

**Thumbnail Image:**



Feb 11, 2020 by [Jian \(Jay\) Wang](#)

## [Why Dubai World Expo Matters](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

The World Expo is arguably the single biggest showcasing event of a nation outside of its own borders. It is one of the few mass events that still command worldwide attention. But unlike the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup, the World Expo is not a “media event;” rather, the spectacle is to be sensed and experienced by “being there.”

This mega event (otherwise known as the “World’s Fair”) began in 1851 when London hosted the “Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations,” with 34 countries participating. The next [World Expo](#) is set to take place in Dubai from October 20, 2020 through April 10, 2021, the first time for the Expo to be held in the Middle East. It will not be the most attended Expo in history, as Shanghai will maintain the record set in 2010 with 73 million visitors during the six-month period. But the Dubai Expo will make history, as it is expected to be the most international ever, attracting the most culturally and ethnically diverse set of visitors. The leading source nations will span the world’s regions including the Middle East, South Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe and North America. This unprecedented and diverse gathering of people *en masse* will serve as a powerful symbol of a unique global communal moment.

This outsized event provides a platform for nations to bring their cultures and innovations into direct contact with large numbers of people. And every participant nation naturally tries to present the best

of itself to the world. Given visitors' varied backgrounds, customs and expectations, designing and executing an engagement strategy at the Dubai Expo will be an exciting yet daunting challenge. To make pavilion presentations and experiences relatable and meaningful to such a broad spectrum of visitors will be no easy task. After all, a pavilion is not simply about selling a country image or a cultural experience, but to demonstrate how a nation's cultural assets or technological innovations can enrich visitors' lives. It is, in a word, to include everyone in the same story during the visit. To create such narrative relevance requires a deep and nuanced understanding of visitors' motivations and imaginations.

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The other notable development for the Dubai Expo is that our digital life interacts ever more with the physical realm. On the one hand, in our tech-infused world, there seems to be craving for a sense of place and a sense of conviviality that an in-person event like the Dubai Expo provides. Physical presence still represents a more elemental form of communication and a transcultural human condition. On the other hand, while the Expo begins as a place-based attraction, advancements in digital technology are upending how people will experience and enjoy the event. Think about all the selfie moments and "instagrammable" places on the fairground. The Dubai Expo will no longer be a controlled physical space, but a fluid, expansive one where visitor experiences are increasingly transmedia and can be instantaneously shared beyond Expo grounds.

Meanwhile, designing a winning strategy at the Dubai Expo will also require a solid grasp of the varied mobile media preferences among visitors based on regional differences. In the Middle East and North Africa region, popular platforms include WhatsApp and SHAREit ads and devices are mostly Android based, while China has a distinct media landscape of WeChat, Baidu and mobile payment systems. For many other countries, platforms such as Facebook, Google Search and Instagram are widely used and are on both Android and iOS operating systems. In short, the Dubai Expo will be a testing ground for making sense of how the boundaries of the World Expo will be redrawn and redefined, as we continue to explore connectivity between the digital and the physical.

Last but not least, the Dubai Expo will take place at a moment of rising populist fervor in many parts of the world. The Expo has always reflected the underlying landscape of international relations. And national identity, both of the pavilion and the visitor, is rendered visible and salient at the Expo. In fact, for most people, national representation is the *raison d'être* for them to choose and visit a particular pavilion. Yet it is also in the transient space of the World Expo where people and ideas from different countries become linked and connected, thereby forging a physical sense of human community. The most significant set of challenges in our times, from sustainability to the future of work, is global in nature and scope and is not divisible between domestic and international boundaries. In this respect, the Dubai Expo will offer us a much-needed cosmopolitan space to moderate our cultural anxiety and insecurity against the dizzying pace of globalization. This spirit of finding harmony amid divisive and discordant voices in the global arena is important and urgent now more than ever.

