

Expatriate bubbles in Dubai: expatriates from West and East cohabitating with locals

6

Henriett Primecz

*Department of International Management, Johannes Kepler Universitat Linz,
Linz, Austria and*

*Department of Organizational Behaviour, Corvinus University of Budapest,
Budapest, Hungary*

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Abstract

Purpose – Focussing on the stratification of expatriates and the boundaries between different types of expatriates and locals, this study investigates the lived experiences and testimonies of Eastern European expatriates and their relationships in Dubai. The purpose of this article to develop the current knowledge on expatriates cohabiting in a cosmopolitan city by providing empirical evidence on expatriate bubbles in Dubai.

Design/methodology/approach – Explorative qualitative research was conducted using online and face-to-face interviews, along with a week-long intensive ethnography with observations, interviews and informal discussions.

Findings – Three distinct groups of people live in Dubai, namely, Westerners, expatriates from the East and Emiratis. They hardly mingle with each other on equal terms, but they do work in a complementary fashion. In Dubai, the status of East European experts, a subgroup of Westerners, is similar to their Western counterparts and in that they are considered European. Consequently, they experience a slight status development in comparison to when they work in the West. The research provides evidence on social stratification of expatriate bubbles.

Research limitations/implications – This very short ethnography with a relatively small number of qualitative interviews could be complemented by a further in-depth study.

Originality/value – Expatriate bubbles have not previously been empirically investigated from an Eastern European perspective, nor has the unique case of Dubai been analysed extensively. Distinct expatriate bubbles with their stratified hierarchies have been identified in this study.

Keywords Expatriate bubble, Dubai, Eastern Europe, Social stratification of expatriates, Citizenship, Residence

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Due to their temporary presence in a new social context, expatriates tend to attach to each other instead of integrating into local communities. They form expatriate bubbles in which a wide variety of nationals might participate, especially when their social status is similar. They are part of the growing global class of mobile experts. Big cities attract expatriates, and expatriate bubbles are formed there. Dubai is a uniquely positioned cosmopolitan city. Not only does it provide an exceptional site for expatriates from the West and East but also from the semi-periphery, namely from Eastern Europe.

Until recently, global mobility was growing, including traditional expatriates (moving from headquarters to subsidiaries in the corporate sector) and non-traditional expatriates



(e.g. self-initiated expatriates, short-term assignees, global professionals, global recruitment and selection and migrants). Differences amongst them are characterised by their mode of entry into the new country (Guttormsen, 2017). Research on internationally mobile employees and professionals has attracted considerable attention in the disciplines of organizational behaviour, international business and anthropology (Dabic *et al.*, 2015). Only a few of the studies in this area; however, have attended to the lived experience of expatriates in their immediate social and cultural contexts. One of the neglected issues in the current corpus of expatriate research is the formation of expatriate bubbles. It is observed in expatriate practice that internationally mobile employees often form isolated, national “bubbles” that shelter expatriates from the otherness of their foreign cultural and organizational environment (Guttormsen, 2018). However, such insulated expatriate “bubbles” have received limited scholarly attention.

Geographically, globally mobile professionals are concentrated in several big cities, and some of the cities are exceptionally cosmopolitan. With a large proportion of expatriates, one of the most renowned of these is Dubai. Its location is unique since it is in the Middle East (not in the West), and it is a notably wealthy place. Dubai’s unique context is attractive for global mobile professionals, especially for Eastern European expatriates from the semi-periphery (Wallerstein, 1979).

This study focusses on lived experiences and testimonies of expatriates from Eastern Europe and their network, and the research uncovers the social stratification experienced by expatriates living in Dubai. The main research questions are what constitute an expatriate bubble in Dubai? And how are these expatriate “bubbles” in Dubai formed? In order to answer these questions, a short-term intensive ethnography was conducted, and online interviews were undertaken in advance of the ethnography. The findings reveal that there are two separate expatriate bubbles in Dubai, Eastern and Western, which are clearly distinct from the local culture. The boundaries of the bubbles are essentially impermeable. Members of each bubble occupy separate jobs with significant salary differences and consequently have distinct free-time activities and social circles. Expatriates also remain separated from local Emirati people, due to their family connections, religious rules and also partially the Arabic language. Eastern European expatriates, as a subgroup of the Western bubble, though, gain a little status leverage by joining their Western counterparts. Consequently, this study explicates the stratification of expatriates in Dubai.

The first part of the article gives an overview of our current theoretical and empirical knowledge on expatriate bubbles. The second part describes the methodology, including the research context, sample development, data collection, coding and analysis. The third part gives a detailed account on the findings around four overarching themes: Dubai at first sight, beyond first sight, cultural context and expatriate bubbles. The fourth part is the discussion, which focusses on making sense of the empirical data through theoretical lenses and provides evidence for the theoretical and practical contribution of the research. The article concludes that two distinct expatriate bubbles exist in Dubai, and they hardly mingle with each other and with the local Emirati culture. They occupy different positions, and their social interactions are minimal. Eastern European expatriates join the more prestigious Western expatriate bubble, and they gain a little status increase in this context.

Theoretical background

The everyday life of expatriate communities is mainly discussed in anthropology, migration studies and the sociology of globalisation (Farrer, 2018; van Bochove and Engbersen, 2015; Spiegel *et al.*, 2017; Colic-Peisker, 2010), while the domain of international organizational behaviour lacks a similar substantial research stream following the opening of Lauring and Selmer (2009). Cohen’s (1977) early formulation has been complemented more recently by Lauring and Selmer’s (2009) and Fechter’s (2016) ethnographies.

Previous research has identified “expatriate bubbles” amongst global and internationally mobile employees and professionals in their foreign locations (Lauring and Selmer, 2009). The existence of communities organised around shared national identities suggests that expatriates are often socially cushioned from their foreign cultural and institutional environments. This impedes cross-cultural learning and the development of cosmopolitan and inclusive organisational cultures. Nonetheless, the actual construction of these self-organised groups and “bubbles” has received limited scholarly attention.

van Bakel *et al.* (2017) point out that expatriates often leave their social contacts (extended family members and friends) behind when they start a new assignment, and they have a strong need to build new social relationships upon their arrival. In these cases, slowly and incrementally developed friendships are less common, as are the social occasions, generally speaking. Rather than creating social bonds at schools or universities or with neighbours, friendships arise either through professional networks or through their children. Even when they are welcoming, local people are rarely active in developing new relationships, whereas expatriates, who are all in the same boat, are more open to building new relationships, not least because they need social support. Co-nationals and expatriates from other countries are often ready to help people cope with situations that they themselves experienced. Local people might be successfully approached when specific help is needed, but this rarely develops into working relationships, and often remains one off assistance. Consequently, expatriates tend to socialise with each other by forming “expatriate bubbles” (van Bakel *et al.*, 2017).

In one of the first empirical studies, Lauring and Selmer (2009) demonstrated that Western expatriates formed a closed expatriate compound in the Middle-East, and the everyday life of Danish expatriates was clearly separated from the surrounding Saudi society and culture. The separation was manifested in a very real tall windowless wall, behind which Danish families lived together, while working family members met representatives of local culture only at work. But within this physically closed area, expatriates and their families from several Western countries lived together, although Danes almost exclusively socialised with each other. However, Fechter (2016) investigated Western expatriates in Indonesia. Their living quarters were not separated from the locals by a visible wall, but their life was more subtly yet unequivocally distinct from the local communities, slightly resembling the colonial past. A generous expatriate package, which made it possible for expatriates and their families live in such an outstanding level of luxury was supported by the ideology of “hardship location”. The luxury they could reach was in stark contrast to the poverty of local people, from amongst whom their household help was selected. This insurmountable social divide was even reinforced by the privilege of whiteness (Fechter, 2016). Fechter and Walsh (2010) explicitly mention Euro-American privileges, especially in connection with ex-colonies, where ex-imperial power contributes to the meaning of being a Westerner. Consequently, the combination of whiteness and country of origin places individuals on different levels in expatriate hierarchies.

Similarly, Goxe and Paris (2016) investigated a hardship location and gave a detailed account of how expatriates are differentiated by their country of origin. While the traditional expatriates – global managers from the West – enjoy high status and reinforce their existing social, cultural and economic capital while on foreign assignment; the other groups of expatriates enjoy less individual growth. Expatriates from the East or global South often hardly make a living and suffer from poor living and working conditions, although their mobility decision was based on financial opportunity or, in some cases, financial necessity. While the Westerners in their sample come from France, Germany and USA, the less privileged expatriates were recruited from developing countries in Latin America, Africa and Eastern Europe. They all could be considered as mobile professionals, but their country of origin determined their position within the expatriate hierarchy (Goxe and Paris, 2016).

In their case, Eastern European experts were considered second-class professionals, as were those from other developing countries.

Zaban (2015) described Western immigrants to Israel, and two distinct bubbles were identified, the Anglos (from the USA, Canada, Britain or Australia) and French (from France, Belgium, Switzerland or Quebec). They connected more easily between each other than with other ethnic communities in Israel, including Israeli born citizens. They are of higher status than several other groups in Israel, as they came from the West, and are predominantly highly educated. However, Anglos enjoy still higher status, due to the positive image of the USA in Israel, and also the language. English is more widely spoken than French, not to mention the fact that a large proportion of the French community arrived from North Africa. The bubble itself functions as a cosy environment, which connects the familiar with the new, and allows them to adapt to Israeli reality gradually and remain connected to those with similar backgrounds. While they are protected by the bubble, this also means they remain foreign because of it. In other words, the bubble is transparent, but detached, and there is a risk of it exploding at any point (Zaban, 2015).

The European Union also provides examples of inclusion and exclusion of newly arrived national communities. The United Kingdom, which was target of a large influx of immigrants from the Southern and Eastern part of the EU before the Brexit, provides thought-provoking cases. A “modern” and “backwards” distinction has been made when professionals migrated from South Europe, for example from Italy (Varriale, 2021), while underemployment was experienced in the case of Eastern European newcomers (Fox *et al.*, 2012, 2015). Racialization and the issue of whiteness were raised in connection with foreign employees arriving from both regions, while Varriale (2021, p. 310) proves that some citizens are better positioned to “claim proper Europeaness” and “racialized European hierarchies” are evidenced. Fox *et al.* (2012, 2015) explains how Eastern European citizens in the UK, especially Hungarians, blend in due to their whiteness, meaning that they predominantly remain invisible, but they are still being discriminated in the work and society mainly by underemployment, though discrimination is often denied by Eastern Europeans (Fox *et al.*, 2015). Their whiteness did not grant a privileged position for them in British society, and “cultural difference” was claimed, and it led to exclusion (Fox *et al.*, 2012), but Eastern European newcomers often rationalised their lower status positions due to their language skills and accent (Fox *et al.*, 2015). It is, indeed, evidenced in literature that English proficiency and economic level of country of origin contributes to advantages in perception of professionalism and consequently to informal leadership status (Kachru, 1988; Paunova, 2017).

Expatriate issues have generally been viewed using positivist approaches (Harvey and Moeller, 2009; Doherty, 2013). However, such models and methods appear to have become less effective as monocultural environments have faded away. Furthermore, more recently, other critical topics have emerged, including postcolonial analysis (Boussebaa and Morgan, 2014; Mahadevan, 2015) and considerations of gender discrimination (Janssens *et al.*, 2006; Metcalfe, 2006; Moore, 2015; Tung, 2004). For this reason, an in-depth ethnographic approach was deemed appropriate, in order to achieve a rich and detailed description of the lived experiences and “bubble” formation from the perspective of expatriate professionals, enabling us to better understand practices, interactions and symbolic performances that are related to the contested production and negotiation of expatriate communities and their boundaries.

Methodology

This study investigates the culture of expatriate “bubbles” in connection to the traditions and methods of organizational and social ethnography (Gaggiotti *et al.*, 2017; Whyte, 2012). In this case observation-based ethnographic data-collection was complemented by interviews and

ensured that expatriates were investigated *in vivo* (Angrosino and Mays de Pérez, 2000). This study followed Geertz's (1973) ethnographic fieldwork design, focussing on emerging data relevant to the broad research questions of what constitutes an expatriate bubble in Dubai. And how are the boundaries of expatriate bubbles formed and maintained in Dubai? The focus is on expatriates from different parts of the world: East and West, including people from Eastern Europe.

Research context

Dubai is a unique context and provides a possibility to discover expatriate bubbles. It is an outstandingly cosmopolitan place, drawing expatriates from various parts of the world. Goby and Alhadhrami (2020) point out that due to the country's oil boom, since the 1960s the UAE has made it easy for foreigners to live and work in Dubai. Initially, workers for the construction industry were needed, whereas later it became an attractive destination for foreign MNCs. Consequently, this encouraged more educated professionals to choose the UAE – particularly Dubai – as their residence. Now approximately 20% of total UAE population is Emirati, while the majority are expatriates (Goby and Alhadhrami, 2020). Walsh (2009) also mentions that instead of citizenship, residency in Dubai, even for Britons, can be gained on an annual basis through the sponsorship of an employer (or as a dependant on this visa), and while they have a relatively privileged position, they rarely establish relationships other than working ones with local Emiratis. It means Euro-American expatriates find companionship with similar expatriates.

Sample development and data collection

The main data collection method was ethnographic observation complemented by qualitative interviews (Brinkman, 2017). The interviews revolved around three main themes: their motivation to move to Dubai, their experiences in living and working in Dubai and their future plans. Keeping the aim of the study in mind and feasibility of the originally planned ethnographic study, the sample development followed the guidelines for purposive sampling (Etikan *et al.*, 2016), targeting maximum variation within research participants and requiring access to different members of the expatriate bubble from the semi periphery and their network. All research participants were white, and their look was reflected several times during the research process. Spouses played an important part in organising social life of expatriates (Lauring and Selmer, 2010), and especially on keeping the borders of expatriate bubbles, so they received extra attention in this research. Consequently, women dominate the gender make-up of interviews, while a husband who followed his wife to her expatriate assignment as a spouse was also interviewed. The first contact and sample development started through a colleague, who worked in Dubai, and he shared his experiences in the breaks of a professional gathering. The researcher intended to begin a more systematic and academic research project on the issue via interviews and participant observation. The initial contact and his contacts formed the first circle of the data collection, while further contacts completed the sample. Consequently, the snowball technique was applied with the intent of developing a sample, from which the research questions could be answered. In this way, formal interviews of expatriates, their family members and friends within and outside of the work premises were part of the research.

The research was complicated with the travel restrictions connected with the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to start the data collection, five online interviews were conducted before a one-week intensive ethnography, which took place between 20th and 26th September 2021. Onsite interviews included further interviews with two previously interviewed expatriates, and spending time with expatriates and their immediate connections during the week. Several informal discussions (often in cars) were completed beyond five formal interviews.

A total of 10 interviews were conducted, five of which were tape recorded and fully transcribed. Research participants were informed about the aim of the study, and they participated in it voluntarily. Other interviews and informal discussions are noted in the research diary. Interviews and ethnographic notes together made up 154 pages of material. Details about interviewees can be found in [Table 1](#).

As observation was the main data collection method, a research diary was kept during the visit, and it included 86 pages of handwritten notes, observations and informal conversations with preliminary ideas about interpretations. Visits were made to shopping malls, tourist attractions, breakfast bars, cafés, restaurants, a yoga class, dragon boat coaching, a gym and swimming pool, a university, a home and hours of sitting in the passenger seat of cars with expatriates. These destinations were suggested by the research participants.

In order to answer the main research questions, several open questions were asked, including to explain their motivation for moving to Dubai, their difficulties and solutions during expatriation, their friends and social circles, including free-time activities and a general description of living in Dubai. Also, they were asked what they found strange, interesting or different from any of the countries in which they had previously resided. Finally, everybody was asked if they felt integrated in Dubai. Beyond these, numerous questions emerged for clarification and as just part of further informal discussion, in cases when there was the possibility of meeting on-site. The main theme of this article, stratification of expatriates in Dubai, emerged during the research, as most research participants were surprised by the strong and perceivable social hierarchies they experienced during their stay in Dubai, which was new for most of them.

Coding and data analysis

Following the protocol of thematic analysis ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)), all transcribed interviews were analysed by MAXQDA, and 27 first order codes were created. The first order codes reflected the questions. For example, motivation for moving to Dubai was coded under “original intent” and “length of stay in Dubai”, and several open codes emerged from questions like what they found strange or difficult in Dubai. All first order codes were then

| Name | Gender | Expat status | Length of their stay in Dubai | Country of origin | Countries lived before | Language of interview |
|---|--------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|--|-----------------------|
| Interviewee 1 (multiple interviews and multiple informal discussions) | Female | Expat (arrived as expat spouse) | 6 years | Hungary | US | Hungarian |
| Interviewee 2 | Female | Expat | 4 years | Serbia | None | English |
| Interviewee 3 (two interviews) | Male | Expat spouse | 1 year | Spain | Poland, Hungary | English |
| Interviewee 4 | Female | Expat | 4 years | Greece | Italy | English |
| Interviewee 5 (one interview and multiple informal discussions) | Male | Expat | 6 years | Hungary | Multiple work projects in Africa and Middle East | Hungarian |
| Interviewee 6 (multiple interviews and multiple informal discussions) | Female | Expat spouse | 8 years | Hungary | None | Hungarian |
| Interviewee 7 | Female | Expat | 1 year | Lithuania | Hungary | English |
| Interviewee 8 | Female | Expat | 12 years | UK | Syria, Cyprus | English |

Table 1.
Main characteristics of interviewees

manually applied to the hand-written notes, including the onsite interviews, informal conversations and observations. Two more codes emerged from the hand-written material. These were then applied to the transcribed material, and eventually the empirical material was analysed by 29 codes. The difficulty of having interviews in electronic format, and observations and interviews in handwritten format was handled by printing out the first order codes into separate pieces of paper, and interpretation and grouping was an iterative process of organising codes into meaningful clusters and visiting potential quotes in handwritten observation and conversation notes and interview transcripts multiple times back and forth. During the process of interpretation, some first order codes were merged, and this resulted four second order codes which were applied as overarching themes in the findings. To ensure validity, coding was discussed with two colleagues who did not participate in the research, but who are experts in expatriation and migration. [Table 2](#) describes the coding structure.

Findings

Dubai at first sight

Expatriates are attracted by appealing positions, even a “*dream job*” or “*lifetime opportunity*” (Interviewee 7). Dubai is described by the interviewees as fast-paced culture, which is often characterised by enjoyable work with less stress than in previous positions and with more pay. People, who choose to work in Dubai have a drive to achieve something. There are several industry-specific centres in Dubai, and this is the main reason why people choose to work there. People work 365 days of the year, and the tempo is high; the intention is to catch

| First order codes | Second order codes | Main themes |
|--|--------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Work in Dubai Original intent Carrier motivation Length of stay Family model in Dubai Gold diggers Terminating expatriation in Dubai Temporary place Intellectual slaves | Official level of expatriation | Dubai at first sight |
| Expat class Westerners Eastern Europeans Expats from East Social inequalities Everything is divided depending on where you are from Description of Dubai culture A kind of fake Alcohol Mall culture Being a woman in Dubai Muslim religion Respectful approach Played off politely Sport in Dubai | Social stratification of expatriates | Beyond first sight |
| Expats' connections Tourists Local friends | Peculiarities of Dubai | Cultural context |
| | Expatriate bubbles | Expatriate bubbles |

Table 2.
Code system

up with the world and even to overcome the old economic centres. One interviewee (5) used the term “*gold digger*” as a metaphor for Dubai, where people try their luck, work hard and have the potential to gain a lot. Many people were also attracted by the possibility of an international career, as they wanted to see the world and this “*fast growing expatriate hub*” (Interviewee 1) was a good choice. The lack of income tax was also attractive for many because they could earn considerably more than previously. Although all social services are private and the prices are higher than in Europe, still many of them could save 30% or even more of their respective salaries and their consumption was often higher, including certain luxury products and services which they could not have afforded in their previous countries.

This all attracts a certain type of person: hard-working thrill-seekers opted for this destination. For some expatriates, the lack of opportunities in their previous locations or considerable debt (e.g. mortgages) was also amongst the reasons why they accepted this opportunity. Consequently, expatriates have similar social backgrounds. They are middle class or lower-middle class professionals, willing to invest in their life to achieve social mobility: “*My parents supported me until I graduated, but they could not give me more*” (Interviewee 1), meaning that she could not buy her own flat or house in her home country, whereas her friends’ parents supported their adult children not only until graduation but also provided them with some start of life wealth, or at least a flat. Other interviewees explained that they had to rely on their own efforts for financial security.

While their salaries were considerably higher than in their previous countries, social services are expensive, including health service, insurance, schools and elderly care is almost non-existent. Consequently, young, able bodied energetic people are welcome, and they enjoy the hard work, but people over 60 most probably cannot even get a residence permit. Having health issues in Dubai is not ideal, and it is rather expensive for those with children, except when the employer of the breadwinner of the family supports their education. Due to limited childcare, couples with children develop a single earner family model; more often than not, the father is the breadwinner and the mother is the caregiver. Young couples without children can pursue the dual career family model, but a turning point occurs when children are born, and Dubai is less affordable with children, unless the company provides generous education support.

The length of stay is connected with the family structure. While dual-earner young professionals state that it is very difficult to leave Dubai, as it provides a very comfortable and safe life with some luxury consumption, most expatriates stated that it is a “*transit stage*” (Interviewees 1, 5, 6, 7 and 8). None of them plan to stay until their retirement. As one interviewee explained: “*my plans are, no I would love to come back in Europe um because its, even if I am ok here and everything is fine like it’s not, it’s not my country I mean I don’t belong here and for sure like um my parents and my friends are mostly in Europe so I would prefer at some point to come back*” (Interviewee 4). It was also said that “*we cannot imagine raising our children here*” (Interviewee 6), and many lamented buying flats or houses there, concluding that it is better to buy real estate in their respective countries, if they buy it at all. Although all of them planned to stay shorter than they eventually remained, they paid back their debt, accrued considerable savings and all planned to go back to Europe.

Beyond first sight

Interviewees quickly brought up the issue of the social stratification of expatriates. They explained to me that “*your salary very much depends on where you come from*” (Interviewee 2). All interviewees consistently suggested that local Emirati people have the most rights, but Western expatriates are very much appreciated and welcomed. In fact, the economy relies on Western knowledge transfer, and many Western consultants and regional headquarters are located in Dubai, which are managed by people from the West or people with a Western education. This is not independent from the fact that UAE moves towards knowledge economy, and it does not want to rely on oil extraction.

Interviewees explained that Western people with genuine British accents have a clear advantage over any other expatriates; after this, however, other native English speaking – American, Canadian and Australian – professionals are preferred. Western European and Eastern European expatriates are almost as well accepted. In general, white people received treatment in the service industry which was unexpectedly respectful/polite for interviewees: “. . . *this is the case everywhere [in Dubai] . . . scaling and judging people based on where they’re from, it’s really very, very much alive here*” (Interviewee 2). South Asian professionals with a Western education or even with a Western passport are considered part of the privileged expat community, but they might not be fully accepted, as one derogative joke illustrates: “*A recent British citizen with Indian ancestors introduced himself: ‘I’m British.’ And reply was: ‘You are confused, not British.’*” (Interviewee 1). As the joke circles around, it shows that (national) identity is not chosen, nor is it objectively given (holding a British passport), but it is decided by the community of people around the given person. When they decided that the person does not have a genuine British accent or his citizenship is too recent, he is immediately positioned in a lower prestige social category, with its attendant stereotypes.

This was not independent from the fact that service personnel mainly arrive from the East or global South. All interviewees explained that it is expected for Western expatriates to have a cook, a house cleaner, a driver, a nanny, a French teacher and a gardener, depending on the size of household and family itself, and it is very surprising when Western expats cook and clean for themselves. Service personnel come from East Asia: cleaners from the Philippines, drivers from Pakistan, while the service and construction industries rely heavily on Asian and African immigrants. Their living conditions and salaries are extremely low. As one interviewee stated: “*I come from a poor country, I mean relatively poor country and not very developed, and everyone always thinks that the UAE and Dubai is so rich, and yes, of course there are a lot of examples of wealth and luxury, but then also the levels of poverty that I’ve seen here is much worse than in my country*” (Interviewee 2).

Eastern Europe, though, has a special status. Professionals from the region are regarded as similar to their Western counterparts. At the same time, it is not only highly educated professionals who work in the Middle East, including Dubai. As one interviewee explained: “*Many young Hungarian women come here to work as waitresses or even prostitutes, many of them hope to find a rich man to marry her.*” She adds that “*I do not want to be associated with Hungarian women like them. I am a professional, I work with my brain.*” (Interviewee 1) Another interviewee explained “. . . *they judge based on your appearance. If you are a white looking person then, you know, they assume you are one of the privileged ones.*” (Interviewee 4). This raises the status of Eastern European professionals slightly. One interviewee explained that he always had an inferiority complex amongst Western Europeans, and now, after a couple years, he could prove to himself that he was not professionally inept, and Dubai contributed to this understanding when he worked amongst Western European consultants and was considered as one of them by local partners.

From the empirical data, three distinct bubbles could be identified, as [Figure 1](#) shows. Local Emirati people form the minority (approx. 20%) of inhabitants in Dubai, and expatriates form two distinct bubbles. Eastern expatriates arriving from East (Asia) and South (Africa) perform manual labour and provide services. Western expatriates – including a smaller sub-bubble of Eastern Europeans – form the global cosmopolitan elite and their work and lifestyle make them separate from the two other bubbles. “Interbubble” contacts are rare and superficial.

Cultural context

As the social stratification of expatriate (and local) community provides pillars of expatriates’ life and work in Dubai, further cultural peculiarities provide the nuances of their status and position. Expatriates’ hobbies were mainly sports, and certain sports are almost exclusively for Western expats, for example dragon boating, triathlons, tennis, sailing, golf, yoga and Pilates.

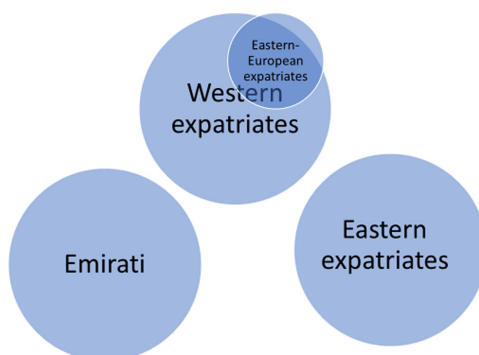


Figure 1.
Expatriate bubbles
in Dubai

These sports are affordable only for well-paid expatriates, so other types of expatriates did not mix in these free-time activities. Gyms and even sometimes swimming pools can be found in most blocks of flats where well-paid expatriates live. It is unimaginable that people from the service industry could afford to live in such places or be able to pay for such sports clubs. And friendship and business develop when they spend time together. In Dubai, people do not even meet unless they are from the same expat community. Westerners and Eastern Europeans spend their free time together, but expats from the East cannot afford to attend expensive sport clubs and might not even have time to go there after long working hours. Several of the interviewees mentioned that they mingle with people from the service industries (e.g. hairdressers, gardeners and masseurs) more in their respective home countries, and their conversation with them was more equitable than it was in Dubai. Separation from them was a new experience for them.

The other issue that was often mentioned was that they do not socialise a lot with Emirati people, and this is partly due to religious standards and alcohol consumption. While alcohol is available in bars and hotel restaurants, it is for Western tourists and expatriates, and Emirati people are not expected to visit those places. It is considered disrespectful when somebody is traditionally dressed and goes to a bar. It is clear cut: Emirati people do not spend their free time with expatriates.

It is also worth mentioning that men outnumber women in the workplaces, and working women often find themselves alone amongst several men. It is not considered to be a problem, but it also happened with one of the interviewees that she was warned that women should not work with men late at night:

I went with my colleague, it was a bit complicated measurement, so I went there to supervise him and um we had to do it around 2 a.m. because since when the metro was not going or something like this but it was yes very late at night and then there were some other engineers from the [...] and from other companies and um one of them told me um women stay at home. (Interviewee 2).

One other interviewee mentioned that she was the only woman in the board room and she experienced trust and respect, but she found it funny and said to herself silently "*I am the diversity here*" (Interviewee 1). She also explained that being a white woman, she had privilege, and she was uncertain what an Arab woman would experience in her place, although she thought that she is given more respect.

Expatriate bubbles

These habits are reinforced by law. Emirati citizenship is unattainable for those who are not born Emirati or related to Emiratis. Residence status is provided for expats, and it is possible to lose it, when employment is terminated or in case of certain legal violations. Residency is

sponsored by the employer or a working family member and several opportunities are open only with residence permits (e.g. renting a flat, driving licence); otherwise, the person is just a tourist. Tourists and expatriates mixed when choosing free-time activities, but tourists often do not understand many cultural and social expectations, which derive from Muslim culture in general, and from Emirati culture in particular.

"Everybody is very lonely at the beginning." (Interviewee 1), and they search for similar people. Beyond spontaneous meetings (e.g. workplace, sport club, etc.) there are fast tracks for finding friends, such as *"Just moved to Dubai,"* and similar platforms, where a typical icebreaker question is *"Where are you from?"* Individual loneliness helps one to find new friends or at least some people with similar social backgrounds, because Emirati people are not overtly motivated to make friends with expatriates. Of course, colleagues start to build relationships, but it is rare for them to invite expatriates into their home. They have their own friends and family relationships: it is *"Not easy to mingle with Emiratis"* (Interviewee 7). Cultural circles remain very distinct, and crossing the boundaries are rare. *"Expatriate life is clicking, a lot of ignorance, a lot of closeness."* (Interviewee 8). When it comes to finding a romantic partner, this is also not easy due to the voluntary restrictions (e.g. *"Europeans want to develop relationships with another Europeans, and there are not many of them."* (Interviewee 6)) or the non-European man raises the question if the European woman is willing to convert. This social boundary seems to be very strong here.

Beyond this, the temporary nature of expatriate assignments also contributes to such quasi-impermeable boundaries. Nobody plans to spend the rest of their life in Dubai. Some even mentioned that they cannot imagine having children there. Most expatriates stay in their own culture, meaning Western expatriates (including those from Eastern Europe) form a bubble, expatriates from East (including South, meaning Africa and Asia) form a separate bubble and Emirati people (potentially including few people from other Arab countries) form the third bubble. The Emirati circle is distinguished by language and religion, as their native language is Arabic and they are predominantly practicing Muslims. Expatriates are not expected to learn Arabic, and most of them do not speak it at all or only very little. All professional communication is conducted in English: *"I am sorry for expats that they don't see how Emiratis live their life, family and children."* (Interviewee 8).

Discussion

Similar to most other expatriates, expatriates in Dubai leave their social contacts in their home countries and in their previous assignments' place (van Bakel *et al.*, 2017), and they have no other choice but to find and support each other. Previous research pointed out that expatriates mainly form isolated, nation-based communities (Guttormsen, 2017), whereas the current study delineates a larger and definitely more cosmopolitan composition of expatriate bubbles. Eastern European expatriates did not search for residents from the same countries as their origin; rather, they sought contacts from diverse countries and enjoyed cultural plurality. While their countries of origin were diverse, expatriates had very similar social profiles. The motivation to work hard and participate in a *"growing expatriate hub"* attracted people who were adventure seekers and probably even more *"gold diggers"*.

The homogeneity of the expatriate community was refuted by the interviewees when they gave a more detailed account about their everyday life and their social networks. Previous studies on Western expatriates in ex-colonial countries and/or hardship locations have pointed out Western expatriates' disconnection with local people (Fechter, 2016; Fechter and Walsh, 2010; Lauring and Selmer, 2009; Walsh, 2009). Beyond this, Goxe and Paris (2016) provided evidence on stratification of expatriates, whose salary and status were determined by the country that issued the worker's passport, while it is slightly moderated by the country in which the person graduated. In Dubai, the country where the passport was issued determines the individuals' social opportunities.

Similarly, as [Zaban \(2015\)](#) described, highly educated professionals arriving from the West enjoy higher status. British passport holders with a genuine British accent are on the top of the hierarchy, accompanied by other native English speakers ([Kachru, 1988](#); [Paunova, 2017](#)) and Western expatriates in general. This is not independent from the fact that United Arab Emirates is a former British colony, and their withdrawal from this imperial power was not the result of a violent war of independence but a quiet divorce. British people remain a highly respected Western nationality. Expatriates from East (and South), however, are devalued, and they fill the worst paid jobs, including services and physical work. Indeed, it is a clear replication of centre – periphery duality in the world ([Wallerstein, 1979](#)). Emirati people hardly mingle with the two distinct expatriate communities. Work is the only exception. As Western expatriates' detachment from local people ([Fechter, 2016](#); [Fechter and Walsh, 2010](#); [Lauring and Selmer, 2009](#); [Walsh, 2009](#)), and the stratification/hierarchy of expatriates depending on the country of issue of passports have been discussed previously in academic literature ([Goxe and Paris, 2016](#); [Zaban, 2015](#)), but Eastern European professionals were not in the focus in numerous previous studies, while [Goxe and Paris \(2016\)](#) mention them amongst the underprivileged expatriates together with mobile professionals from developing countries. The empirical results of this study in Dubai were in contrast with previous studies on Eastern European employees in the West; for example in the UK ([Fox et al., 2012, 2015](#)) where they were clearly underemployed, while research here has proven that they gain a certain status, as people are often evaluated by their looks, and Caucasian people, especially when they work for a renowned Western company, are automatically considered privileged, and they receive the same respect and advantages as their Western counterparts.

This is, indeed, maintained by social activities, which are clearly distinct for the three bubbles. [Lauring and Selmer \(2010\)](#) identified a wall which keeps Western expatriates apart from local people, but within the Western expatriate community, language and social events were the glue which kept certain communities together. In Dubai, though, language played smaller role, all Western expatriates, including Eastern Europeans, spoke English willingly, and they chose to mix with each other. At the same time, Western expatriates pursue sports and free-time activities, which are unaffordable for expatriates from the East, while Emirati people socialise more with locals due to their family relationships, and even Muslim religious rules, such as the prohibition on drinking alcohol. The boundaries amongst expatriate bubbles are reinforced by law, as citizenship is unachievable for non-Emirati family members, and the necessity of temporality strengthens the boundaries between locals and expatriates ([Goby and Alhadhrami, 2020](#); [Walsh, 2009](#)). People are constantly evaluated based on their looks, English accent, place of their education and the issuer of their passports; consequently, the geopolitical inequalities between East and West magnify social inequalities between the badly paid expatriates from the East and well-remunerated Westerners. Eastern European professionals from the semi-periphery could join the well-respected Westerners silently and invisibly, due to their whiteness and companionship with other Western experts. Consequently, they gained slightly from this situation.

The present study goes beyond the acknowledgement of expatriate bubbles ([Lauring and Selmer, 2009](#)) by showing the social stratification within such bubbles in a given cultural context. The findings reinforced the major motivation of forming expatriate bubbles, as people in their new countries miss their previously developed social contacts, and locals are rarely motivated to develop new relationships ([van Bakel et al., 2017](#)), but it also refutes the idea that expatriates mainly form nation-based communities ([Guttormsen, 2017](#)). Rather, they opt for culturally diverse cosmopolitan communities, while remaining within their own social bubbles, meaning that Westerners and expatriates from the East do not mix.

The practical implication of the study builds on the fact that Dubai is a cosmopolitan city with a large proportion of expatriates, and cultural diversity clearly characterises the context. It is, indeed, a welcoming place for experts who have the drive to work hard and who are

ready to accept strict rules. Anyone who is willing to fit in to this work-centred ideal with self-discipline might pursue a successful career and might gain a lot during their stay. The lifestyle can include certain elements of luxury even for middle class professionals. While whiteness and fluency in English, preferably with a genuine British accent, is appreciated, it is not an ideal place for everyone. There is no societal-wide intention to play down social inequalities and privileges; consequently, the further someone is from the desired ideal worker of the place, the harder it is to live there. Gender plays a role, but skin colour and country of origin are more important. Consequently, white men and women are welcomed, even from the semi-periphery, namely from Eastern Europe. At the same time, sexual minorities, people with disabilities and elderly are not welcomed.

Conclusion

The current research describes three distinct bubbles in Dubai: the local Emirati community, Westerners, including Eastern European professionals and expats from the East (see Figure 1). They see each other through opaque borders, but social interaction is minimal. Westerners consider their stay temporary, and they do not invest in efforts to get included in the local Emirati culture. Indeed, such assimilation is discouraged by law, as citizenship is virtually unattainable, and residency status is also connected to work contracts. At the same time, the expatriate bubble of Westerners is very diverse in terms of their country of their origin but homogeneous in terms of their social status. Nonetheless, Eastern European professionals from the semi-periphery, who are white and mainly work for Western companies, can achieve the same or similar status as their Western counterparts, so that their status grows. The other bubble consists of expats from the East, who mainly perform manual work and provide services. They do not mix with locals or Western expatriates, and their opportunities are limited to connecting with similar expatriates from the East. The current study is limited to a very short ethnographic investigation. A more detailed data collection and analysis could give further insights about this unique place with its exceptionally large expatriate population.

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Corresponding author

Henriett Primecz can be contacted at: henriett.primecz@jku.at