Marketing the Political in Tourism Management: Nation Branding in Saudi Arabia Vision 2030

[1]Burak Baskan*, Halil Pece** and Mehmet Emirhan Kula***

*Assoc. Prof. Dr., Erzurum Technical University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, burak.baskan@erzurum.edu.tr**

*Assist. Prof. Dr., Erzurum Technical University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, halil.pece@erzurum.edu.tr****

*Assoc. Prof. Dr., Erzurum Technical University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, emirhan.kula@erzurum.edu.tr******

Abstract: This study aims to provide an in-depth examination of the 'Vision 2030' of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a systematic and holistic project to create a nation brand with the objective of integrating into global capitalism. Employing qualitative content analysis as the primary methodological approach complemented by certain critical discourse analysis techniques, this research seeks to deconstruct the discursive strategies and ideological underpinnings embedded within the official 'Vision 2030' documents. Its holistic approach addresses both the domains of political marketing and tourism management by discussing the political and marketplace implications. The study makes an original contribution to existing literature through its unique theoretical and methodological approach that positions nation branding efforts at the intersection of global capitalism's structural hegemony and the Kingdom's own hegemonic project. The 'Saudi Arabia nation brand' is based on repackaging Saudi Arabia's image from conservative oil-dependent monarchy into a modern, open, and investment-friendly country. This was achieved by underlining the transformation from the "old" to the "new" in every aspect of daily life, blending Islamic/Arab cultural heritage with various economic and social activities such as trade, sports and entertainment and promising a diversified economy that adheres to neoliberal standards within the global capitalist system.

Keywords: *Nation Branding, Political Marketing, Tourism Management, Structural Hegemony, Hegemonic Projects, Saudi Arabia.*
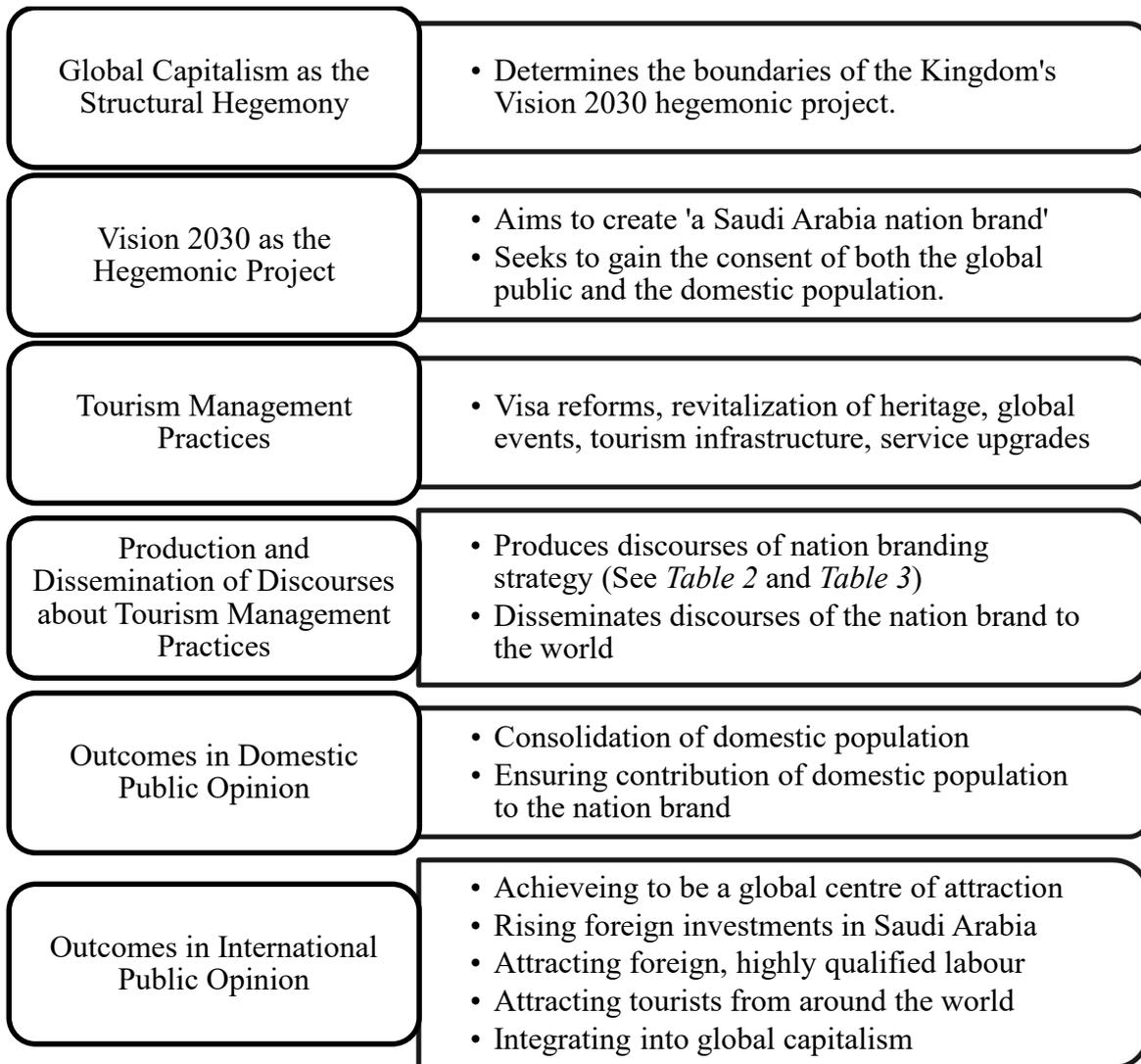
Introduction

The world is experiencing a paradigm shift from "modern world of geopolitics and power" to the "postmodern world of images and influence" (Van Ham, 2001). In this new paradigm, countries undertake various initiatives to strengthen their international prestige and to integrate into the global capitalist system. Maintaining a positive image has become a necessity for attracting foreign investment and to increase tourism revenue. Through nation branding strategies,

---

states can revitalise their image, even if they have previously suffered from a negative one, to a certain extent.

Within this framework, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is developing the Vision 2030 Project, which aims to achieve a more diverse and thriving economy, a vibrant society, and an ambitious nation. Primarily driven by the objective of integrating into global capitalism, the Kingdom is executing a political and ideological branding strategy within the tourism-related sphere in order to transform the image of the country from conservative oil-dependent monarchy into a modern, open, and investment-friendly nation.

Figure 1: Study's Analytical Framework

Global Capitalism as the Structural Hegemony	• Determines the boundaries of the Kingdom's Vision 2030 hegemonic project.
Vision 2030 as the Hegemonic Project	• Aims to create 'a Saudi Arabia nation brand' • Seeks to gain the consent of both the global public and the domestic population.
Tourism Management Practices	• Visa reforms, revitalization of heritage, global events, tourism infrastructure, service upgrades
Production and Dissemination of Discourses about Tourism Management Practices	• Produces discourses of nation branding strategy (See *Table 2* and *Table 3*) • Disseminates discourses of the nation brand to the world
Outcomes in Domestic Public Opinion	• Consolidation of domestic population • Ensuring contribution of domestic population to the nation brand
Outcomes in International Public Opinion	• Achieveing to be a global centre of attraction • Rising foreign investments in Saudi Arabia • Attracting foreign, highly qualified labour • Attracting tourists from around the world • Integrating into global capitalism

Accordingly, this study seeks to address the following question: 'How has the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia designed its nation branding strategy within the framework of tourism management in the Vision 2030 Project in order to integrate into global capitalism?' The main goal the article is to unveil Saudi Arabia's state-led hegemonic nation branding strategy that aims to reposition the Kingdom's image by a consciously-designed tourism management for transforming the country into a global centre of attraction, and to integrate the Kingdom into the structural hegemony of global capitalism by presenting the Kingdom as a global leading actor compatible with the standards of global capitalism. Thus, the article endeavours to deconstruct the persuasive strategies and ideological underpinnings of Vision 2030. Accordingly, a holistic framework is employed in order to assess the brand, with consideration being given to both its political and marketplace implications.

It should also be noted that the present study is by no means intended to enhance the international reputation of Saudi Arabia. The sole motivation of the study is to demonstrate how a country with a questionable democratic and human rights record implements a deliberate nation branding strategy to deflect attention away from its controversial aspects.

Nation Branding: Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

The question of whether a nation's image has an impact on the valuation of its material or immaterial assets has been a subject of considerable interest for contemporary world. Globalisation has created an international order in which countries engage in high-level competition with each other in order to gain the trust, respect and attention of consumers, investors, tourists, media, funders, migrants, and decision-makers of other countries (ZAD Group, 2008). Most notably following the end of the Cold War, nations felt the need to redefine and reposition themselves within the new world order (Jansen, 2008).

In today's world, states attach importance to their image for the following reason: The most effective way for consumers to formulate an opinion about a new product is to categorise it within a specific classification system, such as the product's country of origin. How consumers classify countries determines their response to products associated with those countries (Shimp *et al*., 1993). When a product is labelled as 'Made in Japan' or 'Made in Germany', it is generally considered high quality by consumers due to these countries' prestige as premium manufacturers and suppliers. The same applies to products labelled 'Made in Myanmar' or 'Made in Suriname', as these countries have a low brand value and raise suspicions about product quality (Kotler and Gertner, 2002).

In this framework, the term 'national image' refers to the prevailing sentiment of opinion shaped by the aggregate of foreign public perceptions and assessments of a nation. The core idea is that the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of the international public affect and shape the behaviour of nation states and their interactions with other countries across the globe (Wang, 2013). Thus, the management of a nation's image necessitates conscious and carefully-designed nation branding strategy. Branding, at this point, means "to differentiate products from those of competitors" (Laws *et al*., 2002, p.41). Then, nation branding refers to the array of practices and discourses implemented by cooperating public and private sectors with the aim of creating a competitively powerful national image in the international marketplace of countries by applying brand management and corporate marketing instruments and techniques. A successful nation brand is expected to be competitive in attracting international capital, investment, export-import trade, qualified workforce, well-educated overseas students, and tourists. It should also enhance the competitive power of national companies (Schwak, 2016).

Nation branding has transformed the modern state into a new semi-business union (Cerny, 1997). It is distinct from propaganda, and its scope cannot be limited to those activities that are designed to influence public opinion through public relations or advertising (Kaneva, 2011). It is more than a mere campaigning activity. It is "a component of national policy" involving the processes of governance, planning, and economic development (Anholt, 2008, p.23).

As Van Ham (2001) highlighted, creating a 'nation brand' is not only motivated by economic desire; it also has significant strategic and political implications. When politicians seek to 'brand' the USA for Middle Eastern populations, for example, their focus is not on direct forms of consumption, such as promoting tourism, but on positive public relations in general with their social, political and economic consequences (Volcic and Andrejevic, 2011). A nation brand is the reflection of governments' ideological standpoint. It involves the discussion and agreement by political elites on common ideas, values and traditions and necessitates a long-term, systematic and consistent image of the nation (Nas, 2023).

Various researches showed that tourism is a significant component of countries' nation branding strategies (Scott *et al*., 2011; Cheregi, 2018). For instance, destination image, which

refers to the sum of individual's ideas, impressions and beliefs about a particular destination (Crompton, 1979), is significant for the development of tourism because of its impact on both the demand and supply sides of marketing (Tasci and Gartner, 2007) for the maintenance of tourist loyalty (Yang *et al.*, 2022). Since destination image is a reflection of social biases within the international tourism industry (Chen *et al.*, 2012), a need emerges to consciously design the image of a country's tourism-related elements such as cultural and recreational sites, entertainment events, catering and accommodation facilities.

The topic of nation branding is significant and has been the subject of various studies, which aim to comprehend how national images have been transformed in countries on the Arabian Peninsula (Zeineddine, 2017; Samuel-Azran, 2020; Ahmed *et al.* 2022; Taylor *et al.*, 2023; Mohib and Carroll, 2024; AlSarraf and AlMutairi, 2025). Furthermore, there are several studies about the case of Saudi Arabia that specifically focused on the role tourism-related topics; including Vision 2030 (Alsedrah, 2021; Ali and Salameh, 2021; Winarni and Permana, 2022; Kumar, 2023; Al Qurtuby, 2024; Khan, 2025), sports (Satish et al. 2024; Young, 2024; Agerschou-Madsen, 2025), performing arts (Gamal, 2024), and city branding projects (Shoaib and Keivani, 2015; Alsayel *et al.*, 2023; Andira and Tamsyah, 2025) on nation branding strategy.

Among these studies, Alsedrah (2021) pointed out that Saudi Arabia's image as an 'oil-dependent country' persists, although it has made significant progress with Vision 2030. Therefore, the Kingdom's efforts to improve its image as a diversified global economy must continue. Ali and Salameh (2021) focused on the demand side of Vision 2030 and researched the satisfaction rate of tourists that had visited Saudi Arabia. For them, while the Kingdom's tourism revenues are steadily increasing, there are also structural issues requiring improvement, such as tourism diversification based on the economic status of incoming tourists, speeding up visa application processes, and hygiene issues.

As a person who has a relatively optimistic viewpoint about the Kingdom's 2030 vision, Al Qurtuby (2024) challenged the claim that the motivation behind reforms in Saudi Arabian tourism is solely economic benefits, and argued that this transformation has a deeper purpose: the creation of a new identity. For him, while the Kingdom is striving to become a global tourism hub and a modern country equipped with the latest technology, it also attempts to create a pluralistic, tolerant and moderate nation that embraces foreign cultures, and distances itself from conservatism and militancy. In a similar vein, Khan (2025) underlined that Saudi Arabia has gained an economic identity by means of "Made in Saudi" initiative.

On the other hand, Kumar (2023), who adopted a relatively more cautious view of Vision 2030, indicated that for an authoritarian state characterised by crony capitalism to successfully transform into a fair, accountable and liberal democratic state, the involvement of the people in the reformation process is vital. Similarly, Winarni and Permana (2022), who hold a pessimistic view of the nation branding efforts being executed in accordance with Vision 2030, stated that overcoming the conservatism embedded in society would not be easy and drew attention to the possibility that this transformation would encounter resistance in society.

Based on the general overview of related literature, the original contribution of the current study is its positioning of nation branding efforts within Vision 2030 at the intersection of global capitalism's structural hegemony and the Kingdom's own hegemonic project.

Methodology

The texts and visuals of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 are to be found in numerous documents and on a variety of platforms. Due to study's limitations in terms of length, however, the analysis in this paper was based on the official promotional documents and annual reports of Vision 2030. These documents were selected primarily because they form the foundational source of all subsequent documentation, websites and social media accounts, thereby reflecting their cumulative discourse. These documents also constitute the discursive basis for all marketing activities and advertisements for Vision 2030.

Table 1: An Illustrative Example of Codebook Entries

Code Name	Modernization with Heritage
Definition	Represents the merging of traditional Saudi values with modern global practices to produce a coherent brand identity that appeals both domestically and internationally.
Inclusion Criteria	Include statements linking cultural heritage, tradition, or religion with modernization, innovation, or progress.
Exclusion Criteria	Exclude statements focusing only on economic growth or religious devotion without reference to modernity.
Example Quotation	"*Saudi Arabia's culture, a vibrant blend of tradition and modernity, is actively promoted as part of the nation's commitment to preserving and highlighting its unique identity.*" (KSA, 2023, p.132)
Category	Cultural Preservation and Continuity
Theme	Cultural Identity Construction
Source	Story of Transformation 2023
Memo	Demonstrates the old–new synthesis that underpins Vision 2030's nation branding discourse, turning cultural authenticity into marketable capital compatible with global capitalism.

(Source: Authors of the Paper)

Since the focus of the present study is the Kingdom's nation branding strategy in an international context, the investigation will focus on the English-language content, which is widely regarded as the international language. As the documents cover a wide range of topics, stratified sampling was used to ensure that all topics related to Saudi Arabia's tourism were represented. Then, purposive sampling was employed within each topic to select the most relevant parts for the research question and the paper's objectives.

Although the complete codebook is not included in the main body of the paper, the analytical process of coding and the development of the codebook (its structure and underlying logic) are described on *Table 1* with an illustrative example of codes, categories, themes and subtitles related to the description of the coding process.

The present study adopts a language-based and discourse-oriented approach, with the objective of investigating the meanings embedded within the texts. In fact, language is not just a simple tool used to communicate in everyday life. It reproduces social life, creates, legitimises and perpetuates certain interests and inequalities, and is thus an instrument of domination and social construction. Not only does discourse define social structures and processes, it also plays an important role in producing and reproducing them (Machin and Mayr, 2012). In this sense, the image-enhancing endeavours, such as nation branding, seek to reconstruct social reality, and sometimes this reconstruction also involves distorting reality. Hence, as the qualitative research provides a contextual understanding of beliefs, values and social interactions and focuses on the embedded meanings of social phenomena instead of numbers and measurements (Bryman, 2012), qualitative content analysis has been identified as the primary methodological approach, complemented by certain techniques of critical discourse analysis. Whilst qualitative content analysis has been utilised to systematically examine the texts of Vision 2030, critical discourse analysis has been employed to facilitate a more nuanced examination of specific political discourses embedded within these texts.

Findings: Nation Branding of Saudi Arabia in Content

This section comprises the findings derived from the analysis of Saudi Arabia's official 'Vision 2030' promotional documents and annual reports. In the section, themes, categories, codes and quotation samples are identified and analysed with the aim of revealing the main discursive elements of the Kingdom's nation branding strategy.

Table 2: Analyses of the Texts

Theme	Sub-Category	Code	Example Quote
Cultural Identity Construction	Religious Legitimacy and National Pride	Islamic Custodianship	*"As the birthplace of Islam, Saudi Arabia is also home of the Two Holy Mosques. With this custodianship comes a duty to uphold the identity and ties of Islam, and a responsibility to the 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide."* (KSA, 2022, p.78)
Cultural Identity Construction	Islamic Identity and Leadership	Leadership in Muslim World	*"The first pillar of our vision is our status as the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds."* (KSA, n.d., p.6)
Cultural Identity Construction	Cultural Preservation and Continuity	Revitalization of Heritage	*"The Kingdom has revitalized over 150 historical sites, ensuring the preservation and celebration of its rich cultural legacy."* (KSA, 2023, p.119)
Cultural Identity Construction	Tradition-Modernity Synthesis	Modernization with Heritage	*"Saudi Arabia's culture, a vibrant blend of tradition and modernity, is actively promoted as part of the nation's commitment to preserving its unique identity."* (KSA, 2023, p.132)
Cultural Identity Construction	Tradition and Innovation	Cultural Renaissance	*"Culture is no longer viewed solely as tradition, it is now a dynamic sector that drives economic development, fuels national pride, and positions the Kingdom on the global cultural map."* (KSA, 2024, p.220)
Domestic Persuasion and Consent	Moral Legitimation of Reform	Religious Justification for Progress	*"With all the blessings Allah has bestowed on our nation, we cannot help but be optimistic about the decades ahead. We ponder what lies over the horizon rather than worrying about what could be lost."* (KSA, n.d., p.6)
Domestic Persuasion and Consent	Economic Consent-Building	Promised Prosperity for Citizens	*"We will improve the business environment, so that our economy grows and flourishes, driving healthier employment opportunities for citizens and long-term prosperity for all."* (KSA, n.d., p.7)
Global Image Construction	Global Leadership and Competitiveness	Becoming a Global Hub	*"Transforming our unique strategic location into a global hub connecting three continents… the epicenter of trade and the gateway to the world."* (KSA, n.d., p.6)
Global Image Construction	Global Leadership and Competitiveness	Becoming a Global Model	*"My first objective is for our country to be a pioneering and successful global model of excellence, on all fronts, and I will work with you to achieve that."* (KSA, n.d., p.5)

Global Image Construction	Economic Transformation and Diversification	From Oil to Global Economy	*"We are determined to reinforce and diversify the capabilities of our economy, turning our key strengths into enabling tools for a fully diversified future."* (KSA, n.d., p.7)
Global Image Construction	Integration into Global Capitalism	Investment and Market Openness	*"We will transform Aramco from an oil producing company into a global industrial conglomerate… and encourage our major corporations to expand across borders."* (KSA, n.d., p.7)
Global Image Construction	Tourism as Economic Diplomacy	Opening Doors to the World	*"In September 2019, Saudi Arabia opened its doors to the world for the first time… confirming Saudi Arabia as an exciting new travel destination."* (KSA, 2022, p.69)
Global Image Construction	Tourism's Economic Impact	Tourism as Engine of Growth	*"Tourism will be an engine of job creation and commercial growth, enhancing the Kingdom's international profile while preserving its national identity."* (KSA, 2022, p.70)
Global Image Construction	Soft Power and International Recognition	Global Events and Partnerships	*"Saudi Arabia will host the FIFA World Cup 2034, the largest single-country tournament in the event's history… strengthening international partnerships."* (KSA, 2024, p.209)
Global Image Construction	Good Governance, Transparency, and Accountability	Accountable Governance	*"We will immediately adopt wide-ranging transparency and accountability reforms… and hold government agencies accountable for any shortcomings."* (KSA, n.d., p.7)
Global Image Construction	Good Governance, Transparency, and Accountability	Efficient Administration	*"We will expand the variety of digital services to reduce delays and cut tedious bureaucracy."* (KSA, n.d., p.7)
Global Image Construction	UNESCO Emphasis and Cultural Diplomacy	Global Cultural Recognition	*"Eight of the Kingdom's cultural practices have been recognized by UNESCO… reflecting its ongoing work to safeguard its cultural identity and share it with the world."* (KSA, 2022, p.76)
Global Image Construction	Gender Equality	Empowering Youth and Women	*"Together we will continue building a better country, fulfilling our dream of prosperity and unlocking the talent, potential, and dedication of our young men and women."* (KSA, n.d., p.7)

(Source: KSA, n.d.; KSA, 2022; KSA, 2023; KSA, 2024)

Theme 1: Cultural Identity Construction

One of the prominent themes detected in the texts is 'Cultural Identity Construction,' which is presented by the Kingdom as a strong aspect of Saudi Arabia to the world public. It is also a reflection of an endeavour to consolidate the domestic public.

Islamic identity is presented as the primary component of the Kingdom's contemporary ideological stance. The Kingdom has adopted a dualistic approach to its foreign policy (and therefore, its nation brand), simultaneously promoting an integrationist discourse aligned with global public opinion while concurrently disseminating a message of preservation of its Islamic identity, thereby ensuring its inclusion in these broader integration processes. At this juncture, religion has become a legitimising factor in the Kingdom's future strategic outlook. Moreover, the pronounced emphasis on nationhood and national pride indicates that Saudi Arabia's brand positioning transcends a solely religious framework, suggesting that nationalism is regarded as at least equally significant to Islamic identity. This peculiar cultural blend, characterised by a

confluence of Arab and Islamic identities, serves to strengthen the Kingdom's distinct position on the global cultural map.

Throughout the texts, strong references to ummah that encompasses all Muslims worldwide occupy a pivotal position in general discourse. The perception of the Kingdom's lands as a divine endowment further reinforces the discourse of national superiority in the divine perspective. The usage of keywords such as 'holy mosques', 'birthplace of Islam', 'crossroads of pilgrims', and 'Muslims worldwide' serves to establish a distinct status over other Muslim lands, thereby establishing a hierarchical structure among the global Muslim population and asserting a claim to provide patronage under the flag of Saudi Arabia. The ideological stance stemming from the Kingdom's such privileged status endows the country with a legitimate claim to the role of global arbiter for Muslims, thus positioning itself as a leader figure in the broader Islamic context. In this sense, the Kingdom highlights its Islamic and cultural identity as a component of its soft power and attempts to increase its global influence by producing consent worldwide.

The Kingdom has developed a discourse on cultural identity, centring on the revitalisation of its religious and cultural heritage. This is presented as being the foundation for the Kingdom's contemporary potential. Revitalisation implies embracing the past and attributing value to it. This corresponds to a discourse that prevents the emergence of a hostile dichotomy between the past and the future.

A pervasive theme throughout the texts is the necessity of modernising the country. At this juncture, modernisation is regarded as a conduit for integration into global capitalism. The modernist transformation is predicated on a belief in uninterrupted progress, which can be regarded as a strong message to the world public opinion about Saudi Arabia's endeavours to comply with modern capitalist Western world. The direction of this uninterrupted progress is towards the developed West.

The term 'Cultural Renaissance' can be seen as a manifestation to signify the Kingdom's comprehensive transformation across various domains (especially, in culture and tourism) in order to attract the attention of the West. It serves as a conceptual framework that utilises Western-centric terminology to elucidate the nation's evolution. Consequently, the normative foundations of the transformation are associated with a concept that is favourably entrenched in the collective memory of Westerners. The 'Cultural Renaissance' notion employed in the text also exemplifies a modernist disposition. The text's emphasis on heritage as a dynamic concept, rather than a static tradition, reveals its instrumentalisation and commercialisation as a catalyst for neo-liberal economic development.

Theme 2: Domestic Persuasion and Consent

Another theme identified in the texts is 'Domestic Persuasion and Consent', which reveals the Kingdom's construction of discourse to gain approval from its own people for its 'Vision 2030'. The King's introductory message within the texts effectively conveys a sense of ownership and patronage of the project to the Kingdom's public. The acquisition of domestic consent is of significant consequence in terms of the international standing of a country. A regime that has secured the approval of its society for a specific purpose also responds to suspicions of authoritarianism directed at it. The Kingdom brand is thus introduced on the global stage as an identity endorsed by the nation as a whole.

The Kingdom has pursued a dual strategy in generating consent. Firstly, the Kingdom has produced particular discourse regarding the approval of religion, which is the most important reference point people apply when developing attitudes on any subject. Thusly, the religion's approval has removed all consent-diminishing ethical barriers related to the transformation in the society stemming from Kingdom's Vision 2030.

Moreover, the Kingdom emphasises its current potential and outlines a trajectory of hopeful and ambitious progress towards the future by pledging prosperity for its citizens. The 'progressive future' narrative can be interpreted as an attempt to reposition the Saudi Arabia brand by creating

a past-future dichotomy. The fulfilment of 'dreams, hopes and ambitions' is a key component in the construction of a new future for Saudi Arabia in relation to this dichotomy.

Theme 3: Global Image Construction

The most prominent theme within the context of Saudi Arabia's nation branding efforts is that of 'Global Image Construction'. Within this theme, the Kingdom is undertaking a comprehensive transformation of various facets of the country's past image, concurrently repositioning the Saudi Arabia brand on the global stage.

The deliberate use of the term 'hub' and the inclusion of carefully chosen keywords regarding the Kingdom's strategic geographical location in the texts is intended to transform the country from a passive object to an active subject and shift it from the periphery to the centre. Thus, when a nation becomes a global hub, it positions itself as a pivotal actor in ensuring the continuity of the world capitalist system and attains a decisive position regarding matters related to peripheral countries.

Within the framework of being a 'global model of excellence', the word 'excellence' corresponds to completeness and perfection. The term 'pioneering' is characterised by its emphasis on the capacity to lead others, thereby establishing a hierarchical relationship between the Kingdom and other actors in the world. The use of the adjective 'successful' serves to underline that the country's capacity to lead is a quality that has been merited, thereby lending legitimacy to it. Furthermore, the discourse of being 'on all fronts' serves to enhance the versatility of the Kingdom's brand.

The fundamental rationale for prioritising tourism in Vision 2030 is the Kingdom's strategic objective to transition from its historical role as a solely oil-exporting nation to a more diversified economic profile. The presentation of diversity in economic activities reveals what Saudi Arabia can offer to global capitalism. Consequently, Saudi Arabia will be branded as a key player in the global economy, distinguished by its leadership in multiple sectors, rather than solely defined by the oil produced on its territory.

The nation brand of Saudi Arabia is also designed through the use of keywords such as 'market openness', 'jobs', 'economic growth', 'partnerships', 'create jobs', and 'investment' that proves country's enthusiasm for developing collaborations with global actors of capitalism and attracting both domestic and foreign investors. Such strategy proves the capability and strength especially by the tourism sector of the Kingdom. Moreover, the emphasis on 'talent' within the texts is intended to create the impression of a meritocratic order in the country. This gives rise to a narrative that positions the decisions made in the country as being of a high calibre.

The narrative of 'opening doors to the world' supports the previous narrative of country's investor-friendly atmosphere and open-market identity. The word 'door' is a symbol that distinguishes home from the outside world. The use of phrases such as "Saudi Arabia opened its doors to the world for the first time" creates an openness-closedness dichotomy, signalling a break from the Kingdom's former closed days. The inherent dynamic of global capitalism necessitates a certain level of acquiescence to its prevailing principles. Therefore, being open also means possessing the same standards, accepting the reciprocal dependencies and being able to build partnerships and with the outside. Thusly, such discourse reveals the Kingdom's enthusiasm for welcoming the outside world and for integrating Saudi Arabia into global capitalism.

Tourism is presented as the engine of growth by the Kingdom and expected to enhance "the Kingdom's international profile while preserving its national identity." Since tourism can be regarded as a country's showcase, the Kingdom attempts to display its historical (but modernised) culture as the forte of its nation brand. Furthermore, developments such as the e-visa rollout and the amended Tourism Law reveal the Kingdom's systematic approach to reforming and progressing the tourism sector. This systematic approach, which reveals the country's willingness to comply with international standards of hospitality, inspires confidence in international investors and boosts foreign direct investment to the country by assuring potential tourists that they will not

encounter any unanticipated difficulties. Thusly, such confidence ensures that the Saudi Arabia brand can be distinguished by its clarity and rationality without causing any sense of ambiguity or disorder.

Specific references to world-renowned organisations such as the World Cup football tournament, WWE Wrestling and Formula 1 and music bands with a large global fan base such as Metallica can be regarded as a nation branding effort to internationalise the country's sports and entertainment sector. A significant objective of the Kingdom's strategy to position Saudi Arabia as a leisure hub in the eyes of the global audience is to manage its reputation and reliability and to ensure the accreditation of its way of conducting business. The competencies and capabilities demonstrated through the entertainment sector will make a significant contribution to the process of becoming a global player of capitalism.

The concepts of 'good governance', 'transparency' and 'accountability' are used instrumentally to produce a sense of trust and confidence and to declare that the country has the requisite good intentions to manage administrative processes in a positive manner. Thus, such a declaration possesses two main consequences. Firstly, it encourages foreign investors to transfer their capital to Saudi Arabia and stay in the market of the country without hesitation. Secondly, it serves to establish the country as a trusted holiday destination for tourists globally.

The cultural heritage of the Kingdom is confirmed with universal testimony through references to UNESCO and its World Heritage List. Those references can be regarded as a discursive tactic to accredit the cultural heritage in question by leveraging international testimonies, and thusly to imbue the nation brand with universal objective legitimacy.

A notable concern in the Vision 2030 texts is the attempt to construct a discourse that can counteract the prevailing negative global perceptions regarding social and political aspects of daily life in Saudi Arabia. A paradigmatic example for the establishment of a nation brand that is devoid of the problematic traits is the emphasis on gender equality throughout the texts, as exemplified by the expression "our young men and women". Such discourse can be interpreted as a strategic manoeuvre on the part of the Kingdom to mitigate cultural differences, particularly with relatively egalitarian Western societies, as it endeavours to enhance its global integration and assert itself as a significant global actor.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study, which aim to reveal how the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has shaped its nation branding strategy in the context of Vision 2030, show that the Kingdom has designed Vision 2030 as a conscious hegemonic project that would serve the country to become a part of global capitalism. At this point, it is useful to refer to Joseph's (2000) distinction between deeply embedded structural hegemony, which corresponds to the reproduction and unity of society with its institutions and structures, and the agent-based hegemony of particular hegemonic projects. It should be noted at this point that the reproduction of structural hegemony is not automatic. It can be reproduced through conscious and agential hegemonic projects, which are again restricted by the boundaries drawn by structural hegemony (Joseph, 2001). Accordingly, on the one hand, the Kingdom takes approval from the structural hegemony for its own hegemonic project, and on the other hand, it contributes to the reproduction of global capitalist hegemony by aligning its project with global capitalism.

Within this framework, nation branding endeavours of the Kingdom have functioned as a political and ideological project repackaged Saudi Arabia's image from conservative oil-dependent monarchy into a modern, open, and investment-friendly country. The Kingdom's proactive endeavours to construct its brand image, rather than passively accepting perceptions and beliefs about itself in the international arena are also consistent with the findings of Chen *et al.* (2012), who underlined that destination image is the product of collective construction and people's decisions regarding destination choice are affected by their biased destination perceptions.

Table 3: Discursive tactics that reveal political/ideological underpinnings of the Vision 2030

Hegemonic Project of the Kingdom	Structural Hegemony of Global Capitalism
• Consolidating people inside by using 'we' and 'our' pronouns • Utilising Islamic discourse due to its power to grant legitimacy • Promising prosperity for citizens • Inviting international capital to Saudi Arabia • Inviting qualified labour to Saudi Arabia • Claiming leadership in the Islamic world by constructing a discursive hierarchy stemming from being the 'birthplace of Islam' • Promoting tourism as the engine of growth	• Replacing the image of an oil-dependent country with a narrative of diversified economy • Emphasising on modernisation of society • Guaranteeing market openness • Producing a rhetoric of institutionalised neoliberalism by promising good governance, transparency and accountability • Gaining international endorsement by referring to UNESCO • Promising gender equality • Promising Cultural Renaissance

(Source: Authors of the Paper)

Another dominant ideology that guides the texts' discourse is state-sponsored neo-liberal economic development. Vision 2030 promises that this neo-liberal economic development will be realised through the efforts of the people, and that the people will benefit from the financial gains and improved job opportunities. The tourism sector is regarded as the primary catalyst for such development. In consideration of the supply-demand equilibrium inherent to the neoliberal free market economy, the Kingdom brand assures its capacity to deliver the most dependable and exceptional supply to meet the demands of its prospective clientele.

As Gledhill (2004) highlighted, neoliberalism cannot be limited merely to seeking solutions to the capitalism's accumulation crisis and readjusting labour-capital relations; it is an ideological framework that commodifies personhood and identity, from the reproduction of everyday social life to the most intimate human relationships. In this respect, the Kingdom's integration into global capitalism cannot be reduced to a superficial economic modification; rather, it is fundamentally an undertaking to transform society's identity and everyday practices of people. On the other hand, this transformation will be distinct from the other countries of the Arabian Peninsula. In contrast to the other five members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (namely the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain), which were colonised by Britain prior to attaining independence, Saudi Arabia has never experienced Western colonial rule (Barnawi, 2018). Therefore, unlike the other countries that are more prone to cultural hybridisation due to their colonial past, the Kingdom must play a more proactive role in the transformation of identity, culture and daily life in line with the necessities of neoliberalism.

A close reading of the texts also reveals an emphasis on 'modernisation' as a fundamental ideological principle that draws the boundaries and determines the spirit of Saudi Arabia's nation branding strategy. Modernisation hinges on economic development, political stability, and social and cultural transformation (Tipps, 1973). Thusly, it focuses on social evolution and development of societies. Information's vital role in economic development increases the value of information products such as software, internet, and electronic databases. Such a modernisation in economy also eases the emergence of an administration that protects property rights and provides citizens a

transparent style of governance (Goorha, 2017). This is also the reason behind the Kingdom's emphasis on the values of good governance such as transparency and accountability.

Civil society's role in the transformation process of Saudi Arabia is a highly debated issue. For example, Asadi (2023) argued that the Kingdom's increasingly authoritarian politics and civil society's limited involvement in the Vision 2030 reformation process may prevent the country's national branding strategy from progressing along a desired path. Although it is not to the same extent as Western civil society-state relations, however, according to the findings of this study, the Kingdom endeavours to involve civil society in the process. For instance, the repeated use of the pronouns 'we' and 'our' serves to establish a sense of unity, collective ownership, shared ideal of the Kingdom's Vision 2030. Moreover, the promises of prosperity and wealth for the local population and the efforts to legitimise reforms through religion reveal that the Kingdom values the consent and inclusion of society. In order to gain the consent of the global public, domestic consent relationship is a necessary condition. It is also a crucial prerequisite for the integration of the nation into global capitalism.

In this line, Silvanto and Ryan (2018) found that the ability of a country to recruit and retain skilled professionals from abroad depends on the availability of employment opportunities and the extent of cultural heterogeneity and plurality in the receiving country. The Kingdom's open-door policy, its efforts to position the country as a centre of attraction, and its promises about welfare can be seen as consistent with those findings.

The most significant limitation of this study is that it has been restricted to the content in English. On the other hand, the choice of English content also provides a greater advantage in terms of interpreting the discourse addressed to international public opinion compared to Arabic content.

As the current study focuses on comprehending the process of discourse production, future studies are recommended to use qualitative or quantitative research methods to measure the impact of nation branding endeavours on the opinion of the target audience.

References

Agerschou-Madsen, F. (2025). Football fever in Saudi Arabia: nation branding and framing images of transformation. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 18(1), pp.1-33. doi:10.1163/18739865-01801003

Ahmed, G., Abudaqa, A., Jayachandran, C., Limbu, Y., Alzahmi, R. (2022). Nation branding as a strategic approach for emerging economies: The case of UAE. In Adeola, O., Hinson, R. E. & Sakkthivel, A. M. (eds.), *Marketing communications and brand development in emerging economies volume I*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-88678-3_3

Al Qurtuby, S. (2024). The development and innovation of religious, secular, and archaeological tourism in Saudi Arabia. *The Journal for Interdisciplinary Middle Eastern Studies*, 10(1), pp.33-69.

Ali, A. and Salameh, A. A. (2021). Role of travel and tourism sector in the attainment of Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia: an analytical study. *Problems and Perspectives in Management*, 19(2), pp.276-290.

AlSarraf, M. and AlMutairi, S. (2025). Exploring nation branding in the Gulf Cooperation Council: A thematic review. *Comparative Sociology*, 24(1), pp.58-100. doi:10.1163/15691330-bja10128

Alsayel, A., Fransen, J., and de Jong, M. (2023). City branding in a multi-level governance context: comparing branding performance across five institutional models for urban development in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 16(2), pp.267-290. doi:10.1108/JPMD-07-2022-0061

Alsedrah, I. (2021). Branding the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. *Social and Management Research Journal (SMRJ)*, 18(1), pp.1-16. doi:10.24191/smrj.v18i1.12370

Andira, R. N. and Tamsyah, I. (2025). Saudi Arabia's efforts in nation branding through the NEOM Megacity Project in 2020-2024. *Journal PIR Power in International Relations*, 10(2), pp.1-17. doi:10.22303/pir.10.2.2025.86-102.

Anholt, S. (2008). From nation branding to competitive identity - The role of brand management as a component of national policy. In Dinnie, K. (ed.) *Nation branding: concepts, issues, practice*. Oxford, UK: Butterworth-Heinemann, pp.22-23.

Asadi, A. A. (2023). National branding in Saudi Arabia: capacities and new policies. *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 101, pp.111-136. doi:10.22034/srq.2023.182377

Barnawi, O. Z. (2018). *Neoliberalism and English Language Education Policies in the Arabian Gulf*. London: Routledge.

Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods*, 4ᵗʰ edn.. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cerny, P. (1997). Paradoxes of the competition state: the dynamics of political globalization. *Government and Opposition*, 32(2), pp.251–274.

Chen, C.-C., Lin, Y.-H., and Petrick, J. F. (2012). Social biases of destination perceptions. *Journal of Travel Research*, 52(2), pp.240-252. doi:10.1177/0047287512459106

Cheregi, B. F. (2018). Nation branding in transition countries: a multimodal analysis of Romania and Moldova tourism campaigns. *Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management and Innovation*, 14(4), pp.81-106 doi:10.7341/20181444

Crompton, J. (1979). Motivations for pleasure vacation. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 6(4), pp.408-424. doi:10.1016/0160-7383(79)90004-5

Gamal, N. (2024). The performing arts and nation branding in Saudi Arabia. University of Massachusetts.

Gledhill, J. (2004). Neoliberalism. In Nugent, D. and Vincent, J. (eds.) *A companion to the anthropology of politics*. Malden, MA, Oxford and Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, pp.332-348

Goorha, P. (2017). Modernization theory. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-266

Jansen, S. C. (2008). Designer nations: neo-liberal nation branding - brand Estonia. *Social Identities*, 14(1), pp.121-142.

Joseph, J. (2000). A realist theory of hegemony. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 30(2), pp.179-202.

Joseph, J. (2001). Hegemony in the fourth dimension. *Journal for the Theory of the Social Behaviour*, 31(3), pp.261-277.

Kaneva, N. (2011). Nation branding: toward an agenda for critical research. *International Journal of Communication*, 5, pp.117-141.

Khan, A. A. (2025). Made in KSA and tourism: twin pillars of Saudi Arabia's "nation brand". *International Journal of Social Sciences Bulletin*, 3(7), pp.92-97.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [KSA]. (n.d.). Vision 2030 Document. https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/rc0b5oy1/saudi_vision203.pdf

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [KSA]. (2022). Story of Transformation 2022. https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/sdslhhet/vision-2030_story-of-transformation-2022.pdf

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [KSA]. (2023). Story of Transformation 2023. https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/jvllaxpl/story-of-transformation-2023.pdf

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [KSA]. (2024). Annual Report 2024. https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/r3ij40wu/en-annual-report-vision2030-2024.pdf

Kotler, P., and Gertner, D. (2002). Country as brand, product, and beyond: a place marketing and brand management perspective. *Journal of Brand Management*, 9(4-5), pp.249-261. doi:10.1057/palgrave.bm.2540076

Kumar, N. (2023). Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030": structural reforms and their challenges. *Journal of Sustainable Development*, 16(4), pp.92-99.

Laws, E., Scott, N. and Parfitt, N. (2002). Synergies in destination image management: A case study and conceptualisation. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 4(1), pp.39-55.

Machin, D. and Mayr, A. (2012). *How to do critical discourse analysis*. London: Sage.

Mohib, A. A. and Carroll, C. (2024). Nation branding as a tool to attract foreign direct investments: a case study of Qatar. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 20, pp.363-377. doi:10.1057/s41254-024-00326-9

Nas, A. (2023). Nation branding and sustainability: a comparative analysis of European countries. *Istanbul University Journal of Communication Sciences*, 64, pp.183-211.

Samuel-Azran, T. (2020). Nation branding in the Arab World. In N. Snow, & N. J. Cull (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*. New York: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780429465543

Satish, K., Portet, X. G. and Vela, J. S. E. (2024). Football and nation branding: a case study of Saudi Arabia's strategy for global football recognition. *adComunica*, pp.27-52. doi:10.6035/adcomunica.7776

Schwak, J. (2016). Branding South Korea in a competitive world order: discourses and dispositives in neoliberal governmentality. *Asian Studies Review*, 40(3), pp.427-444. doi:10.1080/10357823.2016.1193474

Shoaib, T. and Keivani, R. (2015). Branding the new city: exploring place branding in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 8(3), pp.254-265.

Scott, N. Ashton, A. S., Ding, P. and Xu, H. (2011). Tourism branding and nation building in China. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 5(3), pp.227-234. doi:10.1108/17506181111156925

Shimp, T. A., Samiee, S. and Madden, T. J. (1993). Countries and their products: a cognitive structure perspective. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 21(4), pp.323-330. doi:10.1007/BF02894524

Silvanto, S. and Ryan, J. (2018). An investigation into the core appeals for nation branding to attract and retain talent to enhance a country's competitiveness. *Competitiveness Review*, 28(5), pp.584-604. doi:10.1108/CR-05-2017-0036

Tasci, A. D. A. and Gartner, W. C. (2007). Destination image and its functional relationships. *Journal of Travel Research*, 45(4), pp.413-425. doi:10.1177/0047287507299569

Taylor, T., Burdsey, D. and Jarvis, N. (2023). A critical review on sport and the Arabian Peninsula - the current state of play and future directions. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 15, pp.367-383.

Tipps, D. C. (1973). Modernization theory and the comparative study of societies: a critical perspective. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 15(2), pp.199-226.

Van Ham, P. (2001). The rise of the brand state: the postmodern politics of image and reputation. *Foreign Affairs*, 8(5), pp.2-6.

Volcic, Z. and Andrejevic, M. (2011). Nation branding in the era of commercial nationalism. *International Journal of Communication*, 5, pp.598-618.

Wang, J. (2013). Branding nations. In Wang, J. (ed.) *Shaping China's global imagination: branding nations at the World Expo*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.23-42. doi:10.1057/9781137361721_2

Winarni, L. and Permana, A. P. Y. N. (2022). Saudi Vision 2030 and the challenge of competitive identity transformation in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Islamic World and Politics*, 6(1), pp.104-121.

Yang, S., Isa, S. M., Yao, Y., Xia, J. and Liu, D. (2022). Cognitive image, aective image, cultural dimensions, and conative image: a new conceptual framework. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13:935814. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2022.935814

Young, K. (2024). Nation branding in Saudi Arabia; sports diplomacy for Western attraction. *Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC)*. https://hdl.handle.net/10609/151738

ZAD Group. (2008). Country case insight - Egypt - an aspiring modern state. In Dinnie, K. (ed.) *Nation branding: concepts, issues, practice.* Oxford, UK: Butterworth-Heinemann, pp.37-50.

Zeineddine, C. (2017). Nation branding in the Middle East - United Arab Emirates (UAE) vs. Qatar. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Business Excellence*, 11(1), pp.588-596.