interviews from more than 20 females was security. Dubai allows them to enjoy night shopping with complete peace of mind with no fear of any safety and security issues. “More quiet and restful shopping is the one that is done at night, no much people and no many teenagers are there” (Sic.); a male opinion regarding the issue.

### 5.3 Discussion about the shoppers' buying patterns

The data collected in the study reveals that tourists buy almost everything from the shops. Apart from buying of food and beverages, the most sought after product categories are clothes, electronic devices, smart phones, and souvenirs. Each of the tourists have a budget to buy from the shops and logically these budgets are not a small ones as they are coming to Dubai and have the idea about how expensive this city is.

Clothes and fashion accessories are the most preferable shopping items from tourists especially females. That is because of the long list of luxury brands and a wide variety of retail choices. Around 45% prefer to buy clothes.

On the other hand, 25% prefer to buy electronic devices, laptops, and smart phones, because of the low custom and other duties compared to their countries. 30% preferred to buy jewelry, gold, and watches because of the variety of collections and shops.

#### **5.4 Discussion about the activities of night shoppers**

Night shopping in Dubai is not limited to eating, drinking and buying. Visitors coming to these night markets do indulge in various kinds of recreational activities. The Mall of Emirates has one of the biggest indoor skiing facility called ski Dubai and surprisingly most of the visitors interviewed near this location had experienced it and liked it. The study also revealed that families with kids loved the fireworks, lighting and various types of games and entertainments for kids. Another attractive activity to do in Dubai mall is watching one of the largest aquariums around Middle East one can dive in the aquarium and feed the Sharks, of course with support. Beside these in both the Malls of Dubai and Emirates tourists had common answers about activities other than shopping like cinemas, fancy dinning, food corners, kids' corner, and hyper markets. Thus, the highest number of respondents prioritized experiencing fireworks, music and visiting stalls set up by people from different regions during the festivals. During regular days, entertaining kids and family members seemed to be the most popular activities.

#### **5.5 Discussion about the problems faced by night shoppers**

Dubai is one of the safest places to live or visit in the world. Most of tourists didn't find any problems or difficulties while shopping at night, because of the security, information center in each mall, public transportation availability, and Metro Rail stations. The aesthetically designed and friendly environment in each mall makes the shopping any time of the day amazing in Dubai. Department of Economic Development in Dubai monitors the markets and shops, to make sure that everything is in order and everyone is satisfied without any problems, for example regular gold price updates are displayed on large screens in the Dubai Gold Souk (market in Arabic).

The only problem that some tourists faced was high transportation cost, and all that because Metro stations close at 12 mid night so the only option for them to go back to the hotels at night will be by taxi.

The percentage of respondents expressing no problem was 78 and 22% expressed high transportation cost as the problem.

In the discussion above it can be observed that shopping in Dubai is a major attraction and night shopping offers great potential as a marketing tool for tourist satisfaction that certainly will have a very positive impact on repeat visitation further boosting the destination image. A recent study on a particular shopping destination finds "strong evidence that tourist satisfaction and the destination image directly affect tourist loyalty towards a shopping destination However, there is a significant lack of evidence in the linkage between tourist shopping satisfaction and destination image as a determinant of tourist loyalty towards a shopping destination" and the authors conclude that having satisfaction with the shopping experiences at the destination "be necessary although the image of the shopping destination continues to play a significant part in developing tourist loyalty towards a shopping destination" (Suhartanto & Triyuni2016).

### **6. Conclusion and implications**

It is evident from the discussions that night-markets in themselves could be tourist attractions for several reasons, more so in a safe and secure city like Dubai. Dubai is a welcoming city for all the nationalities from around the world that offers tourists not just sun, sand and sea but safety and shopping too. The findings show that tourists are engaged in various planned activities in daytime it is the nights they prefer for a relaxed shopping experience. Different types of shops and activities lead tourists to spend more time in the malls and specific night shopping spots in buying variety of products experiencing various activities besides getting to enjoy greater variety of cuisine. The study also identified the only challenge of night shopping being high transportation cost in Dubai. The research findings suggest that there is enough scope to expand the opportunities for night shopping. Shopping festivals can be arranged more frequently and there can be expansion of night markets on regular basis as well. Although, night markets in Dubai are not like Taiwan but the continuous presence of visitors at almost all the night shopping spots hints towards its expansion scope. Night shopping also offers opportunity to mitigate seasonality that negatively impacts Dubai during summer months because of extreme hot and humid weather conditions especially in day time. Night shopping can also develop loyalty towards destination and will invite more repeat visitation.

The major contribution of the study is a reiteration of night-markets as a distinct tourism product that can be replicated at various other tourist destinations as a potential tourist activity. During night shopping tourists get to experience a variety of local cultural products in a more relaxed and time-spaced manner developing a better understanding of the destination country and community. Dubai however adds a much larger international dimension to the erstwhile far eastern experiment of night markets and night shopping giving other destinations a clue that localization of the nature and scope of night markets is always open for more creativity. There sure is significant prospect in the idea of night markets and night shopping. The satisfied night shopper with all the advantages that the study has identified is a potential repeat visitor, as such the study also indicates that shopping in general and night shopping in particular can be an attraction, if marketed well that will boost tourist numbers at the destination. Dubai undoubtedly has earned a reputation of a great shopping destination as evident in its marketing campaigns that extend the traditional 3S framework to a 5S charm of Sun, Sand, Surf, Shopping and Safety. It is only natural, as discussed above, that shopping be marketed as a twenty four by seven attraction especially highlighting the relaxed benefits of night shopping to attract repeat visitation.

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