Creating Saudi Arabia's Destination Image: A Success Story

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Extended Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze the promotional videos of the Saudi tourism campaign that were created to attract foreign leisure tourists to Saudi Arabia. The kingdom is a newcomer on the tourism scene, opening its doors to leisure tourism with the launch of tourist visas only in 2019. Nonetheless, its quick rise in tourist numbers warranted the first place in the Growth of International Tourists Arrivals in 2023 compared to 2019 among large tourism destinations in the UN Tourism ranking. Consequently, it is necessary to analyze what sort of strategy the kingdom has put forward in order to create a destination image that is the reason behind this success, motivating close to 28 million (data for the year 2023) foreign tourists to visit the kingdom.

The motivation for a tourist to visit a specific destination can inarguably be linked to a psychological push/pull force (Chon 1989). Maslow's (1943) theory posited that human needs function as "push" factors, and environmental cues as "pull" factors, arguing that the two in combination form all human motivation. His theory remains today one of the most broadly accepted ideas used by researchers to understand human behaviour (Yousaf, Amin & Santos 2018). Consequently, spin-off research into both push/pull factors and Maslow's five basic needs have been generated for years in a vast array of concepts. One such concept, being *image*. Image is applicable in any context, it could be prescribed to a political candidate, an idea, or a destination "*It* (image) *describes no individual traits or qualities but the total impression an entity makes in the minds of others*" (Dichter 1985). It is also a generally accepted idea within psychology that images, although biased and possibly misguided, is a product of the mind. It is important therefore to process, categorize, and essentialize a huge amount of data (Kotler, Haider & Rein 1993), so that this data can ultimately be used to make better judgements and decisions.

In order to answer the research question, the researchers proceeded to analyze five promotional videos for Saudi Arabia as a whole and two videos made specifically for AlUla (Table 1 below)

Table 1 Videos analyzed in the scope of this study

Title	Link	Release year
Welcome to Saudi	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDqTPT1SQbU	2021
Welcome to Arabia, Saudi	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBotvcJgCD8	2019
Saudi, Welcome To Arabia	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIDggdtVcec	2022
Saudi, Welcome To Arabia	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGggOm7QxC8	2024
This Land is Calling	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDMFgp0FFzo	2024
AluLa, The World's Masterpiece	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tqaBcUQZls	2021
AlUla, Always, and in all ways, revitalising	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OfLJ1Pd-ME	2024

Within the scope of our research, we assume that creation of place identity involves "imagery as a political process that encodes and reinforces the dominant ideology of tourism culture, essentially a global process which manifests locally and explicitly involves the construction of place" (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2002). Creation of such an identity takes place through the use of text combined with signs and images to add meaning to destinations, explain the destinations or the experience tourists can expect there; thus, semiotic language of tourism is deployed in the process (Tresidder, 2011). The process of creation of place identity is a complex one: "What is depicted or not depicted in destination image advertising, and on whose authority it is selected, involves a more complex question of what comprises the destination and who has the power to define its identity" (Fesenmaier & MacKay 1996). Identities acquire meanings through the process of framing (Herbert, 1995). Frames are the cognitive structures that we use to make sense of the world around us (Bateson, 1972; Goffman, 1974). Entman (1993: 52) explains further that "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." He further states that framing essentially involves selection and salience. Exclusion becomes an important element in framing because the way in which an issue is ignored or disguised somehow reinforces attributes of insignificance or unworthiness, which are never neutral.

Content analysis is well suited for retrieving frames from any written, verbal or visual form of communication (Cole, 1988). Given its wide scope of application, we have deemed it an appropriate method for conducting this study. Videos contain visual and verbal messages; hence we have applied these principles of content analysis to the visual video material. Iedema (2001, p. 188-189) mentioned the approach to the analysis of film-based

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materials using analytical categories stemming from film theory, namely, frame, shot, scene, sequence. These four categories proceed from the lowest level of analysis, i.e., frames (what the analyst takes to be the salient aspect of a shot), shots (uncut camera actions), scenes (defined by their continuity of time and place), to the broadest, i.e. sequences (when the camera moves with specific character(s) or subtopic across time–spaces). We have adopted these units of analysis to examine the video content. The approach of this research is thus eclectic in nature, combining the content/discourse analysis of written text with that of visuals. This method is the most appropriate for the first level of our analysis given that "A place is a discourse – a way of constructing meaning […]" (Govers & Go, 2009), frames of place identity were extracted, analyzed and compared. Within tourism research, such approaches have been successfully applied to the content of tourism promotional materials offline and online such as informational leaflets and websites (Karolak, 2018; Mason & Wright, 2010) as well as videos (Salangsang et al., 2022).

Once finalized, the analysis will reveal why has the Saudi tourism destination image been so successful in attracting foreign leisure tourists.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, destination image, tourism, campaign, semantics, semiotics

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Dr. Noela Michael is an Assistant professor in marketing. She holds a PhD from La Trobe University in Australia and has taught at both undergraduate and graduate levels in marketing, such as Managing Social Media Platforms, Corporate Marketing Strategy, Consumer Behavior, Tourism Marketing, Cross Cultural Communication, and Event and Festival Planning and Promotion. Dr. Noela is actively engaged in research and has been successful in securing research grants and the prestigious Provost Fellowship Award during her time at her previous university. Her research work is regularly published in reputable peer-reviewed journals and conferences, which are indexed by Scopus. She serves as a Journal Editorial Advisory Board Member for Consumer Behavior in Tourism and Hospitality. Furthermore, she has held senior administrative positions and was a National Advisory Strategy Board Member of the Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA).