

# Place branding of seaports in the Middle East

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**Abstract** This paper analyses seaports' brand personalities as a means of understanding similarities and differences of these important locations and their relationship with their host place image. Drawing upon Aaker's (J Mark Res 34:347–356, 1997) brand personality construct, the study presents lexical analysis from the websites of nine seaports in the Middle East. Each seaport's website is content analysed, and the brand personality is measured using Aaker's (1997) framework and Opoku's (Licentiate Thesis, Lulea University of Technology, ISSN, 1402-1757, 2005) dictionary of synonyms. Findings show that seaports have developed a level of isomorphism upon particular dimensions of brand image; however, the findings also show the most distinctive seaports were linking their seaport to their place brand. In particular, the findings show only the Port

of Jebel Ali has a clear and distinctive brand personality and to a lesser extent the Ports of Sohar, Shahid Rajee and Khor Fakkan. The research has important management implications of branding for public diplomacy and demonstrates seaport brand positioning in relation to place branding, used to inform public communication and marketing.

**Keywords** Seaport marketing communications · Middle East seaports · Seaport brand management · Seaport branding · Brand personality

## Introduction

Place branding has conventionally concentrated on the communication of brand image (Merrilees et al. 2009), but a new stream of research highlights that place branding is often built in conjunction with how organisations in that place market themselves (Merrilees et al. 2012). Likewise, in the case of seaports, heritage branding has traditionally identified the port as defining the place (see, for example: Cadiz and Seville in Spain, Athens and Piraeus in Greece, Dubai in United Arab Emirates and Lisbon in Portugal). Practitioners are focusing more on how a new city brand can be built from the ground up and how a place and organisations can synergise their image management to impact performance (García and Puente 2016). The political dimension and public diplomacy angle of seaport cities in the Middle East, therefore, emerge as a novel and important area of investigation.

This paper focuses and contributes to a rapidly-growing area of brand competition in the global shipping industry, by using an important shipping region: the Middle East. Middle Eastern seaports (Asia to Europe deep-sea shipping

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lanes) now account for half of the total volume of container traffic from Asia to the West (48.3 million TEUs) (ArabianSupplyChain 2015). The Middle East has 49 ports that are competing for a share of intra-regional as well as international trade. While differentiation may be sought in a highly competitive climate, there are also forces at work to encourage similarities. Isomorphism is a central idea in institutional theory and plays a role in creating commonalities. It is defined by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) as “a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions.” Typically, this means that as one seaport adopts techniques from other sectors, such as branding to distinguish itself, other seaports feel pressure to adopt similar ideas to compete more aggressively to retain and attract profitable shipping lines. Whilst, institutional theory has been applied to seaports (Koufteros et al. 2013; Lun et al. 2008), no research has attempted to explore brand isomorphism between seaports’ brands. Given that a seaport cannot change its location, its brand often coexists, for better or worse, with its place brand and could be used as a differentiator by shipping lines. Thus, a second gap is highlighted between the seaports and their brands and the place brand in which the seaport is located. Therefore, this research aims to explore: what is the connection between the brand personality and location?

This research seeks to establish whether seaports communicate a brand personality, using Aaker’s (1997) brand personality construct. The paper examines how brand personality can differentiate seaports in the Middle East, demonstrating the usefulness of Aaker’s (1997) brand personality construct for the study of seaport brands and marketing. A novel contribution to marketing and the brand theory of seaports is made, based on empirical analysis of the marketing communications produced by seaports by exploring the relationships between brand personality strength and differentiation, as something produced, between infrastructure (seaport brand) and location (place brand).

The nascent literature on the place branding of Middle Eastern countries amid intensifying competition for tourist and investment dollars, while highly valuable, leaves other areas unexplored. In particular, we note the gap in our understanding of how countries, regions and cities in the Middle East (other than Dubai and Abu Dhabi) are managing their nation brands; second, there is a lack of literature on how the infrastructure of these nations plays a vital role in nation brand positioning. Third, there is no literature on the role of seaports in building public diplomacy, particularly in the context of geographically contiguous yet politically distinct cities and regions such as the Emirates. In other words, the literature has hitherto focused primarily on tourism, banking, hospitality and events; ‘hard

infrastructure’ such as airports, ports, railways, canals, whilst used to create a sense of business vibrancy (Merriam et al. 2014), have yet to be studied for their contributions to place and nation branding.

The lowering of entry barriers and deregulation (Strupp 2015) during the latter part of the twentieth century has resulted in an increase in the number and scale of global trade flows, which has led to urban infrastructure projects facing increased competition. Governments and their infrastructure planners have, as a result of these changes, refocused efforts on differentiating their largest infrastructure projects from others, regionally, nationally or internationally. These developments have not escaped the attention of brand researchers. Recent areas of enquiry include airports, which are branded for their attractiveness as tourist hubs, consumption experiences and destinations in their own right (Paternoster 2008; Graham 2004), but also as competitive infrastructure for transshipment goods (Lee and Meng 2014).

Joachimsthaler and Aaker (2009) argue that branding is entering new sectors in which strong forces are driving the need for a brand system. Seaports, in particular, present an emerging and exciting research opportunity within a competitive branding landscape, yet novel and managerially useful research has yet to be forthcoming, gaps in the literature remain and empirical research into this vital sector is lacking (De Langen and Pallis 2007). An under researched area for seaports is on promotion and marketing communications (Cahoon 2007; Stopford 1997).

As part of a concentrated effort to rebrand themselves as attractive destinations both for tourism and investment, the Middle Eastern region and its countries and cities have begun to leverage marketing strategies to enhance their image and attract tourists, businesses and investors (Cooper and Momani 2009). Dubai offers a prime example of this kind of place strategy. When the financial crisis hit the nation-state, Dubai only intensified its efforts at place branding and international diplomacy, wooing investors aggressively and diversifying its economic base beyond real estate, construction and oil to include education and ultra-high-end tourism. Other countries are keen to copy Dubai’s marketing success: for example Abu Dhabi and Bahrain hosted the Grand Prix and Qatar is to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup (Govers 2012). Because of the financial and more recent oil price crisis, other places now see potential to compete against Dubai’s positioning and seize their target markets for tourism and investment. This has meant that as a place brand becomes more well known, organisations are increasingly linking their branding to the place, in order to benefit from this source of equity (Freire 2012).

Differentiation is important in a competitive environment, such as Middle Eastern countries and cities, which



seek to enhance their reputation and image and Morgan et al. (2004) characterise a “personality” as a key basis for highlighting image differences. An emerging stream of literature is focused on brand personality as something which can be *constructed* by organisations, as opposed to perceived by consumers (Pitt et al. 2007). This stream of literature discusses how brand personality can be communicated via different marketing materials, and uses lexical analysis techniques to demonstrate this (Opoku 2006; Pitt et al. 2007; Opoku et al. 2006; Haarhoff and Kleyn 2012). By transferring these new analytical techniques to the seaport context, this research aims for a greater understanding of brand personalities as a method of differentiation: is a brand personality lens useful to scrutinise seaport differentiation?

## Literature review

### Seaports: an overview

As a vital player in globalisation, industrialisation, wealth creation, urban regeneration and employment for cities and their millions of citizens, seaports compete in an aggressive global environment. They have to counter rapid changes in the availability and costs of capital investment, the pressures of multimodal shipping, congestion, pricing wars, a lack of differentiation, volatile supply and demand levels due to political risks of all kinds, global trade embargos, currency fluctuation, security risk, volatile commodities and shipping line preferences (Burns 2015). Shipping line operators (those who use the ports) have the upper hand because they enjoy relative freedom in their trade routes and flexibility with their cargoes and ports of destination. In other words, it is very simple for a seaport’s customers to switch to an alternative port. For all of these reasons, formulating a strong brand that can help to protect a competitive proposition in the shipping market has become essential. Indeed, in the same way that a product or service formulates its brand, ports must increase customer awareness, perceived quality, loyalty and the number of strong and favourable associations.

Ports have clearly differentiated stakeholder segments known as clusters. Clusters are defined by de Langen (2004) as “a population of geographically concentrated and mutually related business units, associations and organisations centred around a distinctive economic specialization”. Three categories of stakeholder clusters can be defined: national governments, port authorities and port operators with their supporting services firms (Haezendonck 2001). Haezendonck further suggests that there are four levels of competition in the seaport sector. The first tier relates to inter-port rivalry, where governments at

national and regional levels strive to enhance the competitive position of the port by providing the optimal working environment, such as the necessary infrastructure, security and promotion support. The second competitive tier is inter-port rivalry on a product or service level, for example, the competition between Rotterdam and Antwerp. The third tier is rivalry at the port operator level, which is essential to ensure efficiency and to reduce loss of business. The fourth tier is the rivalry between operators in the same port as a positive method to maximise holistic port market share.

Ports are no different from other commercial activities in that they have to change and upgrade their facilities and services continuously to secure lucrative and preferred niches in the industry and market. Seaport range, or the surrounding context or region within which seaports cluster and compete, offers seaports the opportunity to specialise or differentiate their services to potential sectors and customers.

Ports’ infrastructure and functionality are constantly evolving to cope with changes in technology and vessels’ type and size. For instance, Dubai Ports Authority and Dubai Ports International have merged to become Dubai Port World (DP World). Owned by Dubai’s ruling family, DP World has quickly branched out from its base in the United Arab Emirates into six continents with more than 60 terminals. The company has recently built the world’s most advanced seaport hub, the London Gateway, in the United Kingdom (Lacey 2015). This drive by countries to maneuver themselves into strategic and lucrative positions can be seen in China’s massive investment in infrastructure (ports, trains, etc.) through the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and with COSTCO increasing its 67% stake in Piraeus port to a full takeover, which included significant investments in efficiency and technology (Jing 2015). Interestingly, in this way, the seaport brand can retain its original connection to its host place while occupying new towns and cities, as can be seen with Dubai Port World, where the brand name remains linked to the initial place brand.

Seaport owners and operators can be both public or private (or both) and modelled as landlord or integrated operators as well as other tenants and operators in the port (PIANC 1998). Maritime logistics consists of both primary and secondary activities: primary activities start from shippers and freight forwarders who carry out forwarding services, such as planning the logistics and completing administrative and legal paperwork. Shipping lines manage the shipping services, for example providing the shipper with a cargo area on the ship and offering a regular schedule. Upon arrival at the port destination, the port operator starts a chain of port operations that includes: loading and offloading of goods, stevedores and



connection. Secondary activities include warehousing, transportation (via land), and information services. The ability to deal with cargo effectively and efficiently is important, but it is also key to investigate the significance of throughput to a seaport's performance.

### Seaports in the Middle East

Of particular importance to the global supply chain network are those ports with central locations and which link East with West. For this reason, we have chosen to focus in this paper on the brands of ports of the Middle East. The Middle East represents a particularly competitive environment because these seaports have very similar locations, services and prices. As a result, seaports in the Middle East have resorted increasingly to marketing and branding to differentiate themselves and to attract and retain shipping lines. Often in the case of less well-known seaports, a sensible place to begin is through linkages with the location (place) brand.

A particularly important maritime passage is the Strait of Hormuz, linking the Arabian Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates) to the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. The Strait is the fourth most strategic maritime passage in the world. It is important to the world economy as approximately 20% of the world's oil supply is transported through the Strait. Unsurprisingly, there is a relatively high concentration of seaports, see Fig. 1, particularly in the Strait of Hormuz, and they compete over more than 25 million twenty foot equivalent unit containers (TEUs) per year.

In the logistics industry, a key measure of seaport efficiency is the capacity of a seaport against the number of TEUs of throughput per year (Bichou and Gray 2004). In the Middle East, this tends to be slightly higher on average than elsewhere, meaning they are being less efficient. Despite this, new seaports in the Middle East are being commissioned at the highest rates in the world. In 2013, container traffic in the region was still rising significantly, with demand reportedly outstripping capacity (Malek 2013). This fuelled new port commissioning and existing port capacity development. However, a point may now have been reached at which capacity outstrips demand (Fitch 2014), leading to a slowdown in new ports being commissioned. Rather, ports are now aiming to capture competitor's market share, often through brand and marketing campaigns.

A particularly successful seaport city brand has emerged in this region: Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (Bagaeen 2007). Today, Dubai is the third most significant transshipment port in the world (after Hong Kong and Singapore) and has the leading port in the Middle East. Although the seaport is officially called the Port of Jebel Ali, it is

commonly known as Dubai Port, emphasising the brand equity of the Emirate (place) of Dubai, and the importance of this association. Thus, brand and marketing communications (promotion) are used by seaports in the region to differentiate between themselves and to attract and retain shipping lines.

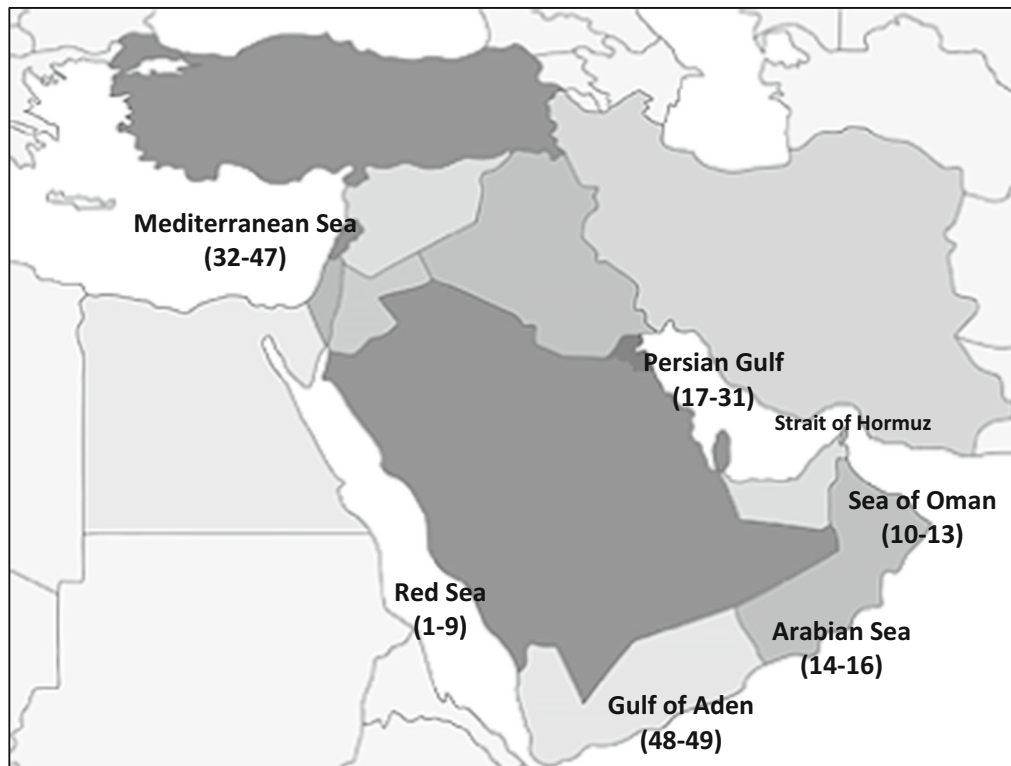
### Seaport branding

Branding is a process of identifying and developing a symbolic, emotional or physical differentiator that marks out a product or service from that of its competitor (Williams 2010). Increasingly, seaports are required to clearly position and differentiate themselves as preferential and to articulate their offering and value proposition in the minds of stakeholders (Cahoon 2004), often when they occupy similar geographical positions. A seaport's success is dependent upon its ability to compete and to retain and attract customers. In order to compare maritime supply chains and performance, a variety of factors around efficiency, quality, competence, ability and frequency are used (Sorgenfrei 2013) and well performing ports are generally considered to be competent. To aid with differentiation and to promote a stronger image to customers, management has paid increased attention to marketing and brand management. Branding is particularly important for more recent seaports, which have attempted to develop new approaches (Sorgenfrei 2009) as well as marketing communications strategies (Cahoon and Notteboom 2008) to be able to compete with more established ports.

The four Ps of marketing play a crucial role in stakeholder evaluation of port offerings (Cahoon 2007, 2004; Cahoon and Notteboom 2008). However, seaports offer very similar *Products*, in terms of container transshipments; have very little control over *Price* in terms of the economics of doing business in a location [for example, land, energy and labour costs: see Port Strategy (2014)] and once a location is initially chosen, they subsequently have little ability to relocate (*Place*). *Promotion* is the element which gives most flexibility and is increasingly being used as a tool to draw attention to the less tangible aspects of a seaport's value proposition and to communicate valence characteristics, as part of a differentiation and positioning strategy, and ultimately for competitive advantage. Given the strength of particular Middle Eastern place brands, an interesting nexus is beginning to emerge as the seaport brand attempts to benefit from the place brand equity. Overall, this forms the basis of retention strategies (Burns 2015); the brand promise. The audience of such communications is the shipment lines, operators, visiting vessels, and logistical and supply chain organisations.

A brand acts as shorthand to aid and increase speed of selection by improving recollection of information,





**Red Sea**

1. Aqaba, Jordan
2. Port of Eilat, Israel
3. Farasan (city), Saudi Arabia
4. Hurghada, Egypt
5. Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
6. Jizan, Saudi Arabia
7. Rabigh, Saudi Arabia
8. Suez, Egypt
9. Yanbu, Saudi Arabia

**Sea of Oman**

10. Port of Chabahar, Iran
11. Port Sultan Qaboos, Muscat, Oman
12. Port of Sohar, Oman
13. Khawr Fakkan, Sharjah, UAE

**Arabian Sea**

14. Al Duqm Port & Drydock, Duqm, Oman
15. Port of Salalah, Oman
16. Port of Bushehr, Iran

**Persian Gulf**

17. Bandar Abbas, Iran
18. Bandar Imam Khomeini, Iran
19. Dammam, Saudi Arabia
20. Doha, Qatar
21. Dubai, UAE
22. Hamriyah Port, Sharjah, UAE
23. Khafji, Saudi Arabia
24. Khobar, Saudi Arabia

25. Shuwaikh port, Kuwait
26. Jebel Ali, Dubai, UAE
27. Jubail, Saudi Arabia
28. Khalifa Bin Salman Port, Hidd, Bahrain
29. Mina Salman Port, Manama, Bahrain
30. Ras Tanura, Saudi Arabia
31. Umm Qasr, Iraq

**Mediterranean Sea**

32. Adana, Turkey
33. Alexandria, Egypt
34. Port of Ashdod, Israel
35. Beirut, Lebanon
36. Datca, Turkey
37. Fethiye, Turkey
38. Iskenderun, Turkey
39. Port of Haifa, Israel
40. Latakia, Syria
41. Marmaris, Turkey
42. Mersa Matruh, Egypt
43. Mersin, Turkey
44. Port Said, Egypt
45. Sidon, Lebanon
46. Tel Aviv, Israel
47. Tripoli, Lebanon

**Gulf of Aden**

48. Aden, Yemen
49. Mukalla, Yemen

Fig. 1 Seaports in the Middle East [adapted from OpenClipart (2012)]



resulting in faster and more accurate decision-making (Cohen 2009; Jain and Golosinski 2009). The brand permeates the entire company and in this way, the sum of a seaport's actions, behaviour, dealings and communications form its brand personality.

The first seaport website was produced by the Port of Hamburg in 1999 and today every competitive seaport has a website (Cahoon 2007). Seaports use their website to sell their services and provide general information about their seaport to shipping lines. Shipping line managers then browse suitably located seaport's websites to choose between these seaports.

### Seaports, public diplomacy and institutional theory

A seaport cannot easily change its location. Therefore, how a seaport location manages its place image can significantly impact the port. Typically, a seaport and its location could look more desirable through a persuasive approach to international relations, usually involving the use of economic or cultural influence. This can be seen in the example of Dubai, which offers the economic and cultural platform to do business. Therefore, governments are actively applying brand strategy to the social, political, cultural and economic development of logistical infrastructure in their countries. The redevelopment of Liverpool in the UK provides a good example of investment in both land and sea infrastructure, including better access to the city via road, and the redevelopment of the seaport and dock to increase the “vibrancy” of the city along with a push to become the European city of culture refreshed the city and was aimed at increasing tourism (Hudson and Hawkins 2006).

The international context of seaports provides a basis for institutional theory to operate as a way to explain the marketing communications for the industry. Institutional theory is about the setting of rules which govern expected norms of behavior for organisations in a specific context. Dimaggio and Powell (1983, p. 149) state that isomorphism is a key concept in the theory and is defined as “a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions.” In particular with organisations or places, which become perceived to be successful, there may be isomorphic pressures for others to mimic particular processes. In the case of seaports and marketing communication, it may be that the seaport is promoted along with the country rather than on its own as an organisation. Therefore, this context may provide insight into the operation of isomorphism when there is an inherent co-branding of the seaport with the location in communication activities. Isomorphism certainly helps explain why competing seaports would communicate similar image aspects in their promotional activities.

However, even in the context of a highly homogenous industry where isomorphic pressures are obvious, such as the energy industry, it remains important to communicate a differentiated position and information about the organisation to stakeholders (Novak and Lyman 1998; Rutter et al. 2016). Bergqvist (2009) argues that the development of logistic capabilities in themselves is not sufficient, rather a coherent marketing campaign must follow. This should aim to differentiate logistic services from that of the competition using logistic arguments, for example, linking its infrastructure with its place marketing. Researchers have started to use theories of brand image and personality to study infrastructure in connection with location. For instance, the town of Sohar in the Sultanate of Oman was a quiet fishing village which was quickly built into an international seaport. This growth was supported by an aggressive brand (Prabhu 2014) and promotion campaign designed to raise its infrastructural profile locally, regionally and internationally. Amongst an array of activities, promotional material was placed outside the cargo entrance of Jebel Ali port indicating that the Sohar infrastructure (located strategically outside the Strait of Hormuz—Fig. 1) would save transportation time resulting in a clash between the Jebel Ali and Sohar seaports' management. However, the campaign was viewed as a success in raising awareness of the Sohar location and its seaport.

The relationship between the seaport and country images may also work in the opposite direction. A number of countries have attempted to use the branding of their infrastructure as a mechanism to change the perception of their country, with examples such as Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates (Cooper and Momani 2009) and Kazakhstan (Gaggiotti et al. 2008), which have predominantly focused on their (seaport) infrastructure. In the case of Kazakhstan, their two most famous cities are indeed their seaport cities, largely being used to project a positive image of Kazakhstan to the outside world.

Brand management has evolved to become a corporate brand orientation, which serves to guide the organisational culture (Balmer 2013). Further, the corporate brand extends the organisation's identity providing a point of reflection (Abratt and Kleyn 2012). Therefore, the seaport brands are representative tools to gain insight into the isomorphic and competitive pressures on the organisation. Brand personality is a central aspect of corporate identity and will be reviewed in the following section.

### Seaports and brand personality

Seaports actively tailor their position and marketing communications to target specific customer segments, depending upon whether they are trying to overtly take an offensive position to attract new customers or a defensive



position to protect existing customers (Laxe 2010). Although it may seem counter-intuitive for seaports to have a brand personality, it can be argued that seaports do undergo anthropomorphisation and human attributes and characteristics do prevail in how seaports choose to communicate their USP (unique selling point) and expertise (Phau and Lau 2001; Cappara et al. 2001; Aaker 1997; Grohmann 2009). Brand personality helps to sustain individuality and create differentiation by emphasising psychological values, beyond a brand or product's functional utility. For example, the way in which ports operate and behave can be attributed as a brand personality and the trait of 'competence' has already been established as a key criterion for judgement (Cavusgil and Zou 1994).

A dominant framework of brand personality exists in the literature, produced by Aaker (1997). Aaker's (1997) model can be used to measure brands on five dimensions of brand personality: Competence, Excitement, Ruggedness, Sincerity and Sophistication. The model is particularly useful when comparing brands, in order to explore how consumers attribute a personality to a brand.

Further, the generalizability factor in Aaker's framework has been discussed extensively in the literature [e.g., Austin et al. (2003)]. Aaker (1997, p. 348) herself noted the extendibility of the framework to diverse product categories: "Perhaps most important, this framework and scale are generalizable across product categories". Although it is recognised that seaports have been using brand techniques to differentiate themselves, and Aaker's model of brand personality is frequently used to analyse place brands (Opoku and Hinson 2006), this model has yet to be extended to a seaport context.

Building upon Aaker's model, Opoku (2005) created a dictionary of synonyms, which can be used to lexically analyse marketing channels. This means that rather than relying on consumers' perceptions of a brand personality, the words used to communicate a brand personality can be analysed to measure what the brand is actually saying about itself. Although seaports use their marketing media to communicate with shipping lines, a brand personality lens has yet to be applied to seaports, and in particular to understand how marketing media are used to create differentiation and distinctiveness. For the purposes of this study, Aaker's (1997) brand personality framework was chosen as a theoretically and heuristically appropriate means of understanding how seaports in the Middle East convey their qualities through a text-based marketing channel (i.e., their websites).

In the same way that a seaport has a personality, so do countries (Ishii and Watanabe 2015) and the way in which a country portrays itself and is perceived can have a vast impact on the success of brands within that country. Ishii and Watanabe (2015) examined how the national brand

personality affected the attributes of product brands in that country finding a significant link between the kind of brand personality marketed by a nation and the success of product categories within it. For example, competence was positively linked with the assessment of all brands from a country and sincerity was positively linked with the assessment of technology products and bottled water. Peighambari et al. (2016) explain that whilst a city and country brand can act as powerful differentiators, they must be activated by officials (nurturers of the identity) but accepted by residents (holders of the image) as perpetuators. Therefore, creation of an image by a brand (for example, a seaport) within a city or country alone, with no support or synergy between its place (and its residents) could be futile.

## Method

The potential to use Aaker's framework of dimensions and Opoku's subsequent brand personality dictionary tool for analysing seaports were discussed in the previous section. In order to evaluate how seaports were using their marketing media to differentiate and link their brand to their place, procedures were used to collect and analyse seaport brand personalities and to plot the relationships diagrammatically between seaports using the brand personality strength of each.

It is noted by researchers that future studies should incorporate a large sample of areas (Freire 2012). This is because branding tools function as a method of clarifying brand positioning in the market. The sample consists of the top nine seaports within the Middle East: Port of Jebel Ali (1), Jeddah Islamic Port (2), Port of Khor Fakkan (3), Port Said (4), Port of Salalah (5), Shahid Rajee Port (6), King Abdulaziz Port Dammam (7), Port of Alexandria (8) and Port of Haifa (9). These ports were selected for our study because they are the largest container seaports in the Middle East by Twenty foot Equivalent Units (TEUs). Finally, Sohar Port (10) was included in the sample as a newly established and branded seaport.

Table 1 highlights that during 2014 the sample of seaport websites averaged 15,333 unique visitors per month and these visitors spent an average of 4 min and 21 s reading the website per month.

To collect the data, each seaport's website was first downloaded. Beginning with the homepage, each website was "spidered" which provided a list of URLs for manual check and to be downloaded. During the data collection stage, one trained researcher examined and made judgments about all webpages in the sample. Pages not intended to convey brand personality (for example, terms and conditions and specifications) were excluded. The process



**Table 1** Average website statistics (per month) in 2014 (source: Alexa)

Seaport website	Unique views per month	Average time on site per month
Jebel Ali	30,000	5 m 33 s
Jeddah	25,000	6 m 6 s
Fakkan	7000	5 m 52 s
Port Said	20,000	2 m 16 s
Salalah	na	na
Rajae	5000	2 m 46 s
Dammam	25,000	6 m 6 s
Alexandria	5000	2 m 48 s
Haifa	15,000	2 m 29 s
Sohar	6000	5 m 4 s

**Table 2** Frequency of words classified by each dimension

Seaports	Competence	Excitement	Ruggedness	Sincerity	Sophistication	Total words
Jebel Ali	170	70	123	108	30	35,721
Jeddah	114	33	3	97	18	13,399
Fakkan	35	33	21	44	8	14,133
Port Said	67	21	4	18	2	6490
Salalah	45	19	9	33	9	7944
Rajae	61	47	7	53	4	14,665
Dammam	128	34	6	104	21	14,679
Alexandria	6	2	0	4	0	2688
Haifa	89	43	19	66	7	12,598
Sohar	112	17	23	56	18	11,914

provided 134,184 words for analysis, shown in Table 2. The Port of Jebel Ali had the largest number of words (35,721), whilst Alexandria had the smallest (2688).

Second, brand personality was operationalised using Aaker's (1997) brand personality framework and Opo-ku's (2005) dictionary: a frequency count of words associated with brand personality across Aaker's five dimensions (of Excitement, Competence, Ruggedness, Sincerity and Sophistication) was taken, using the dictionary. These proportions are shown in Table 3. Opo-ku's (2006) dictionary was utilised, as it is comprised of synonyms for each of the five dimensions of brand personality and had previously been used to transfer Aaker's model to new sectors, for example Tourism (Pitt et al. 2007); the dictionary consisted of 833 synonyms distributed almost equally across Aaker's five dimensions and examples of commonly found words are highlighted in Table 4. The data were checked to account for context of mention to ensure the synonym representation was as expected. During this process, synonyms counted were randomly selected and checked. It was observed that the usage of brand traits in the text was predominantly oriented towards positive valence in order to promote the seaport.

From the dataset, checks were made for outliers using a box plot. The port of Alexandria only communicated 12 brand personality words and was identified as an outlier and removed. This reduced the sample from ten to nine seaports. The data are then tested for normality, linearity, homoscedasticity and independent errors. No assumptions are violated and no evidence suggests that the data are not suitable for further analyses (Field 2009).

Third, multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) was used to analyse the word counts shown in Table 2. MCA is typically used to reduce complexity in tabular data and is often used in marketing and positioning research to visualise relationships between organisations. Whilst it is possible to identify differences between seaports using the tables (for example: Jebel Ali is the most *rugged* seaport), it is much easier to interpret the complex inter-relationship between the five dimensions and nine seaports using a two-dimensional MCA solution, which also eliminated the problems related to inter-spatial differences to aid interpretability (Hoffman and Franke 1986; Greenacre 2010). The proportion of variance explained in the two factors was high ( $66.92\% + 20.66\% = 87.58\%$ ), thus two dimensions were appropriate. Then, 95% confidence circles were calculated (Lebart et al. 1984) to interpret the level of





**Table 3** Trait words expressed as a percentage of all trait words

Seaports	Competence (%)	Excitement (%)	Ruggedness (%)	Sincerity (%)	Sophistication (%)	Total words (%)
Jebel Ali	33.93	13.97	24.55	21.56	5.99	1.40
Jeddah	43.02	12.45	1.13	36.60	6.79	1.98
Fakkan	24.82	23.40	14.89	31.21	5.67	1.00
Port Said	59.82	18.75	3.57	16.07	1.79	1.73
Salalah	39.13	16.52	7.83	28.70	7.83	1.45
Rajae	35.47	27.33	4.07	30.81	2.33	1.17
Dammam	43.69	11.60	2.05	35.49	7.17	2.00
Alexandria	50.00	16.67	0.00	33.33	0.00	0.45
Haifa	39.73	19.20	8.48	29.46	3.13	1.78
Sohar	49.56	7.52	10.18	24.78	7.96	1.90

**Table 4** Brand personality synonyms

Dimension	Associated word	Number of synonyms
Competence	Dependable, responsible, systematic, thorough	168
Excitement	Bold, courageous, determined, fresh, inventive, new	143
Ruggedness	Challenge, desert, endeavour, robust, tough, unrestrained	174
Sincerity	Accurate, authentic, decent, frank, reliable	174
Sophistication	Captivate, charming, exclusive, distinguished, royal	174

distinction of each seaport and dependence upon the five brand personality dimensions.

The results of the MCA analyses are plotted in Fig. 2a, b. Figure 2a presents the reduction of five-dimensions of brand personality into two-dimensions and plots the relative position of each seaport, surrounded by a 95% confidence circle. Figure 2b plots the relative position of each brand personality dimension and a 95% confidence circle for each (along with the position of each seaport for ease of comparison); and highlights that Sincerity is positioned to the left, whilst Ruggedness is on the right of the x-axis and, therefore, opposes more “sincere” from more “rugged” seaports. Likewise, the y-axis opposed more “exciting” from more “sophisticated” seaports.

## Results and interpretation

The results showed that these seaports have developed a level of isomorphism and some areas of distinction upon particular dimensions. Figure 2a highlights the degree of uncertainty surrounding each seaport, using boot-strapped confidence circles. Only the Port of Jebel Ali has a clear and distinctive brand personality and to a lesser extent the Ports of Sohar, Shahid Rajee and Khor Fakkan. However, it is difficult to distinguish the Port of Haifa from Salalah; Dammam from Jeddah; and Said from Salalah, Dammam and Jeddah.

The personality dimensions presented in Fig. 2b indicate that some tensions exist for brand personality in this

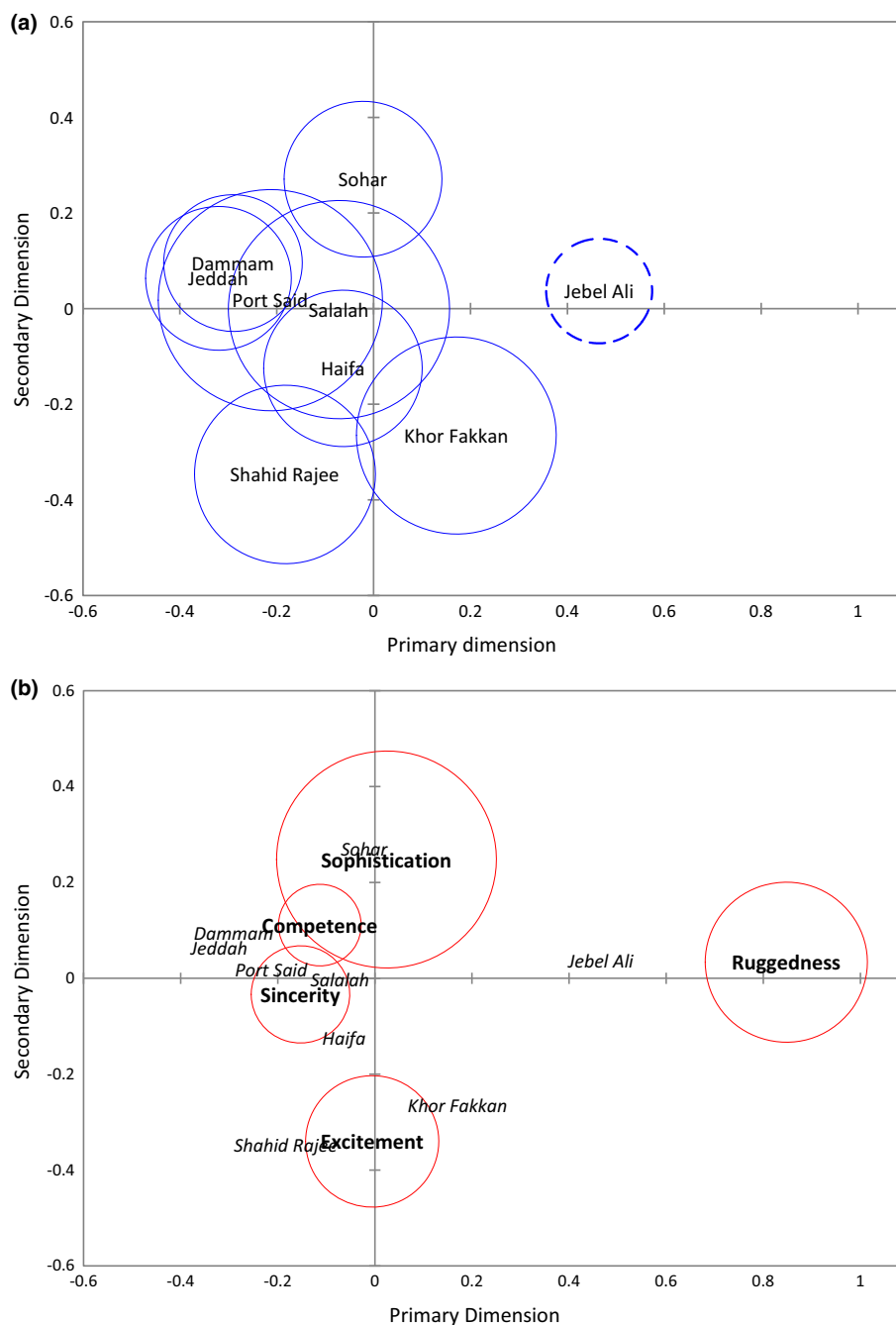
context. There is some distance between Sophistication and Excitement, and between all traits and Ruggedness. However, the latter is more significant as it explained more variability in brand personality words for seaports. The dimension of Sophistication significantly overlaps Competence, whilst there is a small overlap of Sincerity with Competence. Seaports that communicate Competence may also be associated with Sophistication and Sincerity.

The overlay of the seaports and personality dimensions in Fig. 2b helps to define the images associated with each seaport demonstrating both differentiation and commonalities. The Jebel Ali port communicates Ruggedness strongly, positioned between Competence and Ruggedness. The Jeddah and Dammam ports communicate Sincerity and Sophistication weakly, although Dammam communicates these dimensions slightly more strongly than Jeddah. The Khor Fakkan port communicates Excitement and, to a lesser extent, Sophistication, although both relatively weakly. Port Said communicates Sincerity and Competence. The ports of Sohar and Salalah communicate Sophistication and Competence: Sohar communicates Sophistication more strongly, whilst Salalah communicates Competence; Salalah also communicates Sincerity. The Shahid Rajae port is communicating Excitement and Sincerity but relatively weakly while the Haifa port communicates Sincerity and, to a lesser extent, Excitement.

We can conclude that the majority of seaports are communicating a brand personality. It is clear that seaports are communicating different brand personalities through their text-based media. In the next section, each seaport is



**Fig. 2** a Seaport positions.  
b Dimension positions



explored in relation to the dimension(s) communicated most prominently and in relation to the words used.

### Evidencing the positions

*How are words used to differentiate a seaport's brand personality? How does the seaport brand personality link to its location?*

Prior to the 1970s, the Port of Jebel Ali (informally known as Dubai Port) was a small trading port which grew

gradually from a fishing village inhabited in the eighteenth century by members of the Bani Yas tribe (Bagaen 2007) into the largest Seaport in the Middle East. Perhaps in reference to its roots, Jebel Ali emphasises Ruggedness more than any other Seaport in the Middle East, mentioning “desert” no less than 38 times. This success should be seen within “the climate of change and challenge” through which Jebel Ali “has emerged as one of the top ten container ports worldwide” through leadership and “discussion [...] on tough issues”, such as “marine piracy and its impact” as well as being a leading provider of specialist



facilities to handle “dangerous, hazardous or obnoxious” cargo. However, whilst this emphasis has taken away from the Competence brand personality dimension, the Port of Jebel Ali’s website actually communicates more Competence related words than any of the other seaports, describing itself as an “experienced and professional team” who are “dedicated to providing a comprehensive” service through the “most advanced infrastructure and outstanding facilities”. They also emphasise “winning Expo 2020” as recognition of their progress and competencies.

King Abdulaziz Port Dammam and Jeddah Islamic Port were communicating a distinct position, although very similar to each other. Perhaps this means a convergence of their strategies. Whilst not communicating any dimensions strongly, their closest association is with Sincerity. Jeddah explains how it expanded from “modest” roots and now operates under “international standards” using the “best professional practices”. The website emphasises events in which “open discussions” with stakeholders have taken place. Dammam explains, in a similar manner to Jeddah, that it operates with “international standards” and describes the “direct” nature of its navigational operations. The Sophistication emphasis came from these seaports’ links with “his royal Highness” and royalty.

The Port of Khor Fakkan promotes Excitement by offering its customers membership to a “unique VIP programme”, designed to generate “new business” which serves as a “vital” entry point to the UAE. The website emphasises the surroundings of the seaport, more than others and describes its “modern waterfront hotels”. To a lesser extent Sophistication is communicated through its “excellent shipping links to all corners of the globe”, and again in its surroundings with “beautiful mosques, lake-front apartment buildings, restaurants, and well laid-out parks and gardens”.

Port Said communicates Sincerity and explains that they operate in a “careful and humble way” ensuring that “terminals achieve the highest standards” to offer the “best people” and the “best tools”. This seaport promotes Competence when it describes itself as a “world leader in maritime” and its aim to “develop leaders” with “constant promotion of safe working practices, safety awareness and a commitment to safety”.

Sohar Port is communicating Sophistication more strongly than any other seaport, as well as Competence, which actually appears as a subset of Sophistication. This is perhaps as a consequence of their recent ambitious rebranding project (Prabhu 2014). Sohar Port emphasises its connections to Royalty, in fact the word “royal” is mentioned 17 times. For example, the port explains the role of the “Royal Navy of Oman” and the impact of “royal decrees” made in 2002/3, as making Oman “safe,

attractive” and an “excellent” transit-home. This perhaps reflects its government ownership, ultimately by the Royal family and the Sultan of Oman leading to it “reporting excellent growth figures”. Sohar Port also communicates Competence strongly, describing itself as “effective, safe and efficient [at] handling vessel traffic [and] serving as the competent, major port in the region”. Further as “fuelling [...] industrial growth” through the creation of an environment that is “healthy, safe, secure and environmentally friendly”.

Also based in the Sultanate of Oman, the Port of Salalah communicates Sophistication relatively strongly, linking their connection again with Royalty. The “port of Salalah is one of the largest and most prestigious projects in the Sultanate of Oman” with the “Royal Oman police” for protection, offering itself as an “attractive place to do business” with “excellent management systems”. However, Salalah is aligned more strongly with Competence than Sohar. Describing itself as in “constant expansion and development” to improve and ensure that it “remains an industry leader” serving as an example of “success” in Oman and attracting the most “talented, knowledgeable and committed” employees.

Shahid Rajaei Port communicates a relatively weak and indistinct brand personality, although it is closest to Excitement and Sincerity. It talks about “modern facilities and equipment” and “improving current processes”, as well as the “important and vital role in Iran’s economy” as well as its sincere quest for the “best standards for maritime safety”.

Haifa Port communicates Sincerity, and to a lesser extent, Excitement. Its website talks of working towards “common goals” through “completeness, reliability or correctness” and dealing with agents with “honesty”, whilst ensuring “the good of the company and the economy”. The port ensures strict “standards which apply to all of the company’s activities” and shared “responsibility to understand, to assimilate [and] meet these standards”. It references Excitement in terms of its modernity, suggesting it is the “most modern in the world” with “modern, state-of-the-art operational methods” which offer “vital services”.

## Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine the branding activity in a highly competitive cluster of shipping ports through the lens of institutional theory and brand personality. Institutional theory provides an explanation as to why organizations behave with a set of rules and expectations about behaviour in specific industries. Further, the institutional theory concept of isomorphism represents a force for



consistency in behaviours, which we expected would result in similarities of branding activities in the seaport industry. This perspective provides a unique look at branding activities because branding is often about differentiation from competitors and the brand personality perspective ensures that we examine both the differences and sameness in seaport branding. The findings of the research have been presented in the previous section and several significant theoretical, strategic and managerial implications emerge from the data.

First, a key finding is that the five dimensions outlined by Aaker's (1997) framework (Competence, Excitement, Ruggedness, Sophistication and Sincerity) can work in mutually reinforcing but diverse ways in terms of intensity and relational effect. Our research shows the varying degrees to which the dimensions interact with each other as well as the relative importance of each for each port. Taken together, each dimension shows its strength in the different seaports in different intensities, allowing for a novel comparison between them emphasizing differentiation of port images. For example, our analysis shows that Jebel Ali's website conveys Ruggedness much more strongly than all the other ports, while the dimension of Excitement is relatively weakly demonstrated by all ports. Port managers and brand consultants can draw upon these findings to accelerate strengths and cultivate new ones that have yet to be strongly identified with a particular port. One recommendation would be for ports like Shahid Rajaei and Haifa to communicate Excitement much more strongly while also emphasising Competence and Ruggedness.

Second, our findings not only showed that particular dimensions were stronger than others for the different ports, but also that certain dimensions acted more as underlying dimensions of all seaports demonstrating some operation of isomorphic pressures. Previous research identified differing dimensions as important in different contexts (Clemenz et al. 2012) [for example: Excitement and Competence in UK Higher Education (Rutter et al. 2017), as well as, Ruggedness in African tourism destinations (Pitt et al. 2007) and Competence in Politics (Rutter et al. 2015)]. The dimension of Competence seems particularly important when trying to emphasise technical superiority and is a shared dimension for a few seaports. The purpose of a seaport is to provide a maritime logistics system. The effectiveness and efficiency of a seaport is an indicator of port management success and is considered to be an essential competitive advantage (Song and Panayides 2012). A seaport, which consistently transports cargo efficiently and effectively, is automatically perceived as low-risk [in brand theory, therefore, it would be classed as a risk reducer (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley 1998)]. Because the costs of risk and poor risk management are so high in the maritime industry, having a low-risk brand is of

overwhelming importance for seaports. The costs of risk are estimated by some scholars and practitioners to account for as much as 20% of the final retail price of logistics services (Kotler et al. 2008). Certain dimensions are more or less likely to affect brand trust (for example, Competence: Is this brand safe?; Can we rely on this brand?); meaning companies can leverage a brand personality to retain consumers; particularly in risky or high value purchase situations (Sung and Kim 2010). Our findings indicate that Competence could be acting as a risk reducer for higher performance, indicating that less competent ports may not be as effective in attracting or retaining shipping lines.

Third, an interesting finding was that Sophistication and Sincerity were linked to Competence. That is to say, some ports were able to convey qualities of symbolic prestige, natural beauty and advanced infrastructure, and simultaneously emphasise their qualities of safety and efficiency. Sohar and Salalah stand out in this respect. With this finding, managers might want to focus on better understanding and exploiting the interaction(s) between brand sophistication and service competence. Once again, Jebel Ali's website was best at conveying the management of Competence and Sophistication (winning Expo 2020 is a case in point of the latter dimension as well). Relatedly, our paper has expanded Aaker's vocabulary for explaining brand dimensions, providing a more nuanced description of what those dimensions—Ruggedness, Sincerity—actually consist of. Brand managers can adjust their marketing communications to be more consistent and synthetic in the use of words that convey certain brand personality traits and can update their communications to reflect better the contemporaneity of the marketing environment. For example, the use of the words “modern” and “state-of-the-art facilities” are paradoxically, rather outdated. One of the most well-known modern ports in this study—Jebel Ali—did not mention that it was ‘modern,’ not even once.

Fourth, our findings show that Middle Eastern seaports utilise their heritage to emphasise their Sincerity. Such a strategy, whether deliberate or otherwise, hints at an understanding of place branding principles (Pike 2005; Braun 2012). While many ports emphasised their links with royalty, others reported on their relatively modest beginnings. Businesses often link their product or brand to their country of origin [made in Germany as high quality, or made in Finland as innovative (Ryan 2008)]. Our findings indicate that seaports in the same country (for example, Sohar and Salalah in Oman; and Dammam and Jeddah in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) communicate relatively similar brand personalities, as seaports are linked in similar dimensions to their country. This provides evidence of country images playing an isomorphic role in the image of the seaport within a country but also as a point of



differentiation in an international competitive context. This finding is compounded with links made directly by seaports to their host country, for example Sohar and Salalah's links to Royalty and Jebel Ali's links to Dubai. However, seaports in the United Arab Emirates also have differing brand personalities, which is indicative of the context of their location within different Emirates, which act as competing entities and have different ruling families. In building their personalities, seaports are linking themselves to their country (for example, Royalty in Oman; the desert in Dubai) and also their city in terms of achievements (Dubai), which has previously been observed in the UK (Hankinson 2001). We recommend that port brand managers integrate port branding with place branding, working with city planners and marketers and even urban historians and artists to create synergies between seaports and cities. This strategy pays further dividends as well. For example, if the place is branded well, there would be less of a brand load on the port brand, strengthening its brand dimensions in Competence and performance, for example, instead of spreading its message too thinly across many dimensions. We suggest, in fact, that a seaport's brand could be 'reverse engineered' so that the place brand takes priority and then that equity is transferred over, as a halo effect, to the port. In this case, port authorities would work closely with local or national governments to build up the place brand in parallel with the seaport brand.

From a theory perspective, this study provides insight into the operations of institutional theory for a public diplomacy context, where the organization is inherently linked with the location. With seaports, we have organizations under the typical isomorphic pressures described by institutional theory to project a brand personality in their communications as competent and sincere. To be credible, these brand personality traits require support from the organization but also the place where the seaport is located. The co-branding of the seaport and the place of location also create a point of divergence or differentiation. In this study, we found ruggedness, sophistication and excitement are ways in which seaports break out of the isomorphic pressures to form more unique configurations of the brand personality traits. This study demonstrates that there are limits to the effects of isomorphic pressure and the forces of competition and characteristics of place can allow a seaport to create a distinct brand personality.

In summary, we have extended Aaker's framework beyond its original context, extending it from a solely consumer or business application and into the B2G (business to government) context. Whilst studies have validated Aaker's model within a business-to-business context (e.g., Veloutsou and Taylor (2012)), few studies have applied Aaker's framework to the B2G context. Our findings showed Aaker's framework helps differentiate seaports

from one another in both functional and symbolic ways, thus enabling Aaker's framework to be usefully employed in the B2G and B2B contexts. The authors are not aware of any studies to have applied a model of brand personality to seaports. In this regard, our paper speaks to regional, national and international infrastructure providers seeking new ways to differentiate their services. In addition, we find a tension between isomorphic and competitive pressures, which reflect the inherent co-branding of seaports and place, whilst providing a basis to extend institutional theory for the context of public diplomacy.

### Conclusion and managerial implications

This study is important for seaport marketing managers who are designing their communication strategy. Our findings show that all seaports in our sample, excluding the Port of Alexandria, communicate differentiation through varying degrees of all five of Aaker's brand personality dimensions. However, reflective of isomorphism and institutional theory, our findings show that brand personality Competence played a significant role as an underlying dimension of seaport branding. Marketing managers should seek to explore their own brand personality communication strategy with a particular emphasis on the communication of Competence.

The findings of this research add to the existing body of literature on brand management, brand communication and seaport brands. The literature recognises branded marketing communications and port competency as important, but there has been no empirical research to establish whether a relationship exists between the brand personality of seaports and their location. This research makes an original contribution in that it provides empirical evidence across nine seaports to test these relationships. Our findings highlight the significance and interaction of brand personality between a seaport and its place branding. In particular, we find evidence of brand differentiation and institutional theory's concept of isomorphism operationalized through brand personality within the seaport industry. Last but not least, ours is the first study, as far as we know, to analyse the digital presence of Middle Eastern seaports, an area of research that would interest brand managers in related industries such as e-procurement, e-government and B2B e-marketing in commodities and other trading platforms. In other words, the website communications of niche markets hold tremendous potential for further research.

Naturally, the study has a few limitations. This is the first study to use Aaker's model in the B2G context, therefore, a study which validates the dimensions, traits and facets within this new context should be undertaken. This study used port websites to measure brand personality as communicated by the port, and so a confirmatory study



would be useful to verify these seaport brand personalities as perceived by stakeholders. The data in the study were collected at a single point in time and so do not account for brand personality changes over time. Further research should explore different sectors and collect brand personality data over time to study temporal effects. In addition, a study examining the effects of brand personality on consumer decision-making in the seaport context should be conducted.

This is a single study within a Middle Eastern context, and so the results may not be generalisable beyond the Middle East. However, a seaport's marketing communications are designed for an international audience, which may increase the generalisability over local marketing communications. Also, while the study captures the largest seaports in the region, the sample was relatively small. Further research could examine a larger number of seaports globally.

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