



Tourism stakeholder perspectives on the Saudi Seasons and opportunities to further develop international tourism

By Sultan Al-Mohmmad

College of Humanities, Art and Social science

Flinders University

December 2020

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ABSTRACT

Saudi Arabia is a country that has a rich history and heritage, and although primarily known for its religious tourism, the country has now embarked on a new journey to build new forms of tourism. Saudi Arabia has ambitions to become one of the leading international tourist destinations by 2030. For this reason, the state has taken a number of important steps, including the launch of E-visas and the hosting of the ‘Saudi Seasons 2019’. The Saudi Seasons were held in many parts of Saudi Arabia with an aim to increase tourism in Saudi Arabia and to help promote regional cultural and natural heritage attractions to wider audiences. This study explores how successful the Saudi Seasons strategy has been so far and how it may be improved in the future. To do so, this research relies on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews of tourism stakeholders from 3 locations: Riyadh, Jeddah, and Al-Ula. The findings of the study suggest that the Saudi Seasons have been successful in creating employment opportunities, an increase in business activity, and in supporting economic stability. However, it was also observed that the Saudi Seasons initiative could be improved through increasing the duration of the events and via the provision of better facilities for tourists. The respondents also shared their views on how Saudi Arabia could attract greater numbers of international tourists in the future, and it was proposed that new marketing strategies should help showcase its climate diversity and rich cultural heritage that remain widely unknown to international tourist markets.

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I certify that this work does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed 

Date:11-12-2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express gratitude from the depth of my heart to my mother and my little sister, Manal, for their constant support, inspiration, and encouragement that they showered towards me throughout my master's degree. Likewise I am also grateful to all my family members including Saoud, Yazeed, Munira, Saeed, Mony, and Suliman.

I would also like to thank my friends for their continuous support and motivation so that I would not feel alienated, especially Abdul Mohsin Al-Ghonaim and Nawaf Al-Muneef.

In addition to this, I would also greatly thank and acknowledge my instructors who taught me at Flinders University, especially my supervisor Dr.Gareth Butler, tutor Marion Weck, and Dr.Gerti Szili. For the knowledge they taught me and the invaluable advice that they enlightened me with. Their words of wisdom shall be cherished for a lifetime.

Finally, I would also like to express my full respect and gratitude, to my government, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, who provided me with the opportunity to study abroad. They not only supported me financially but emotionally as well. For this, I will be grateful forever.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

Located across the central and northern Arabian Peninsula, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a country that exhibits a rich cultural heritage (Philby, 2020), and is home to the holiest cities for Muslims, including Mecca and Medina. Since its formation in 1932, Saudi Arabia has now radically transformed, and traditional places, like Jeddah, have now been developed into large state-of-the-art modern cities. Similarly, cities that were once merely known as oasis towns, like Riyadh, have now flourished into modern metropolitan cities and business centres (Philby, 2020). In short, change and transformation in Saudi Arabia has been considerable in scale. In recent times, Saudi Arabia has also made increasing efforts to promote leisure tourism in Saudi Arabia in an attempt to diversify its economy and to decrease the dependence on oil. For this reason, Saudi Arabia has also changed some of its policies to make Saudi Arabia more welcoming to international tourists, including the release of e-visas (Poncet, 2020). With such positive steps, Saudi Arabia considers itself ready to embark on the journey of becoming a major tourist destination in the Middle East region, Saudi Arabia as outlined in its Vision 2030 that was developed by the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH). Saudi Arabia aims to open itself to the international world and has planned investments in the economy, amounting to more than \$64 billion, in leisure, entertainment, and culture over the next 10 years (Poncet, 2020). Saudi Arabia also aims to become one of the top five tourist destinations in the world through Vision 2030. This national strategy aims to create millions of new jobs in Saudi Arabia and will diversify the nature of the nation's tourism industry. Thus, the Vision 2030 aims to achieve the following through facilitation and development of its tourist sector (KSA, 2020).

- Attract foreign investments and become a global powerhouse.
- Stimulate the economy through revenues from the tourism sector.
- Nationalise many large portions of the tourism sector, so that the public office can benefit from the development of tourism.
- To elevate the current value of 49 in the Logistics Performance Index to 25.
- To ascertain a higher place in the Global Competitiveness Index.
- Increase the Public Investment Fund's to value in trillions.
- Transform Saudi Arabia to a global village.

- Decrease the rate of unemployment from 11 to 7 percent.
- Increase the contribution of small to medium size enterprises in the GDP of Saudi Arabia from twenty to thirty percent.
- Increase participation of women in the total workforce of Saudi Arabia by thirty percent.
- Become one of the 15 top economies in the world (currently 19th).
- Increase the proportion of non-oil exports in the GDP to fifty percent.
- Increase foreign direct investment, private sector contribution, and non-oil revenue.
- Increase household income and savings.

In fulfilling these goals, Saudi Arabia aims to become a vibrant economy that has strong foundations and offers its citizens a fulfilling life (KSA, 2020). Through the Vision 2030 Saudi Arabia also aims to develop a prosperous economy that provides rewarding leisure opportunities to its people, investment incentives for tourism stakeholders, and become an economy that is open for entrepreneurship ideas and innovation (KSA, 2020). Moreover, the Vision 2030 aims to facilitate the creation of an ambitious nation with a sustainable economic future, and the development of its tourism sector is seen as important step in this process (KSA, 2020).

Tourism has been growing in Saudi Arabia for the last 10 years, despite some yearly fluctuations. Religious tourism has always been a strong pillar of the economy, and millions of people visit Saudi Arabia every year, as it is the global epicentre for Muslims that visit Saudi Arabia in order to perform Umrah and Hajj, and to visit the city of their prophet Muhammad (SEERA, 2019). However, Saudi Arabia now seeks to focus on leisure tourism, which has shown considerable promise so far. Currently, the tourism sector contributes over US\$65 billion to the national economy and its contribution to national GDP has grown by 4.6% since 2008 (SEERA, 2019). In addition, business tourism has also increased significantly in Saudi Arabia in the last decade by 35.8% between 2009 and 2018 (SEERA, 2019). Saudi Arabia is now aiming to secure a 70 to 30 ratio of non-religious to religious international tourists by the year 2030. The 2030 Vision developed by the government aims to focus on entertainment and leisure. Thus, Saudi Arabia is now working on developing appropriate infrastructure, the diversification of international events, and the expansion of hotels and restaurants to attract international tourists (Gulf Monitor, 2019). The Saudi government has also developed a

number of policies to further develop tourism, including the creation and facilitation of the General Entertainment Authority, that aims to promote the entertainment sector of Saudi Arabia. In doing so, the organisation established the Saudi Seasons in an attempt to attract both domestic and international tourists to the region (SEERA, 2019). The Saudi Seasons were designed to consist of a range of entertainment and activities for tourists of all ages and demographics profiles. They involved a calendar of multiple events, ranging from concerts by world renowned artists, to circuses, theatres, and cultural events (SEERA, 2019). The main goals of the Saudi Seasons were to:

- Attract international tourists in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
- Generation of income through development of the tourism sector.
- Improve the standard of living of the locals.
- Convert the country into one of the top tourist destinations of the world.
- Facilitation of development that benefits the country in the long run.
- Creation of entertainment and a unique cultural experience for international tourists in all of the main cities of the country (Saudi Seasons, 2020).

The Saudi Seasons were designed to be hosted by many different cities across the country, including Riyadh, Al-Ula, Taif, and Jeddah. For example, the Saudi Season in Jeddah that took place in the months of June and July of 2019, had performances by 50 Cent, Chris Brown, Janet Jackson, and included many circus events. Initial reports on the performance of the Saudi Seasons have revealed success as they have increased tourism in Saudi Arabia. For example, the Saudi Season held in Taif received more than 2.5 million national and international visitors (SEERA, 2019). However, understanding how well the Saudi Seasons have performed holistically remains undetermined and there will be many challenges ahead that affect its ability to achieve its long-term goals.

Firstly, political stability throughout the Middle East region will be an important ingredient towards success. Secondly, it has been argued that Saudi Arabia must earn the confidence of international tourists, as the nation has typically been seen as a very traditional and conservative Muslim country where the freedom and expression of self is not that liberated (Poncet, 2020). Moreover, it also yet has to change the perception of Saudi Arabia in the eyes of the international world with respect to human rights, a just legal system, and security matters.

Third, the strengths of Saudi Arabia, including its rich and diverse cultural heritage and natural attractions along the Red Sea remain relatively unknown to conventional international markets (Poncet, 2020). Thus, even though the state is heavily investing in tourism and injecting a significant amount of capital in the kingdom to promote the industry, this change may take longer than expected. Therefore, this study aims to explore tourism stakeholders' views on the initial performance of the Saudi Seasons and their views on how to attract more international tourists.

To explore the aforementioned themes and to understand the current nature of tourism development in Saudi Arabia, this research was based on non-numerical and unstructured qualitative data. The qualitative material for this study was collected through primary and secondary means. Primary materials were collected via semi-structured interviews, whilst secondary materials were obtained through the analysis of contemporary academic literature. This methodology aimed to gain from the experience of those who are directly involved in the tourism sector of Saudi Arabia. For this reason, semi-structured interviews were conducted in person, in either formal or semi-formal settings. The interviewees included a range of professionals working in the tourism and hospitality sector of Saudi Arabia, including managers and owners of hotels, staff at restaurants, and those working in travel agencies. In order to obtain in-depth information, and to ensure that key themes were fully discussed, the interviews included a set of pre-determined questions that were provided to every respondent, that were also designed to foster two-way dialogues between the interviewer and the interviewee. The recorded answers were then transcribed and translated from Arabic into English before a coding technique was applied to infer meaning and identify emergent themes. Coding is a distinguished tool and can result in further analysis and understanding of the data. It is also used by many academic scholars and experts to understand and comprehend the data (Lockyer, 2004). Moreover, it helps in the organisation of raw data and aims to make sense out of the information attained.

The sample comprised of participants from Riyadh, Jeddah, and Al-Ula, as these three cities hosted a number of festivals and events during the Saudi Seasons. A total of 30 interviews were conducted, of which 11 took place in Jeddah, 10 in Riyadh, and 9 in Al-Ula. All three cities are very similar in their culture and economic activities. Therefore, this allowed the researcher an opportunity to draw comparisons between the three geographical localities. Thus, this

methodology supported the capture of a rich seam of qualitative materials from those who had first-hand experience in the industry.

This research not only offers unique insights into the nature of tourism in Saudi Arabia but provides opportunities to further develop international tourism from the perspective of people heavily involved in the tourism sector. So far, few studies of this kind exist in the context of Saudi Arabia. Therefore, this research aims to address gaps in the current literature and make a noteworthy contribution to academic discourse. In doing so, a significant geographical gap can be bridged and it is anticipated that this study will be a helpful tool for not only those directly involved in the tourism sector, but also the state, as it provides a number of grounded recommendations so that Saudi Arabia can achieve the goals set out in its Vision 2030. Thus, this study can be seen as a facilitator of change and an enabler of awareness of the tourism industry for Saudi Arabia. This makes this research a one-of-a-kind, pioneering academic research. Such research also serves the purpose of inspiring other scholars to research on Saudi Seasons to further understand the nature and growth of tourism in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East more broadly.

1.2 Research Question, Aims and Objectives

Research Aim

This academic study aims to analyse how successful the Saudi Seasons has been so far and to identify the key positive and negative impacts. In doing so, it also aims to provide stakeholder feedback on how the country can attract more international tourists in the future. Thus, the following research was developed:

Research Question

From the perspective of tourism stakeholders, how well did the Saudi Seasons perform and what more could be done to support the growth of international tourism?

Research Objectives

- To critically analyse the performance of the Saudi Seasons tourism strategy from the perspective of tourism stakeholders.
- To identify further opportunities to improve the Saudi Seasons tourism strategy from the perspective to tourism stakeholders.
- To identify new opportunities to grow international tourism in Saudi Arabia from the perspective to tourism stakeholders.
- To specifically analyse the performance of Saudi Seasons in the cities of Riyadh, Jeddah and Al-Ula with regard to positive and negative impacts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview

International tourism has experienced exponential growth over the past decades, making it one of the leading economic sectors globally (Algieri et al., 2018; UNWTO, 2020). There is no doubt that tourism offers many advantages for host countries, as it is believed to be beneficial for economic growth and development, increases foreign exchange income, generates employment opportunities, and can stimulate business activity (Samimi et al., 2011; Narayan et al., 2010). Thus, tourism has become an integral sector for many governments (Samimi et al., 2011). However, it can also result in significant environmental and social impacts if it is not regulated properly (Krippendorf, 1982). It can lead to commercialisation of culture in the host country, and place immense pressure on the infrastructure of tourist destinations that rapidly grow (Pizam & Milman, 1993). In addition, tourism is also known to degrade the environment of the host country by causing many forms of pollution, and the overconsumption of important natural resources (Pizam & Milman, 1993). Other adverse environmental effects of tourism involve losses of natural habitats and ecosystems, that are often caused by rapidly developing infrastructure for tourism, including the construction of resorts, high rise buildings, and transport networks (Krippendorf, 1982; Sunlu, 2003). For this reason, the main aim of this literature review is to investigate and analyse the impacts of tourism on host countries. In doing so, this review aims to identify the positive and negative economic and social impacts of tourism. Thus, it is the goal of this literature review to provide an opportunity to consider key themes that could be fostered by the development of the tourism industry in Saudi Arabia.

2.2 The Economic Impacts of Tourism

Tourism is believed to be the engine of development and a chief contributor to the growth and development of many economies (Habibi et al., 2018). Firstly, tourism helps the host country to earn foreign exchange, which allows host destinations to pay for imported capital goods that can be used in other sectors of the economy (Habibi et al., 2018). Secondly, tourism spurs investment in the infrastructure of the economy, and promotes economic competition at both the local and international levels (Habibi et al., 2018). Thirdly, it encourages growth in many other sectors of the economy through indirect, direct, and induced linkages to the tourism economy (Habibi et al., 2018). Finally, tourism is believed to be a positive driver of economies

of scale at the local level (Schubert et al., 2011). Additionally, the goods and services consumed by international tourists can promote and increase demand within many sectors of the economy, such as the transportation industry, accommodation providers, travel agencies and tourist guides, souvenir shops, and tourist sites (Habibi et al., 2018).

The benefits of tourism have been highlighted in many other academic studies and government reports (Assaf & Al-Shaikh, 2013). It is believed by many academic scholars that tourism not only helps in the creation and generation of foreign exchange for the host country, but also helps in the creation of many employment opportunities (Assaf & Al-Shaikh, 2013). Additionally, it facilitates the growth of the economy, which is led by an increase in gross domestic product (Assaf & Al-Shaikh, 2013). For this reason, the development of this sector has become one of the most fundamental economic priorities of many nations and their governments (Assaf & Al-Shaikh, 2013; Manzoor et al., 2019). To further illustrate this point, prior to the emergence of COVID-19, the World Tourism Organisation (2018) estimated that the number of people traveling internationally could exceed 1.6 billion by the end of 2020. Moreover, the WTO estimated that the tourism industry could generate more than USD 200 billion during the same period (Assaf & Al-Shaikh, 2013). Furthermore, it has been expected that tourism will not only grow in the tourism hotspots but in other destinations as well (Assaf & Al-Shaikh, 2013).

Many studies have attempted to underline the economic benefits of tourism. Manzoor et al. (2019) highlight the importance of the tourism industry as a fundamental and reliable source for the creation of employment and income opportunities in the host country, not only for formal sectors but informal sectors too (Farooqi et al., 2010). Hwang and Lee (2019) also confirm the economic advantages of tourism after studying and analysing the Korean economy. According to them, tourism has led to a significant increase in the economic growth of Korea (Hwang & Lee, 2019). Other scholars point out that developing economies can stimulate and produce a large sum of foreign exchange through tourism. This influx of foreign exchange can lead to economic growth and development in the economy, along with many other economic benefits (Ekanayake & Long, 2019). This phenomenon has been further verified by Shahzad et al. (2017), who advocate for tourism as one of the main sources and foundations for a developing economy's development, prosperity, and growth (Shahzad et al., 2017). It has also been widely accepted in the literature that the revenue generated by tourism supplements and equals the exchange generated from the trade of goods and services to overseas markets. In the

case of developed nations, it is understood that tourism helps in the expansion of the economy, which can be used as a source of power to influence other economies (Mahmoudinia et al., 2011). For the majority of economies, the revenue raised through tourism is seen as a substitute for the export earnings of the economy. This is because this revenue contributes a major sum towards the balance of payments in the economy (Scheyvens & Russell, 2012). It can lead to enhancement of household income, generation of revenue, and earnings in the form of visa fees to potential tourists (Scheyvens & Russell, 2012).

As many academic scholars have stated, the tourism sector is seen as an important source of revenue, foreign exchange, and economic development for the countries of the Middle East (Assaf & Al-Shaikh, 2013). This sector also provides employment opportunities for many people residing in these countries. For example, in Egypt, approximately 10% of its entire population were reported to be dependent on tourism as a means of livelihood (Assaf & Al-Shaikh, 2013). In Bahrain, around 18% of all jobs were found to be in the tourism sector, either directly or indirectly (Assaf & Al-Shaikh, 2013). Moreover, although Gulf countries rely heavily on oil exports as a source of revenue, growth in their tourism sectors has led to a decrease in the dependence of oil.

In a similar capacity, tourism is seen as an engine of growth and an important pillar on which the economy of the Saudi Arabia stands (Eid, 2012). The country relies heavily on religious tourism for prosperity, income generation, and economic growth. Being a holy site for Muslims, millions of Muslims arrive in Saudi Arabia to for religious pilgrim during the Hajj annually (Eid, 2012). For the economy of Iran, tourism plays a very important part and is a major contributor towards the gross domestic product of the economy, foreign exchange earnings, and a major source of employment (Habibi et al., 2018). In this economy, there have been some structural changes, and the economy is moving away from dependence on oil through their tourism industry (Habibi et al., 2018). This sector has given the much-needed boost to other sectors of Saudi Arabia as well, which include airports, hotels, infrastructure, and the food and hospitality sector (Habibi et al., 2018).

Returning to the case of Egypt, a popular tourist destination for international travellers since the 19th century, when archaeological sites gained popularity (Vignal, 2010), tourism has been deemed essential for development and economic prosperity. By the 1990s, it typically only received 2-3 million international tourists every year and accounted for only 0.4% of the

world's tourism (Vignal, 2010). However, as the tourism industry in this country grew, the state received more funds to reinvest in the economy and by 2008 had flourished as a result (Vignal, 2010). Indeed, by the end of 2008 Egypt attracted 12 million international tourists per year and received a 1.4% global share of international tourism (Vignal, 2010). This increase in numbers within the tourism industry led to the further development and expansion of other sectors of the economy (Vignal, 2010). For example, increased demand for tourism led to the expansion of the hotel sector, while the state used the increased revenue from the tourism receipts to invest in the infrastructure of the economy, in the building of roads, bridges, and also airports (Vignal, 2010). As a result of tourism growth in Egypt, especially in the Red Sea region, new tourist destinations have also emerged in Saudi Arabia and many new coastal resorts were built (Vignal, 2010). By 2022, the tourism sector is expected to contribute more than 4 percent to the GDP of the Middle East (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019; Assaf & Al-Shaikh, 2013). For 2011, this sector was responsible for more than 1,750,000 jobs that were directly linked to the tourism sector in the region, suggesting that tourism accounts for up to 3% of the total employment in the region (Assaf & Al-Shaikh, 2013). By 2022, this sector is expected to be responsible for the earnings of 2,220,000 individuals (Assaf & Al-Shaikh, 2013).

2.3 The Social Benefits of Tourism

It is evident from the current body of literature that tourism has many economic benefits for the host country. Additionally, there are several social benefits that may emerge from tourism development (Besculides et al., 2002). According to academic scholars and researchers, tourism can be advantageous and fruitful for local communities situated in the host country, as it gives them an opportunity to share their culture, identities, and their way of living to the outside world (Besculides et al., 2002; Driver et al., 1991). This demonstration of one's culture to international tourists can help the locals take pride in their heritage and culture. Hence, such pride can help in boosting the self-confidence and self-esteem of the locals (Besculides et al., 2002; Driver et al., 1991). Additionally, when international tourists visit a destination, their understanding of the host may be enhanced and as a result they are more likely to respect their culture, beliefs, and way of living (Besculides et al., 2002; Driver et al., 1991). Thus, through the interactions between local and tourist populations, people can learn from one another and develop new knowledge or capacities (Besculides et al., 2002; Driver et al., 1991). According to Driver et al. (1991), exposure to different groups can help people become more tolerant

towards different cultures and more open to new ideas. At the same time, it can also instil in the locals a greater sense of belonging and cultural identity (Besculides et al., 2002; Driver et al., 1991). This is primarily because the locals of the host community represent and express their culture to the foreigners. In doing so, they not only begin to understand their own culture more deeply but feel a greater sense of pride in who they are (Besculides et al., 2002). Similar conclusions have been drawn by a number of other academic scholars. For example, Stein and Anderson (1999) advocate that local communities, through the promotion of tourism, are exposed to people who belong to many diverse and distinct cultures, which can help the local community in becoming more tolerant and understanding (Stein & Anderson, 1999). They studied tourist destinations in Minnesota, United States and concluded that the social benefits to the host country are an increase in knowledge, cohesion, and exchange of cultures (Stein & Anderson, 1999). McKean (1989), after investigating tourism growth in Bali, advocates another social benefit of tourism, which is also known as cultural evolution. Cultural evolution takes place through the elaboration of the establishment of cultural forms and practices, which results in the establishment of prominent material cultures. Hence, as international tourists enter the host country, they create a market for traditional arts and crafts (McKean, 1989). In comparison, some other social benefits are revitalisation of the local community's culture, an increase in the quality of life of the local community, and an improvement of the image of the host community, especially from the perspective of international travellers (Besculides et al., 2002).

As mentioned above, the social benefits of tourism have led to an increase in cultural exchange and tolerance of different cultures, which has led to the rise of new concepts and phenomena in tourism. One of these is known as Islamic tourism or Halal tourism (Qaddahat et al., 2016). This kind of tourism, which takes into consideration the cultural requirements of Muslims, has gained increasing popularity. Especially in the Middle East, countries like Egypt and Jordan have adopted this stream of tourism as an important means of economic development (Qaddahat et al., 2016). Islamic tourism focuses on providing tourists activities and forms of entertainment that are Muslim friendly. In doing so, the tourism activities are consistent with the religious customs and traditions of Muslims (El-Gohary, 2015). The word Halal originates from Arabic language, which means permissible and allowed. This word is the fundamental source of this line of tourism, which guides on what food, and activities Muslims can indulge in when travelling (El-Gohary, 2015). Halal tourism focuses on providing Muslims with food that is made according to the guidelines of their religion, offering tour packages that are

designed for entertainment, and the broader needs of Muslims (El-Gohary, 2015). In addition, Halal tourism focuses on providing alcohol-free attractions for Muslims, providing female staff to serve families and females especially, the provision of prayer rooms, copies of the Quran in hotel rooms, and the direction of qibla marked clearly. All these activities cater to the religious needs of this group (El-Gohary, 2015).

In recent studies, another social benefit of tourism is that it is an enabler of social change and that it can contribute towards both social change in the host country as well as among individuals who visit the tourist destination (Pizam et al., 2002). These changes include changes in the beliefs, norms, values, and opinions, from the perspectives of both tourists and the local community (Pizam et al., 2002). The rationale behind this is that when tourists visit a tourist destination they receive an opportunity to interact with the locals, see how they live, learn who they are, and what their values are (Pizam et al., 2002). This theory has been further verified by Anson (1999), who found that this kind of social change is stronger in situations where differences between the local community and international tourists are great (Anson, 1999). This phenomenon has also been explored by Pizam et al. (2002), who sought to evaluate if tourism can be a facilitator of social change between Jordan and Israel. Both these countries do not have good political relations, and the people of these economies have very hostile attitudes towards each other (Pizam et al., 2002). This study examined 50 tourists who travelled from Israel to Jordan for the first time. The participants were then asked to complete questionnaires to assess their attitudes towards the local community of Jordan (Pizam et al., 2002). The questions addressed their political beliefs to control for any biases and the tourists were requested to fill in the questionnaire before their visit to Jordan, and after their return to Israel (Pizam et al., 2002). The findings of this study showed significant and positive changes in the opinions of Israeli tourists towards the people of Jordan (Pizam et al., 2002). In this way, international tourism has the power to change the image of the tourist destination in the minds of the foreign travellers and hence can be used as a vehicle to improve a nation's outward image. Thus, being an agent of social change, tourism can also help in rectifying or improving relationships amongst the citizens of the two countries that have faced – or continue to face - conflict or weak levels of diplomacy.

Similarly, a study by Tovar and Lockwood (2008) observed that locals view tourism as a means of acquiring positive social benefits. According to this study, tourism helps to raise the standard of living and quality of life of the local community (Tovar & Lockwood, 2008). The locals

believed the state invests in better infrastructural facilities, improved shopping centres, and more recreational activities, in order to attract tourists. This, in turn, benefits the local people of the community who get to enjoy better services, leisure, and entertainment (Tovar & Lockwood, 2008). Schluter et al. (1989) arrived at similar conclusions in their study of tourism development in Argentina. According to their findings, the locals were content with tourism in their community and believed that it led to a number of positive sociocultural benefits to the community (Schluter & Vars, 1988). Moreover, they believed that these positive social impacts were of greater importance than the economic advantages that tourism had fostered.

Nayomi and Gnanapalab (2015) examined the social and economic impact of tourism in small villages of Sri Lanka. According to the findings of their research, the locals felt that tourism had improved the quality of their life by developing better schools, improving public services, constructing new roads, and increased demand for their arts and crafts (Nayomi & Gnanapalab, 2015). Some of the villagers also felt that because of tourism their land had become more valuable and helped them become more secure financially (Nayomi & Gnanapalab, 2015). Others reported that tourism had brought more awareness in the local community and for employees working in hotels. Along with this, they felt that because of tourism, their village was now cleaner than it was before, and that the locals were enjoying better facilities and opportunities (Nayomi & Gnanapalab, 2015). This study also found that many of the hotels in these villages are carrying corporate social responsibility practices, thereby helping the local community economically (Nayomi & Gnanapalab, 2015).

It is evidently apparent that the current body of research identifies that tourism can provide a number of economic and social benefits. Amongst the economic benefits, the most prominent benefits include the increase in the gross domestic product of Saudi Arabia and a major source of foreign exchange. Along with this, it has also been highlighted in the literature that tourism helps create new employment opportunities for the locals and serves as a means of livelihood for many. Furthermore, growth in this sector can help the economies to decrease their dependency on other goods, and tourism also promotes economic growth. The social benefits of tourism range from greater pride in the locals of their culture, increased tolerance and acceptability for other cultures, and a better quality of life by the development of better facilities in the economy to attract tourists that locals get to enjoy. These include a range of sites, including better access to green spaces or nature, shopping malls, and improved transport

infrastructure. Tourism has also been seen as an enabler and agent of change and has the power to change the perception and mindset of not only tourists but those of members in local communities that experience tourism.

2.4 Negative Impacts of Tourism

A number of studies have focused on the positive economic and social impacts of tourism development. However, tourism does come at a cost to many societies, academic scholars refer to such a scenario as ‘overtourism’, where excessive tourism leads to disturbances in the host country and interferes with the lives of locals (Pappalepore et al., 2014). Koens also reports that tourism leads to changes in the way of living of the local community when it is visited by international and foreign tourists (Koens et al., 2018). These can be changes in the moral conduct of the locals, in their creative expressions, and in their way of living, due to the influx of tourists (Zhuang et al., 2019). The cultural impacts include changes in the traditional ceremonies, rituals, traditions, and the culture of the host community (Zhuang et al., 2019). It has been narrated in the literature that not only results in a change in the social culture of the tourist destination but also negatively affects the environment of the host country in the form of irrevocable damage to the environment caused by the construction of tourist facilities, all of which can have very detrimental effects on the ecology of the destination (Carrigan, 2011). An increase in tourism has also been reported to deteriorate the quality of the air due to an increase in carbon dioxide emissions and fossil fuel energy consumption (Malik et al., 2016). Williams and Zelinsky (1970) describe a tourist as a ‘cancer like agent’, through which tourists invade locations and multiply at an exponential rate. In doing so, tourists will then impact upon many aspects of the destination they are visiting in a negative manner influencing the host’s culture, heritage, environment, morals, norms, and traditions (Williams & Zelinsky, 1970).

Many other studies have also highlighted some serious adverse effects to the local community due to tourism development. These include psychological, economic, and social negative impacts (Koens et al., 2018). Development in tourism has resulted in overcrowding of urban locations especially and has led to more developed tourist areas becoming less accessible to the local community. Additional negative economic impacts include a rise in the rate of inflation in the host community (Zaidan, 2016; Xue-Pin & Jun-Yang, 2012). This rise in the general price level due to tourism has also been observed by a number of other studies. Shaari et al. (2018) embarked on finding out the link between inflation and tourism by using consumer

price index data on the economy of Malaysia, a popular international tourist destination. This study investigated the changes in price levels within the Malaysian economy and linked it to the number of tourists that visited the nation every year from 1986 to 2014. Using quantitative analysis, and using variables like economic growth and interest rates as dummy variables, the findings of this study suggest that tourism plays a significant role in the determination of inflation not only in the short-term but also in the long-term (Shaari et al., 2018). One explanation for this is that tourism accelerates aggregate demand in the economy, creates employment opportunities, and increases the income of the host country (Shaari et al., 2018). This increase in income means that people have more money to spend which triggers inflation in the economy (Shaari et al., 2018). In addition, inflation is further exaggerated in the economy when a government increases its expenditure to stimulate tourism and provide the necessary infrastructure to support it. Increased government spending means more money has been injected in the economy, and this rise in money supply leads to inflation (Shaari et al., 2018; Olayungbo, 2013).

A more recent study by Zaidan (2016) attempted to study the cultural differences between the host country and the tourist country and its sociocultural effects. This study found that a loss of cultural identity of the tourist host country as one of the negative impacts of tourism in the United Arab Emirates (Zaidan, 2016). This phenomenon has been supported by several other academic scholars, who claim a greater cultural distance between the cultures of tourists and the host country can lead to feelings of misunderstanding and hostility (Reisinger, 2012; Henderson, 2003). Other negative impacts verified in Zaidan's (2016) study were conflicts within the community, an increase in the crime rate, a general rise in the price levels, and the failure of the international tourists to respect the traditions and norms of Saudi Arabia (Zaidan, 2016).

Contemporary literature has also highlighted the environmental costs of tourism including pollution, the loss of natural habitats and wildlife, and deforestation along with loss of agricultural land (Amuquandoh, 2010). This notion has been seconded by Colorni in 2016 who observed the influx of tourists as a disturbance on the natural ecological system. They highlight the fact that tourism development comes at the cost of agricultural development by taking into consideration the island of Bali in Indonesia. In Bali tourism growth has put the agricultural sector of the economy under a great threat (Colorni, 2016). Be it pro-tourism government policies, to land-grabbing of agricultural land and converting it to tourist resorts, the farmers

and the locals who are directly and indirectly involved in the agricultural sector are suffering leading to social injustice in the community (Colorni, 2016). These negative impacts are not recognised by the state of Bali, and for this reason, the actual damage is usually shifted by the state to the local and indigenous people.

From a social perspective, significant overcrowding heavy traffic, undue pressure on public transportation, noise pollution, the lack of available housing, an increase in waste and, shortages of water, have all been reported as some of the negative impacts of tourism (Koens et al., 2018). In Saudi Arabia, negative impacts have already been identified by Sunlu (2003) who observed that increases in tourist arrivals challenged its environmental capacity for new demand (Sunlu, 2003). The burden on water resources was especially of concern to Sunlu (2003), who noted that tourists activities and infrastructure, such as the use of hotels, swimming pools, and golf courses, placed increasing pressures on local or regional water resources (Sunlu, 2003). Furthermore, he pointed out that tourism had also increased the pressures on other resources of the economy, ranging from energy, food, and many other raw materials (Sunlu, 2003). Gladstone et al. (2013), in an attempt to analyse the negative environmental impacts of tourism in coastal regions studied the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf (Gladstone et al., 2013). The Red Sea is enclosed by many countries that serve as popular tourist regions in the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel. Similarly, the Arabian Gulf is also enclosed by many tourist countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (Gladstone et al., 2013). This study observed that activities by tourists have resulted in the loss of natural habitats in the Arabian Gulf region, especially in Iran and the United Arab Emirates (Gladstone et al., 2013). These negative impacts ranged from damage to coral reefs by divers and snorkelers to littering and pollution by tour vessels (Gladstone et al., 2013). In the Red Sea, tourism development, especially in Egypt, has led to loss of marine habitats due to the construction of tourism infrastructure, including jetties and artificial beaches. There have also been reported incidences of erosion and compromised way of the flood ways (Gladstone et al., 2013). Such findings have been reported by Sheppard et al. (2010), who found that the coastline around Dubai has been severely damaged and there has been a significant loss in the growth of corals (Sheppard et al., 2010). In a similar capacity, Pour et al. (2012) and Price (1993) have reported incidents of overfishing in the Gulf. Along as well as the spread of coral diseases due to shipping activities (Pour et al., 2012; Price, 1993).

These studies reveal that tourism development may foster many costs. It is also a dangerous assumption that these countries have the capacity to absorb further numbers of foreigner tourists without additional environmental costs (Koens et al., 2018). This can be clearly seen in the case of the Arab countries who have experienced rapid tourism development and where less consideration was given to social, cultural, or environmental considerations (Mustafa, 2010). These countries have suffered from environmental degradation, especially in the form of many different types of pollution. In addition, sewage water has been reported to have been dumped in the sea, which has resulted in a compromised and contaminated quality of the groundwater (Mustafa, 2010), whilst hotels have been reported to have been using huge amounts of chemicals and detergents that also cause many environmental issues.

From a cultural perspective, Arab countries have also encountered a number of social ills through tourism. Tourism has led to a rise in activities like gambling due to the emergence of casinos and similar Western-style attractions (Bonny-Noach & Sagiv-Alayoff, 2020), and even sex tourism (ECPAT, 2018). These findings highlight how the tourism industry has led to a very negative impact on the lives of the people residing in these countries. It is therefore crucial that literature explores the negative impacts of tourism development in emergent destinations in the Middle East. This notion is underpinned by the assumption that host communities are the most important stakeholders in the industry and their lives are directly and indirectly affected by tourism (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2010; Jennings et al., 2009). Although limited research has been undertaken in Saudi Arabia with regards to tourism impacts on communities, a study by Aref et al. (2009) is a useful waypoint, as they investigated the perceptions of the local people of Iran towards tourism development in the region of Shiraz. The findings of this study are based on both qualitative and quantitative analysis. After studying more than 160 communities in Shiraz, this study finds that although tourism produces many positive effects the locals also feel that tourism is responsible for many negative issues, including overcrowding in the city (Aref et al., 2009). Others also reported that tourism has led to an increase in the rate of crime, has destroyed the environment of the region, and has led to pollution (Aref et al., 2009). Another similar study was conducted by Eraqi (2007) in Egypt. This research paper also studied the views of the local residents and how they believed tourism has impacted the economy. The empirical findings of this study reveal that although the locals believe that tourism has provided many economic advantages, it has come at a cost (Eraqi, 2007). These costs, according to the locals, were in the form of a high costs of living, the erosion of Egyptian culture and way of living, oversaturated parks and nature-based settings,

beaches, and museums (Eraqi, 2007). In addition, it was also interesting to note that the locals did not perceive tourism as an enabler of local skills or as a facilitator of economic innovation and development (Eraqi, 2007). Similarly, Khizindar (2012) investigated the effect of the locals on the quality of life in the tourist-attracting cities of Saudi Arabia (i.e. Makkah and Madinah). After studying data from more than 700 residents and running empirical regression, this study found that tourism directly affects the quality of life of the locals both in a positive and negative way (Khizindar, 2012). Other studies have revealed that tourism development has led to changes in cultural values and traditions, including the loss of authenticity (Marvous, 2014) and cultural erosion (Fernanda, 2020; Spanou, 2006; Tosun, 2002). Bernstein et al. (2014), have also identified a number of social ills including the exploitation of labour and sex workers, the rapid growth prostitution, and drug trafficking (Bernstein & Shih, 2014). These studies reveal that tourism development can yield many negative social impacts and that careful consideration should be afforded to these impacts when seeking to grow tourism. Indeed, Tosun (2002) explains that tourism can be an enabler and facilitator of change but that this change can be seen rather negatively by the locals of the community.

2.5 The Benefits of Hosting Events

Tourism is one of the leading growth industries in the services sector (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011). According to the current body of the literature, one of the most significant and predictable factors is the hosting of global mega-events (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011). Literature defines these events as large-scale commercial, sporting, and cultural events which appeal to large volumes of people and are of great international significance (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011). Such events contribute to the promotion of tourism in the host country and it has also been reported that the global mega-events have the power to increase the growth of tourism in that country for many years after the event was held (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011). Hosting events at an international scale such as sport events, festivals, art exhibitions, and conferences can help nations to attract a large number of national and international tourists (Kim & Walker, 2012). Such events like the World Cup and the Olympic games are often seen as an opportunity for economic growth and as an opportunity to develop urban regions within the host country. This gives an opportunity to increase the income of the local people, provide them with means of earning livelihood, and minimise inflation at the same time (Homafar et al., 2011). Chalip (2006) and O'Brien (2006) suggest in academic studies that the host communities in regions that host events can benefit both economically and socially. However,

for any destination to successfully host international events, they must also develop appropriate infrastructure and other facilities so that they can accommodate and sustain a large influx of people. For this reason, this leads to the development of housing, recreation, and transformational facilities in the area, the benefits of which can be enjoyed by the locals for many years to come (Stewart & Rayner, 2015).

In addition, mega-events can help in improving and enhancing the knowledge and skills of the host community. It has been cited in literature that the Commonwealth Games of 2002 held in Manchester were able to increase the skills and capabilities of approximately 50% of all the 10,000 volunteers who participated in the event (Solberg & Preuss, 2007). More than 15% of the volunteers felt that having taken part at such an event reflects positively on their resume and helps them in finding employment. Moreover, over 40% of the volunteers felt that participation in the event has led to their personal growth and development (Solberg & Preuss, 2007). Thus, there are a number of ways that such events lead to an improvement in human capital (Solberg & Preuss, 2007). This is through upgrading of skills and knowledge of the service sector and the hospitality industry, gained through training and experience earned in these events (Solberg & Preuss, 2007). In the 2000 Olympic games in Sydney, Australia, it was also reported that many of those involved gained a range of new skills. Australia's Olympic organising committee also introduced many programs with the initiative to increase the skills of the people in the service sector, many of which can later be applied in the tourism development sector of the economy (Solberg & Preuss, 2007). Other examples include the provision of language course for taxi drivers to improve their fluency in English before the Seoul Olympics in 1988. The literature also repeatedly highlights the potential for such events to create income and to generate tax revenue for the state of the host community. Such events have also proven to be a useful tool and platform for branding and promoting local products (Chalip & Costa, 2005).

Another benefit of hosting events is that they help in the creation of awareness of the host destination amongst the general public, many of which may become potential tourists themselves (Henderson, 2014). This is also a useful platform to create awareness for investors so that they can invest in the community and contribute towards growth in the GDP of the economy (Henderson, 2014). Events like these are made to promote a favourable image of the host destination and disseminate any negative image or perceived notions relating to the host destination (Henderson, 2014). Furthermore, hosting such events can help communities with

the host destination to feel pride in its culture and its achievements. This is particularly true for the less developed nations where being host of such events can lead to civic pride and make the host destination a part of a legacy (Henderson, 2014; Esman, 1984). This can be seen in the United Arab Emirates, during the hosting of Expo 2020 in Dubai (Sutton, 2016). Dubai has rapidly developed itself as a tourist destination, as it emerged from a small desert town to one of the most popular international destinations (Sutton, 2016). This development has included new tourist facilities and infrastructure, including resorts, hotels, and human made beaches before hosting Expo 2020 (Marzouki, 2019). In doing so, the locals have enjoyed many benefits that tourism development brings to the UAE (Marzouki, 2019). At the same time, UAE has identified this opportunity as an ideal platform to establish business networks in the long run at a regional, national and international event (Marzouki, 2019). It has also been reported that such events have been the main and foremost contributors for the dynamic economic growth in Dubai (Marzouki, 2019). They have also allowed Dubai an opportunity to transform from being seen as a conservative Muslim city to a modern business and shopping hub (Marzouki, 2019).

The literature also highlights that apart from Dubai, many other destinations have adopted the policy of hosting mega-events. In today's era this has become one of the most prominent strategies used to attract foreign tourists in the hopes that it will lead to the facilitation of improvement of the host country's image in the global world (Avraham, 2014). Such events also receive significant attention from the media, giving many nations an opportunity to promote a favourable image, rebrand, and shift the media's attention to more positive portrayals of the host (Avraham & Ketter, 2009). Ritchie (2009) advocates that many economies try to host such events to improve their image, which might have been affected due to a number of internal and external factors, such as war, terrorism, and natural disasters (Ritchie, 2009). Beriotas and Gospodini (2004) are of the view that such a strategy is a very straightforward one and has the power to attract influential journalists in the improvement of the host destination's image (Beriatos & Gospodini, 2004). In a similar capacity, after the massacre of 1989, in the year 1990 Beijing became the host for the Asian Games and used this opportunity to improve the global image of China (Avraham, 2014). Interestingly, China again used this policy after it had developed a negative image and attracted negative publicity in relation to its very strict policies regarding freedom given to its people and the violation of human rights (Avraham, 2014). On this occasion China hosted the 2008 Olympic Games and Lee (2010) suggests that this strategy has been successful for China and has helped improved its image

(Lee, 2010). Lastly, Qatar is also trying to adopt a similar strategy by hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup. According to reports, it is doing so in an attempt give the country an opportunity to help itself be recognised as a tourist destination. At the same time, it will allow Qatar to attract a large influx of people and help make the region the centre of all news and media platforms for the duration of the event (Henderson, 2014). In this manner, Qatar will acquire an important opportunity to promote itself as a destination, and reveal a positive side of the local culture. It has also been reported that this is a diversification strategy for Qatar to decrease its reliance on other sectors and grow its tourism sector (Henderson, 2014).

2.6 Factors that can influence tourism development

Academic scholars have also taken into consideration the many different factors that can influence tourism development ranging from environmental factors to human ones. An obvious environmental factor is climate diversity and variability of which all tourist locations are to some degree affected (Scotta & Lemieux, 2010). Seasonality can also strongly influence tourism demand, especially in regions that either have considerable differences between summer and winter or if extremes occur during particular months (Scotta & Lemieux, 2010). Becken (2010) additionally argues that climate and weather are significant factors that influence tourists' decisions in making the choice for a tourist destination. Thus, in this manner, having a diverse range of climates can be helpful in making a destination a favourable tourist destination but problematic if they present many extremes (Becken, 2010). From a human perspective, heritage or cultural assets are frequently of major importance, especially famous historical or archaeological sites. Comer et al. (2012) report that some of the places that have received the highest number of tourists on a consistent basis are places that are known for their heritage and archaeology. This has been further verified in a study by Ismagilova et al. (2015) who highlighted the importance of history and cultural heritage in the development of tourism. Quoting the example of Russia, this study suggests that history and culture can be used as an important tool for tourism development (Ismagilova et al., 2015). Moreover, a study by Venegas et al. (2009) consisting of 275 tourist destinations, found that a significant relationship existed between the diversity of tourist attractions and the number of tourists visiting the place (Venegas et al., 2009). Thus, successful destinations typically host an array of different forms of tourism so that they can attract diverse markets (Adeboye, 2012).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Methods

This study was developed to use qualitative research methods as tools for data collection, interpretation, and analysis. For this reason, this research was based on non-numerical and unstructured data. The research materials for this study was collected through primary and secondary means. These included field notes of the researcher during observations of semi-structured interviews, and analysis of the literature review through peer-reviewed articles. Through peer-reviewed academic studies and other online sources on this discipline, the researcher was able to develop a greater understanding on the topic. In addition, the review of the literature gave the researcher an opportunity to narrow down the scope of this study and concentrate on the gap in the current body of literature, which gave this research the opportunity to contribute further to contemporary literature on tourism development in the Middle East.

The main source of primary data collection for this study was semi-structured, face to face interviews that the researcher conducted himself to avoid any biases or distortions that may arise due to any involvement of a third party. These biases could range from interviews not being conducted in an appropriate manner to some meaningful information being left out. In a similar capacity, the literature also confirms that semi-structured interviews facilitate in-depth responses, help the researcher in understanding people's experiences, perceptions, knowledge and feelings (Austin & Sutton, 2014). Wethington and McDarby (2015) advocate that semi-structured interviews are able to strike a balance between standardised questions and open-ended questions. They allow the researcher the opportunity to ask a standard set of questions with yes or no responses to all the interviewees, while asking some more detailed open-ended questions to gain information on personal experiences (Wethington & McDarby, 2015). As mentioned earlier, it allows questions to be modified as per the needs of the interview, the life experiences of the interviewee, the life events of the interviewee, and what kind of the information the interviewer is looking for (Wethington & McDarby, 2015). They are also said to reduce interviewer's demands as they do not need to require the same in-depth knowledge about the topic at hand (Wethington & McDarby, 2015).

On the other hand, when using semi-structured interviews, there is always a concern that some important and valuable information can be left behind, especially if the interviewer is not well trained, especially because such interviews are more like a conversation between two

individuals (Bernard, 2006). In addition, as these interviews do not entail asking the same questions, it can lead to biases based on race, sexual orientation, age, and social status, etc. Lastly, these semi-structured interviews can also be very time consuming (Bernard, 2006). Keeping in mind both the strengths and weaknesses of this kind of methodology for data collection, semi-structured interviews were selected for data collection in this study. This is because it is the most suitable for this research and it takes elements from both structured and unstructured interviewing methodology.

Nonetheless, despite the aforementioned challenges, the researcher believed that this was the best approach for the nature of enquiry in this study. The researcher opted for semi-structured interviews so that interviews do not limit or restrict the flow of communication between both parties, further enabling new themes to be identified in situ. Thus, the interviews also helped the researcher in understanding the challenges faced by this sector, some of which were not considered before the study was implemented. Other advantages of this kind of research methodology included two-way communication which allowed the respondents some time to open up regarding sensitive matters, and the flexibility to improvise as the interview progressed by asking other pertinent questions if necessary. In this manner, the data collected was not constrained or limited by one stream of questions. Therefore, every interview was unique and tailored made to the experience and skillset of the interviewee. The semi-structured questions that were asked during the interview were as following:

1. For how long has your business been operating?
2. What prompted or influenced you to start (or purchase) a tourism business here?
3. How has your business changed over time? (i.e. has it expanded or declined in terms of scale or employee numbers? Have there been noticeable changes in tourist profiles or volume?)
4. How do you feel the ‘Saudi Seasons’ strategy has performed?
5. Did the ‘Saudi Seasons’ impact on your business in any way?

6. Where did most tourists come from? (Did they notice any international tourists? If so, where did they come from?)
7. How could the 'Saudi Seasons' be improved in the future?
8. What do you feel are Saudi Arabia's main strengths as a tourist destination?
9. What do you feel are Saudi Arabia's main weaknesses as a tourist destination?
10. If Saudi Arabia is to attract more international tourists, what do you think needs to change or what else could be done?

By including these standard sets of questions in the interviews, the researcher ensured that no essential information has been left out due to the two-way communication of unstructured questions. Hence, the aim of these questions was to understand the tourism industry of Saudi Arabia, the main drivers of tourism in Saudi Arabia, and how the industry has evolved with time. These questions also helped the researcher in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the industry, especially from the perspective of those directly involved in dealing with international tourists.

The objectives of this research study were to structured around the need to understand how tourism development had positively impacted upon Saudi Arabia through the implementation of the Saudi Seasons. Moreover, this study sought to explore if tourism in Saudi Arabia has caused any negative impacts, as mentioned in the literature. Lastly, through the primary and secondary sources of data, this study also wanted to provide recommendations to improve the performance of the tourism industry of Saudi Arabia. These included ways to increase the benefits of the tourism industry while minimising the costs of the industry, along with suggestions as to how the tourism industry of Saudi Arabia can grow and continue to prosper with changing times.

3.2 The Research Phase

All the interviews focused on attaining first-hand information from the people who are directly involved in the tourism sector. The researcher chose semi-structured interviews as they allowed the researcher to gain from the experience and knowledge of key tourism stakeholders. Their views were important as they were based on real life experiences and therefore they could also provide unique insights into the nature of tourism development and the impacts of the Saudi Seasons. For this reason, the interviews were very detailed and open-ended so that maximum knowledge could be transferred to the researcher. In order to make sure that no information is missed, misunderstood, or misinterpreted by the researcher, all the interviews were recorded using an audio recording device after taking consent from the interviewees. In addition, as the national language of Saudi Arabia is Arabic, most of the stakeholders were more comfortable communicating in Arabic. For this reason, the researcher had to create an English transcript of all the interviews after translating them from Arabic. The researcher also made notes in the interviews of the important points. These were also then converted into English language.

As the researcher was limited by time and resources, he had to carefully select the participants to interview. Firstly, the researcher had to ensure that the potential interviewee had time to participate in the interview during the time the researcher was visiting the cities. In addition, the researcher selected participants on the basis of their proximity to the tourist events hosted by Saudi Arabia by creating a list of potential tourism-focused businesses via Google Earth. In this way, the researcher gave first preference to the hotels and restaurants that were closest to the location of events and the least preference to the ones that were farthest away. This strategy was adopted by the researcher because he wanted to access and analyse to what extent such international events impacted the service providers of the industry. Choosing these participants also meant that they had the most experience in dealing with international tourists. Thus, they were able to provide more detailed and insightful information as compared to their counterparts who were further away from the location of tourist activities.

Keeping the above-mentioned points in mind, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to gather data on the tourism and hospitality industry in an attempt to meet the objectives of the research paper. For this reason, he only included people who had ample experience in hospitality management and had years of experience in handling international tourists (more than 5 years experience was required to qualify for an interview). Some of the

men and women interviewed involved those working in restaurants, hotels, and travel agencies. A total of 30 interviews were conducted across 3 cities, of which 11 took place in Jeddah, 10 in Riyadh, and 9 in Al-Ula. All these cities are very business-centric areas of Saudi Arabia. Additionally, all the three cities are very similar in their culture and business activities; therefore, this allowed the researcher an opportunity to draw comparisons between the three geographical localities. To eliminate any bias and loss of communication that may take place when a third party is involved, the researcher went to Saudi Arabia and conducted all the interviews himself. Such interviews allowed a greater understanding of the tourism sector from a very practical and holistic view. Additionally, when more than one informant talks about the same points, it helps in the validation of the information generated in the interview. It also helps the researcher prepare for the next set of interviews and helps them focus on the more relevant points. Choosing this specific group for interviews helped the researcher understand the similarities and differences of the experiences of people, based on their geographical location, the number of years of experience they had or the type of tourism-focused business they worked in.

Ethics was approved for the project by the researcher's host University on 29 November, 2019. Before conducting the interviews, all the participants were contacted via email, and on occasions where they did not respond to their emails, they were contacted on their personal mobile numbers. This first point of contact was to finalise the list of individuals to be interviewed for this study and to access if they will be able to take time out for the interview when the researcher was traveling to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. All the shortlisted participants were then contacted again three to six weeks prior to the scheduled date of the interview. The purpose of this communication was to inform them of the research that was being carried out and why their participation is important. This communication also proved to do the job of a polite reminder for the participants. The participants were also sent a consent form, that gave the researcher permission to conduct interviews and use the information as data for the research paper. Lastly, the participants were sent an information sheet that provided detailed information on the study, its purpose, and how the study will benefit from the participation of the participants. Then, once the participants signed the consent form and agreed to be interviewed, they were shortlisted, and a meeting with them was scheduled. Based on this tentative schedule, the researcher went to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to conduct interviews. All the interviews were conducted in the three months between December of 2019 and February of 2020. One of the chief reasons the researcher selected this time of the year for

interviews was because this is the time when the peak tourism season just ends in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, in this way, the participants not only had more time on their hands to give to the researcher but also their experiences from the peak season were still fresh in their minds. Hence, this allowed the researcher with the opportunity to gather data on the participants' experience of tourism of 2019, their expectations for the future, and what they learned from this year.

The interviews of the participants were customised as per the experiences of the interviewees and their role in the tourism industry. Thereby all interviews, in terms of both the content and how they were conducted, varied from individual to individual. Some of the meetings were held at the hotels where the owner, manager, and supervisor of the hotel were interviewed one by one. Some of the interviews took place in the offices of the interviewees, and others were conducted in cafes, restaurants, and coffee shops.

Overall, the interviews went smoothly and were a success. However, while conducting these interviews, the researcher did meet with a number of challenges. Of these challenges, the first one was that not everyone was willing to participate in interviews. In addition, the first point of contact was particularly more difficult, as many of the people from the tourism and hospitality industry did not respond to their emails. This was because some of them were very busy in their work, while others did not get the email, and it was automatically sent to their junk emails. Therefore, the researcher tried to find numbers of these individuals and contacted them via phone call. He also went to meet some of the more important individuals in the tourism industry personally to get them on board. In a similar capacity, the second challenge faced by the researcher was that some of the people interviewed were very introverted and were unable to provide in-depth and detailed answers to the questions that were being asked. As a result, the researcher had to improvise and come up with more questions on the same point to gather as much information as possible. Other participants did not give detailed answers because they did not want to waste their time, effort, and energy.

As highlighted by other academic scholars, the research interview is one of the most significant ways of collecting data in qualitative research (Sandy & Dumay, 2011). This methodology has been used in a vast number of studies and many researchers have been able to meet the objectives of their study through this kind of methodology. This is particularly true for studies

that involve ethnographic and field research. It gives the researcher an opportunity to learn and experience of the world of others (Horton et al., 2004).

3.2 The Post-research Phase

Once the researcher had finished all the interviews, transcribed them, and translated them to the English language, the researcher used the method of coding for data analysis. Coding is a way of classifying, sorting, and grouping the text to generate a structure of thematic ideas (Langman, 2013). This tool is often used in qualitative research as a means of deifying the data that is being analysed. Coding is a distinguished tool and can result in further analysis and understanding of the data. It is also used by many academic scholars and experts to understand and comprehend the data (Lockyer, 2004). It has also been known to help organise data and make sense of the information attained. As qualitative data is unstructured and non-numerical, coding is a crucial step to analyse the data. The current body of literature describes coding as a useful way of effectively reducing raw data and condensing it into meaningful information. At the same time, other benefits of this technique include giving the researcher an opportunity to connect and communicate with the raw data in order to generate theories grounded in the qualitative data. It is also seen as a tool of converting qualitative data into quantitative data for statistical analysis (Basit, 2003). Thus, coding is seen as an extremely useful method that allows the researcher to better understand the data, give meaning to the data, generate theory from the data, and as a means to analyse the data and to draw conclusions from it (Basit, 2003). For this reason, this study used coding for better comprehension and analysis of the given data.

When the researcher was coding the collected data, he looked at the similar words and phrases that were used in the interviews most frequently. He also looked at the most frequently positive and negative impacts discussed in the data. Relying on this information, the researcher came up with three main themes of the data. He then classified data in these three main classifications of codes. The first code was the positive impacts of tourism, the second code was the negative impacts of tourism, and the third code related to the benefits of hosting international events.

4. Findings

4.1 Overview

This section aims to present the main findings of this academic study based on the primary data collected for this research. This is based on those individuals, who are experts in the tourism industry in Saudi Arabia. Through these interviews, the researcher was able to understand the economic benefits of tourism. Many of the hotel managers believed that the hotels thrived due to the recent growth in tourism and that tourism was now more important than business travel. Indeed, some believed that their jobs were now dependent upon tourism as opposed to business travel as they had been previously. Therefore, an understanding of how tourism affects economic growth and employment in Saudi Arabia was well understood by the interviewees. The interviewees were also able to identify the overall trends of the tourism industry in Saudi Arabia, the impacts of tourism on the economy of Saudi Arabia, and how the lives of many local people employed within the industry were affected, In addition, the benefits and impact of hosting international events were also well explained by the participants. Moreover, many were also able to give some valuable recommendations as to how this industry can be improved, the challenges faced by the industry, its strengths, its weaknesses, and how Saudi Arabia can fully utilise the potential of tourism. However, while some of the interviews were able to identify the pressure tourism puts on the resources of the host country, a more in-depth understanding of the actual costs remained unclear. Nonetheless, in respect to the responses received through all 30 interviews, the researcher was able to gather enough data to be able to address to the objectives of the research. The participants in this study are summarised below (Table 1):

Table 1. Summary of Participants

Participant #	Gender	Age group	Nationality	Position/Business type	City
1	Male	35-49	Saudi	Manager/Hotel	Riyadh
2	Female	20-34	Saudi	Supervisor/Hotel	Riyadh
3	Female	20-34	Saudi	Supervisor/Hotel	Riyadh
4	Male	35-49	Saudi	Supervisor/Hotel	Riyadh
5	Male	20-34	Saudi	Supervisor/Restaurant	Riyadh
6	Female	35-49	Saudi	Manager/Restaurant	Riyadh
7	Male	35-49	Lebanese	Supervisor/Restaurant	Riyadh
8	Male	35-49	Sudanese	Manager/Travel & Tours	Riyadh
9	Male	20-34	Saudi	Supervisor/Travel & Tours	Riyadh
10	Male	35-49	Egyptian	Manager/Travel & Tours	Riyadh
11	Male	35-49	Saudi	Supervisor/Hotel	Jeddah
12	Male	35-49	Saudi	Supervisor/Hotel	Jeddah
13	Male	20-34	Saudi	Supervisor/Hotel	Jeddah
14	Male	35-49	Saudi	Manager/Hotel	Jeddah
15	Male	35-49	Saudi	Supervisor/Hotel	Jeddah
16	Male	50-64	Saudi	Owner/Cafe	Jeddah
17	Male	50-64	Saudi	Owner/Cafe	Jeddah
18	Male	35-49	South African	Owner/Restaurant	Jeddah
19	Male	20-34	Saudi	Supervisor/Restaurant	Jeddah
20	Male	35-49	Saudi	Manager/Travel & Tours	Jeddah
21	Male	35-49	Saudi	Manager/Travel & Tours	Jeddah
22	Male	20-34	Saudi	Supervisor/Resort	Al-Ula
23	Male	35-49	Egyptian	Supervisor/Resort	Al-Ula
24	Male	35-49	Saudi	Owner/Resort	Al-Ula
25	Male	20-34	Saudi	Owner/Restaurant	Al-Ula
26	Male	20-34	Saudi	Supervisor/Restaurant	Al-Ula
27	Male	20-34	Filipino	Supervisor/Restaurant	Al-Ula
28	Female	20-34	Saudi	Manager/Café	Al-Ula
29	Male	20-34	Saudi	Manager/Café	Al-Ula
30	Female	20-34	Saudi	Supervisor/Travel & Tours	Al-Ula

The findings of this study highlighted many interesting and unique viewpoints on tourism development in Saudi Arabia. Amongst these findings, three themes emerged as the most prominent. For this reason, this study will primarily focus on the findings based on these three themes. The first theme that appeared as a very prominent one was the positive impacts of tourism in Saudi Arabia, in relation to economic opportunities, generation of employment, and other social benefits. The current body of the literature suggests tourism is seen as a driver and a stimulator for economic growth and development for many economies (Habibi et al., 2018). It is also seen as a tool for increasing the economic welfare of Saudi Arabia and a facilitator

for earning foreign exchange (Habibi et al., 2018). Similarly, Manzoor et al. (2019) also suggest that the tourism industry is one of the most fundamental and reliable sources for the generation of employment and income opportunities (Farooqi et al., 2010). While Hwang and Lee (2019) also advocate some of these positive impacts of tourism on the host country.

The second theme that emerged in the findings of this study, based on the semi-structured interviews of the tourism stakeholders, revolved around ideas to improve the Saudi seasons in the future. These suggestions ranged from increasing the tourism season to hosting events in the kingdom. The benefits of such strategies, like hosting events, has been discussed by many scholars in the literature. Henderson (2014) found such events facilitate awareness of the host destination in the eyes of the global community. In doing so, it can also create awareness in the eyes of the investors, and can positively impact investment (Henderson, 2014). Such events are also known to promote a favourable image of the host destination and potentially erode any negative image or perceived notions relating to the host destination (Henderson, 2014).

In a similar capacity, the third most common theme that emerged from the primary research of this academic study, pertained to the potential ways in which tourism could be improved in Saudi Arabia. This theme emerged as a prominent one, as many respondents reported that they believed that Saudi Arabia could benefit from tourism, and that the state needs to further promote tourism to attract more international visitors. In addition to the three main themes discussed above, this study also includes a fourth findings section. This is an amalgamation of all the interesting and noteworthy findings of this research. It includes a vast array of topics and whilst several did not emerge as the most common answers in the primary research, they help in providing unique insights and perhaps themes to explore in future studies.

4.2 Positive Impacts of the Saudi Seasons

As aforementioned, many of the answers to the interviews focused on the benefits that tourism brings to Saudi Arabia. These benefits included a number of positive economic impacts, including the creation of employment and opportunities to expand businesses. Moreover, the majority of respondents mentioned that tourism in their region has led to an increase in the economic performance of their businesses and has also brought stability due to the Saudi Seasons. For example, P3 felt that the income and the reservations increased for the hotel due to the Saudi Season in Riyadh that had aimed to develop and transform the tourism sector of

the city (Saudi Seasons, 2020). P3 also felt that the number of customers increased significantly for them after the Saudi Season. Both P11 and P15 reported the same observations in Jeddah, and added that the Saudi Season had increased the number of European tourists they typically received. As a result of this growth, they additionally reported a need to create new jobs to manage the increase in tourist arrivals. Similarly, P17, an owner of a café that is situated at the heart of Jeddah, also noted that they had to expand the size of their store due to an influx of tourists as a result of growing tourist numbers due to the Saudi Seasons. Moreover, P17's shop had not only received increased demand for their products but had to employ more workers to support this increase in demand. The arrival of local celebrities that were either performing or attending the Jeddah Saudi Season who visited his café also led to further domestic tourist arrivals. However, P17 had also noted that tourist numbers were still high even after the cessation of the Saudi Season and believed that the event had fostered long-term positive impacts: "The [Jeddah] season was very good for us, even after it ended.... visitors still keep coming. The season affected us positively and because of the celebrities in Social Media, who took pictures inside our store... this too has a positive impact on us'.

P15 at Al-Ula also shared similar views, and felt that "more visitors came to us [after the Saudi Seasons] and there are more even after the high seasons have ended... we have expanded more during these two years, we have more villas and suites in our residential resort". He further added, that French and American tourists had visited the resort the most, and that the Saudi Season had led to an increase in the income of the resort. Thus, in this manner, it can be concluded that the Saudi Seasons which has a number of activities for the tourists, has led to an increase in the revenue for businesses and also an increase in employment opportunities during the Saudi Seasons. Moreover, this study observed a strong relationship between economic growth for the local community through hosting events like Saudi Seasons. These findings are consistent with those highlighted in the literature review. Indeed, many scholars including Habibi et al., 2018, Schubert et al., 2011, Assaf & Al-Shaikh, 2013 and Mahmoudinia et al., 2011 have all advocated for tourism as a driver of economic growth, a facilitator of employment opportunities, and an enabler of business opportunities for the host country.

Many other participants also felt a positive change in their business due to the Saudi Seasons and an increase in tourism more broadly. Six of the respondents expressed that tourism led to an increase in employment in the industry or their businesses due to an influx of tourists in Saudi Arabia. Firstly, P1 hired more employees to cater for the Saudi Seasons, and P2 also felt

that due to tourism their business had to increase the number of people working for them during the peak season. P15 was of the opinion that due to the Saudi seasons, approximately three-quarters of their hotel was booked out, and there was a noticeable shift in the nature of tourism. He felt that tourism in the region shifted from business tourism to entertainment-related tourism and as a result also hired more staff during this period. P19 added, 'Yes, there is a difference [during the Saudi Seasons], the work increased during the season, and we increased the staff'. Similarly, P28 was also of a similar opinion and verified that more employees are hired when needed during the tourist seasons. Hence, it can be concluded that this study has found that the development of the tourism sector not only leads to economic growth in Saudi Arabia, but also results in employment in the local community as it did for the tourist destinations of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. For example, P2 confirmed that their business expanded during the Saudi Seasons that led to many new opportunities to employ local people. For this reason, they opened another branch in the embassy district and P2 further added that hotels are now fully booked due to the tourism season, unlike in the past, to the extent that he can no longer meet demand.

P19 also felt a change in their business and sensed a rise in the work during the peak season, whilst P23 shared similar views: 'We opened in two stages, as you see, this is the first stage. We are now working on the second stage, which is expanding the hotel. Initially, the first thing that we opened focused on local tourists.... but now, after the seasons, there is a need to concentrate on both the local and international [visitor]'. However, due to the growth in tourists as a result of the Saudi Seasons, it was reported that many temporary employees could no longer find accommodation. Interestingly, this provided new economic opportunities as many local people began to rent our rooms or create Airbnb properties. For example, P24 shared the following anecdote, 'There were many workers for the Saudi Seasons working in the Mirrors Theatre project, and they did not find accommodation for them.... So they came to rent from me as an Airbnb.' Thus, in this way, P24 was also able to expand his operations and find new business opportunities. Lastly, P25 added, 'The previous year, our place was much smaller now, and now we have expanded this year.' The current body of literature on the topic also cites that amongst many other advantages of tourism, an opportunity to expand business activity due to an influx of tourists and a rise in demand of goods and services in the local community as a benefit of tourism. Therefore, from such responses, it can be concluded that for Saudi Arabia, tourism has led to an expansion of business activity and scope in the locations where the Saudi Seasons had taken place. The literature also states that tourism is beneficial

for the economic growth and development of the tourist destinations as it promotes business activity in the region (Samimi et al., 2011; Narayan et al., 2010). Habibi et al. (2018) highlight that when tourism increases, the demand of goods and services consumed by international tourists can be promoted, such as travel agencies and tour guides, souvenir shops, and tourist sites (Habibi et al., 2018). Tourism is believed to be the engine of development and a chief contributor to the economic growth and development of economies (Habibi et al., 2018). Hwang and Lee (2019) also verify these economic advantages of tourism after studying and analysing the Korean economy. According to them, tourism has led to a significant increase in the economic growth and expansion of business in the economy (Hwang & Lee, 2019). Lastly, Vignal (2010) also confirms that tourism leads to the development of businesses in the host country and is a driver of economic growth (Vignal, 2010). This relationship is also supported by many academic scholars and experts that tourism helps in the creation of many employment opportunities (Assaf & Al-Shaikh, 2013). In a similar vein, Manzoor et al. (2019) highlight the importance of the tourism industry as a reliable source for the creation of employment and income opportunities in the host country, and that tourism supports both the formal and informal sectors (Farooqi et al., 2010; Vignal, 2010) Lastly, Homafar et al. (2011) also confirm that tourism is a means of providing a livelihood for the local community that attracts tourism (Homafar et al., 2011). Thus, in this way, these findings are consistent with the findings of many other academic scholars.

As Saudi Arabia traditionally attracted only religious tourism on account of the holy place of worships for Muslims in the cities of Makkah and Madina, it is now trying to shift the nature of tourism and has also started working on attracting tourists for entertainment in other cities including Riyadh, Jeddah, and Al-Ula. When participants from these locations were interviewed, many felt that the Saudi Seasons strategy was a good opportunity to diversify tourism products and, in their opinion, it had surpassed their expectations. P5 felt that in the first four years the business increased, but gradually, after the seasons of Saudi Arabia, the increase in business activity became very significant and noticeable just within three months of the Riyadh tourist season. When asked how they felt about the Saudi Seasons, P5 responded. 'Very good and better than we expected', whilst P6 also held similar views and felt that the Saudi Seasons were 'fabulous and better than their expectations' due to the Saudi Seasons attracting a wider array of tourists. Indeed, P5 had also noticed an influx of tourists from Kuwait, UAE and Bahrain due to the Saudi Seasons. In a similar capacity, P7 also felt that 'Saudi Seasons have contributed to the increase in the number of visitors to us from the Gulf

countries, such as people from Kuwait and the Emirates who have now heard about us.’ When asked about how they felt about the Saudi Seasons, they had only positive experiences to share and agreed that this strategy had worked well, especially as it had opened up new international tourists markets that sought things beyond religious tourism. Lastly, when P25 was asked about the Saudi Seasons strategy and their expectations from it, he reported a very positive experience:

‘It was very powerful and beautiful. I had been studying five years abroad and after returning to Saudi Arabia, I was shocked by the change. To be honest, everything that comes to mind is positive... it was a perfect experience. We participated here the previous year in the winter at Tantora, during the first Saudi Season in Saudi Arabia. Last year the Royal Commission for Al-Ula asked us to be able to serve an average of fifty people per day, but this year they asked us to be able to serve an average of more than 200 people. This shows rapid growth and an increase in demand for us... in summary, yes [the Saudi Seasons], has had a huge impact on us’.

P25 also observed that many European tourists were visiting Al-Ula that were quite rare to see, ‘the previous week we had many French and Belgian groups.... several groups came from different counties through a [tour] company trying to promote Al-Ula’. P13 also felt an increase during the Saudi Seasons in Jeddah and this also led to an expansion of their business. P14 and P16 also shared similar views and verified not only an increase in income during the Saudi Season but also an increased demand for their business, revealing consistency between the observations in this study and contemporary literature. Indeed, this literature also highlights that there are many benefits of hosting events, as such events can increase the growth of tourism in that country in the long and short run (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011). According to Homafar et al. (2011), such events provide an opportunity to increase the income of the local people, and provide them with means of earning livelihood (Homafar et al., 2011) The literature repeatedly highlights the potential for such events to create income, and to generate tax revenue for the state of the host community (Kang & Perdue, 1994).

Finally, this additionally observed that the citizens of Saudi Arabia gained an opportunity to explore their own country due to the Saudi Seasons and they took great pride in it. For example, P4 added that he knew little about tourism in Saudi Arabia before the events:

‘The Saudi Seasons strategy are something very beautiful and wonderful, we, as Saudi citizens, have discovered things about our country that we did not know about before such as Al-Ula and its beauty’.

Similarly, P23 also added that awareness of Al-Ula had increased and that its archaeological sites should now be recognised internationally if Saudi Arabia wanted to develop tourism further. He further added that as an Egyptian, tourism has led to an increased awareness of Saudi Arabia in the eyes of international tourists and had provided a feeling of pride amongst the Saudis he knew. These findings are consistent with the views of Henderson (2014) who highlighted that events can help in creating awareness of the host destination amongst the general public, that can lead to many to many becoming potential domestic tourists (Henderson, 2014). Events like these are designed to promote a favourable image of the host destination (Henderson, 2014), and hosting such events can help people located within the host destination feel pride in its culture and its achievements (Henderson, 2014; Esman, 1984). In this way, this first theme of this academic research suggests that tourism leads to economic growth, business growth, development, a rise in income, stability in the business, and an increase in awareness of the tourist town in both the local and international tourists. All these findings are consistent and in line with the works of other academic scholars and experts.

4.3 Opportunities to Improve the ‘Saudi Seasons’ strategy in the future

The second theme of this study focuses on how Saudi Arabia can improve in hosting events and gain more from the Saudi Seasons strategy. This theme will also focus on some of the negative social impacts even as the Saudi Seasons strategy continues to flourish and the tourism sector in Saudi Arabia grows. A number of respondents felt that hosting international events could be beneficial for the Saudi Seasons in Saudi Arabia and this remained one of the most popular opinions in this study. For example, P1 responded that Saudi Arabia should host international events and find new opportunities and events to attract international visitors in country. Furthermore, P1 added:

‘From my experience, there are many stories about new experiences because of the Saudi Seasons and who they can attract... for example, 2 Americans I never expected to see [in Saudi Arabia]... visited for the big wrestling event. They had stayed 3 days after the wrestling match... and they did not know what [else] to do, so I suggested they

to go to a popular local restaurant. After they went and tried the restaurant, they came back to me the next day telling me “thank you”... they went to eat there the next day as well... now they say they may return [to Saudi Arabia] due to the good treatment they received and the hospitality they experienced.’

In a similar manner, P27 also suggested that hosting events attracts more people to popular tourist destinations and that international tourists are now seeing the real value of expiring tourism in Saudi Arabia. Thus, in this manner, this study identified that hosting events like the Saudi Seasons encourages people from different countries to visit Saudi Arabia because it had the ability to change perceptions. The current body of literature also holds a similar view, and sees hosting international events as a tool for prosperity and flourishing of the tourism industry of Saudi Arabia. The literature highlights one of the most significant factors for increasing tourism is hosting of global mega-events like the Saudi Seasons (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011). These events also attract international tourists in Saudi Arabia (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011). According to Kim and Walker (2012), such events can help increasing tourism of the host country as suggested by this academic study. As suggested by P7, ‘attempting to increase foreign investors in Saudi Arabia, because it will greatly affect tourism in Saudi Arabia’. Henderson (2014) also highlights that such events help in creating awareness about the host destination amongst international tourists, many of which become potential tourists for the host destination (Henderson, 2014). Events like these also help in portraying a favourable image of the host country (Henderson, 2014), as was also narrated by P1.

At the same time, the creation and organisation of an adequate infrastructure has been suggested by many of the individuals interviewed for this academic research. For example, as P2 suggests, the Saudi Season strategy can be improved and can benefit from organising international events. P12, P26 and P28 were also of the same opinion. In fact, P2 also suggested that Saudi Arabia should focus on having more international cafes with bands and music, like the ones in London. Others like P5 and P6 suggested that the Saudi Seasons duration should be increased to more than three months every year and the price of the tickets should also be decreased so that the tickets are affordable and more people can buy them easily. Moreover, some respondents, like P10, also suggested that the duration of the events should be increased to all around the year while others like P20 also shared the same opinion. Thus, in this manner, the findings of this study suggest that these individuals feel that their business could benefit from hosting more international events and for this reason they suggest having adequate

facilities for the tourists and increasing the duration of the tourist season. The findings also suggest that the events must be organised in an efficient manner so that it is convenient for the tourists, as well as the locals. This is so that the region can gain from the benefits of the tourism. As suggested by P4, 'If we focus more on tourism as the Saudi 2030 vision is already based on tourism, and if we largely support tourism, we will cover our needs for oil. For example, Dubai has become what it is now after focusing on tourism'. This has also been verified by the literature. It is not only Dubai, but Qatar as well that is trying to host international events to position itself as a tourist destination. This is a diversification strategy for Saudi Arabia to decrease its reliance on other sectors and grow its tourism sector (Henderson, 2014).

Another finding of this academic research is to provide a proper infrastructure to make the Saudi Seasons do better, which includes the opening up of cafes, restaurants, and other tourist attractions to provide entertainment and tourist facilities for tourists coming to Saudi Arabia. As suggested by many of the experts like P13, expanding amusement parks and having supervision to make Saudi Arabia safe could help Saudi Seasons. P30 also holds similar views and advocates to 'increase amusement parks, cafes, and entertainment venues' to benefit the Saudi Seasons strategy. At the same time, P15 suggested there should be a diversification of events for the entertainment of international tourists. Similarly, P19 suggests that the government should invest in the 'renovation of some beaches, such as the beach (waterfront) in Jeddah and invest the construction of a walkway and gardens' to improve Saudi Seasons. Others also suggest that increasing accommodation facilities to facilitate tourists, and improving safety as a pre-requisite of making the Saudi Seasons a success. As narrated by P25, 'The only thing that needs more arrangements in Al-Ula is accommodation because the city here is not ready to receive huge numbers of visitors. To the extent that the government manufactured caravans and put them next to each other as a resort to cover the shortage of housing in Al-Ula'. This is further confirmed by P29 who suggests that increasing security in the tourist destinations of Saudi Arabia will help in increasing the peace of mind if the people. He further adds that there should also be 'diversification in shops around the Mountain Elephant. This place around the Mountain Elephant has to be expanded because it accommodates the most number of visitors'. Thus, in this manner, it is clear that if Saudi Arabia wants to expand tourism in the region, it must provide adequate infrastructure to facilitate international visitors. The literature also highlights this in many studies. Stewart and Rayner (2015) highlight that for any country to host events like the Saudi Seasons, they must develop a good infrastructure in that area along with other facilities, such as housing, recreation, and

other transformational facilities (Stewart & Rayner, 2015). In addition to this, Homafar and his colleagues in 2011 also suggest that development of the urban areas is very important for the success of mega events in that region (Homafar et al., 2011). Marzouki (2019) also verified that Dubai has worked hard to establish facilities, which include resorts, hotels, beaches, infrastructure, and much more just to host Expo 2020 in their country (Marzouki, 2019). This goes to show that Saudi Arabia could really benefit from the suggestions that have been highlighted by experts in the tourism sector.

The findings that emerged from the interviews also suggest that the Saudi Seasons has led to an increase in the general price levels and many of the interviewees reflected upon this as well and suggested that the price levels should be decreased. P14 straight out said that ‘Prices need to be decreased.’ P30 also felt that his business is being adversely affected by the rise in the price levels he added that ‘Previous year, the prices were lower than this year. Customer turnout this year is less due to higher rates.’ P6 also suggested that a reduction in the prices can be a good strategy for the Saudi Seasons to produce better results. In a similar fashion, P9 also confirmed that he noticed an increase in the price levels due to these events. In addition to this, P11 also confirmed that the ‘Prices are quite expensive, like tickets in Jeddah are costly.’ These findings are again consistent and in line with the works of other academic scholars who have on several occasions pointed that tourism comes with some negative consequences for the host country, amongst these one of which is inflation. Eraqi (2007), after studying the impacts of tourism on Saudi Arabia of Egypt, reported inflation as one of the negative impacts of tourism for Saudi Arabia. This has been further confirmed by a more recent study by Zaidan (2016), who also found an increase in price levels due to tourism in an empirical research. On the other hand, a study that dates back to 1983 by Bélisle also suggests similar findings after studying the experience of Caribbean countries. This study advocates that tourism results in imported inflation for these economies (Bélisle, 1983). While Shaari and his colleagues in 2018 also suggest the same. They suggest that the rationale behind increase in prices is because tourism leads to an increase in economic growth and incomes in the host country, which results in a higher spending power and a higher demand of goods, which in turns leads to inflation in the local community (Shaari et al., 2018). On the other hand, Olayungbo states the reason for this rise in price levels can also be due to increased government expenditure (Olayungbo, 2013). Thus, in this manner, inflation as a negative consequence has been extensively researched and verified by many academic scholars.

Another finding of this study was that tourism has led to an increase in pressure on the current tourism resources of Saudi Arabia and basic facilities like accommodation have been fully booked and overcrowded. P14 felt that the pressure on the resources of their business has increased. P24 also felt that there was a shortage in the accommodation facilities in the region for many at the Saudi Seasons. 'There were many workers for the Saudi Seasons working in the Mirrors Theatre project, and they did not find accommodation for them'. In a similar manner, P3 also felt immense pressure on the current infrastructure of the company and suggested, 'The event sites should be distributed, and should be far from each other to be less crowded. Because they are now close to each other.' P22 also verified that there is a dire need to have additional accommodation as the current accommodation is insufficient and is putting undue pressure on Saudi Arabia. P25 shared a similar opinion by stating, 'The only thing that needs more arrangements in Al-Ula is accommodation. The city here is not ready to receive huge numbers of visitors. To the extent that the government manufactured caravans and put them next to each other as a resort to cover the shortage of housing in Al-Ula. Unfortunately, its price was too expensive.' P30 also focused on increasing accommodation in Al-Ula. P13 emphasised on the congestion on roads due to excess traffic. Another common finding of this research is that the Saudi Seasons is not organised, and hence more resources must be utilised in the organisation of the event. This goes to show that the people of Saudi Arabia have to pay a heavy price for tourism in terms of congestion on the roads, lack of adequate accommodation, and exploitation of the current resources of Saudi Arabia which are not enough to cater to the demands of the people. As mentioned earlier as well, this research also finds that there must also be development of parks, cafes, and other tourist places for the entertainment of international tourists. If Saudi Arabia is to develop the social infrastructure that is in terms of the increase in accommodation and other tourist facilities as suggested in this academic research, that too comes at a heavy price, which is to be paid by the environment of Saudi Arabia. The price that has to be paid as a result of a loss in habitat for many species, and at the price of converting the beautiful landscape of Saudi Arabia to hotels and other tourist facilities. A number of academics and experts who have carried out extensive research on this discipline also second the findings of this paper. Carrigan in 2011 confirmed tourism can lead to many negative impacts on the environment of the host country and can cause irrevocable damage to the environment of the country, this includes loss of habitat, pollution etc (Carrigan, 2011). Malik et al in 2016, also verify these findings and highlight that tourist centric activities can lead to an increase in carbon dioxide emissions, which are very detrimental to the environment (Malik et al, 2016). Koens et al in 2018 also confirm that development of this industry can

result in overcrowding of urban cities (Koens et al, 2018). This is not all. Another study by Sunlu (2003) highlights that the increase in accommodation and hotels can lead to an increased burden in the water resources of Saudi Arabia. Aref et al. (2009) confirm that amongst the many costs of tourism that the local community has to pay, overcrowding in the cities is a main one, while excess traffic on the roads, too many people in parks, and lack of parking spaces are some of the problems mentioned in this pioneering research. Thus, in this manner, these findings are also in line and consistent with the current body of research.

4.4 Opportunities to Improve Tourism in Saudi Arabia

The third main theme of this academic research focuses on the opportunities that Saudi Arabia could utilise in order to attract more international tourists in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In doing so, this academic study aims to provide robust ways to improve the tourism sector of Saudi Arabia and help in achieving the 2030 vision. The first opportunity that emerges as a finding in this academic paper was that Saudi Arabia should make use of its climate diversity as its strength. Saudi Arabia has abundance of deserts, mountains, hills, and terrains with forests, cities, and beautiful seas. As mentioned by P4, ‘Geographically, we have very strong points, like terrain. No country in the world has a variety of terrain like Saudi Arabia and America, and I assure you that because I studied in this field. If you look at America, for example, it has forests, seas, deserts, cities. You will not see a place that has these advantages except for Saudi Arabia and America. I know that Saudi Arabia is not the same size as America but we have all the resources. We must take advantage of it’. This was further confirmed by P5 who added that Saudi Arabia ‘has all the rituals like mountains, deserts, seas, and forests that will suit most tastes.’ P7 was also of a similar opinion and P19 also thought the region has great climate diversity. P25 also agreed with this popular opinion and said that: ‘The strongest strengths are that we have huge land in Saudi Arabia and climate diversity. We have snow, deserts, mountains, hills. There is an area here in Al-Ula that looks like Grand Canyon in Arizona. We have a desert of the Empty Quarter, which for me is a miracle of the wonders of the world, and it was not exploited, but this year they used a part of it to race the Dakar rally’.

Thus, this suggests that climate diversity does affect the tourism of a destination and Saudi Arabia should take advantage of its climate diversification to increase tourism in Saudi Arabia and attract more international tourists. Many studies in the literature also confirm these findings. A study by Scotta and Lemieuz (2010) claims that climate variability is a significant

factor is affecting tourism both in a positive and a negative manner and that terrains like mountains, beaches, etc. can positively impact tourism. Similar findings have also been reached by Becken (2010) that highlights that climate and weather are extremely significant factors that influence tourist decisions in making the choice for tourist destination. Thus, in this manner, having a diverse range of climates can be helpful in making a destination a favourable tourist spot (Becken, 2010). That being said, many of the experts also believe that climate can at the same time be detrimental for tourism in Saudi Arabia, as the summers in Saudi Arabia are not only very hot but long spells of the summer season make it difficult to provide relief to international tourists. P5 added that the summer seasons in Saudi Arabia are excruciatingly hot which makes tourism in Saudi Arabia a little difficult and it is for this reason that the government prefers most of the activities in the winter season when the weather is a little better. P6 and P7 also felt the same, in addition to other respondents like P20 and P21. This goes to show that climate can have a negative impact on tourism of Saudi Arabia as well, as highlighted by Scotta and Lemieuz (2010) as well.

On the other hand, another finding that came forward in this academic research is that historical sites and ancient heritage that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is abundant and can help in increasing international tourism in Saudi Arabia. This has been a popular opinion of most of the experts in this industry. For this reason, P10 believed that Saudi Arabia has an abundance of archaeological sites, including the holy mosques of Makkah and Medina. This is not all. P11 confirmed that the city of Jeddah also has a lot of heritage and historical sites. P16 further verified this and added Saudi Arabia has an abundance of ancient heritage. Similarly, P20 and P21 also shared similar views, while P21 added the historical places of Saudi Arabia are of the same quality as United Arab Emirates. In a similar capacity, P22 added, 'We have a lot of antiquities. France is one of the most countries in the world interested in antiques and history. There is an exhibition of Al-Ula in France. Therefore, the French, who are interested in archaeology and history, come to Al-Ula'. In addition to this, P24 added, 'Here in Al-Ula, the Kingdom of Dadan, or as they call it "Al-Khoraiba", in which there is the Nabatean civilisation, or as they call it "Al Lehiania". Also, there are volcanic craters in an area called "Al Horrah". There is a vast area in "Al Horrah". We can place a cable car between the mountains, and we can make resorts in it'. Likewise, P26, P28 and many others also confirmed that the archaeology and historical sites of Saudi Arabia are worth a visit. While P25 added, 'We should highlight the history of Saudi Arabia more. People, in general, are interested in history. We need to highlight the history of Saudi Arabia more. Al-Ula is more than 2000 years old. We

have a mountain, which came out of the camel of the Prophet Saleh in the Qur'an. People who care about history, if they knew that these sites exist in Saudi Arabia, would come'. In a similar fashion, P17 also added that Saudi Arabia has a beautiful spirit and a life of simplicity, so simple projects such as the Traditional Hijazi Balila shops and old things must be supported because foreigners want to see authentic items. Simply, we need support for simple projects. These findings are also consistent and in line with that of the current body of the literature, as many researchers have proposed a correlation between archaeology, cultural heritage and history with development of tourism. Amongst these scholars, Comer et al. (2012) report a positive correlation between the countries that have been visited by tourists and the importance of their archaeology and heritage. These finding have been further verified in another study by Ismagilova et al. (2015). This study proves the importance of history and cultural heritage in the development of tourism by taking into account the example of Russia (Ismagilova et al., 2015). Similar findings have been suggested by P8 as well who believes, 'Foreigners mostly care about archaeological and heritage places, old areas, and old car shows. So, the best solution is to publish tourist areas equally in parts of the kingdom.' In addition to the above mentioned findings, another finding that became prominent in this research is that through having a diverse set and array of events that can provide forms of entertainment for a larger group of people who belong to different backgrounds, family structures, and age groups, this can positively affect the tourism of Saudi Arabia and help Saudi Arabia to attract international tourists from all cultures, demographics, and ethnicities in the kingdom. When the respondents were asked how Saudi Arabia could attract international tourists, many of them replied through diversification of events. Such and such that, P11 suggested that diversification of events can help Saudi Arabia in achieving its 2030 vision, and events like the Global Village in Dubai should also be replicated in this country. Along with this, international events like rallies and car racing could also increase tourism according to P11. Similarly, P13 suggested increasing marine relating activities could benefit Saudi Arabia as the region is bestowed with an abundance of seas, while climbing and mountaineering was also suggested. P1 gave some interesting and well thought-out suggestions and said: 'We need to look at the things that attract tourists. If we host the World Cup, people will come and say "I will return to Saudi Arabia"'. For example, I am a fan of Real Madrid, and I want to attend their match. I will not travel to Spain to attend a match just for one day. There must be many other motives besides the game to make me excited to go. I have heard a lot about Italy as a beautiful country, and I went there and the thing I liked most there was their food, and now I want to return back to Italy only to eat a pizza. In this way people who will come to Saudi Arabia might return to Saudi Arabia to

eat Kabsa or Mandi'. This was further agreed by P2 and P4 who emphasised, 'If you open foreign investment and allow large foreign companies to invest with us. For example, if Apple comes to us, hundreds of employees will come from Apple and they will bring their families with them and friends of their families will come to visit them, etc... The most important thing is the diversity in events. All people want to see something different and we have this today'. These findings are similar to those of many other scholars and researchers. A research by Venegas et al. (2009), consisting of 275 tourist destinations, through a regression analysis found a significant relation between tourist attractions and number of tourists visiting the place (Vengesai et al., 2009). Adeboye (2012) also highlights international tourists are always looking for ways to find entertainment in a foreign land.

In a similar manner, another opportunity to improve the international tourism in Saudi Arabia is through marketing. Marketing helps in creating awareness of the tourist activities and attractions, and lets people know all the things Saudi Arabia has to offer. Hence, in this manner, marketing can help in increasing the demand for tourism in Saudi Arabia. Many of the respondents also felt the same. For example, P4 said that 'Most people think Saudi Arabia is only for religious tourism, but they do not understand that Saudi Arabia is much more than this. Saudi Arabia's reputation with most of the foreigners is that it is just a desert, but if they come they will be shocked by what they will see.' In addition to this, P5 suggested that Saudi Arabia should hire celebrities to promote and endorse tourism of Saudi Arabia. These celebrities have a great following and can increase awareness of all that Saudi Arabia has to offer to the world. P7 suggested marketing should be done through advertisement of tourism by travel agencies in different parts of the world. This means that, for example, travel agents in London could inform their clients of the tourist destinations and attractions in Saudi Arabia. At the same time, P20 suggests that the Internet can be used as an efficient channel to advertise the culture and beauty of Saudi Arabia. Similarly, P6 believes that giving perks to tourists can help increase tourism as tourists will spread all the great things they did in Saudi Arabia through word of mouth. Thus he suggested to 'Give free tickets to families of people who will come to perform in Saudi Arabia, because marketing from their mouths is completely different from online or TV marketing.' Thus, in this manner, marketing of tourism is seen as an effective manner to increase tourism by those who are directly involved in this sector. This marketing is also believed to improve the reputation of Saudi Arabia, as many of the respondents believe that Saudi Arabia is being advertised by the media as a very negative and close-minded country. As P25 mentions, 'The most important weakness is simply sabotaging the reputation of Saudi

Arabia by the news and political things, which made Saudi Arabia influenced by what was said in the news and what is still being said between people.’ P9 further adds to this by stating, ‘There are many places that the media did not highlight. There are many beautiful places in Saudi Arabia.’ P9 also holds similar views. Thus, in this manner, the right kind of advertisement can help Saudi Arabia create awareness and improve the image of Saudi Arabia. This has been consistently seen in the past and many scholars have also verified that through hosting events and inviting tourists to visit Saudi Arabia the reputation of a country can be improved. There are many such examples in history for this kind of an approach, dating back as early as the 1930s when the Olympic games were held in Berlin as an awareness and marketing strategy. This strategy helped to improve the image of Saudi Arabia from the Nazi regime of the Hitler era and give an opportunity to the world to see for themselves the positive side of the Germans (Avraham, 2014).

4.5 Other Emergent Findings

This section focuses on the miscellaneous findings and observations of this study. This includes the other emergent themes that were found through this research and includes findings that may not have been the most popular view but are of potential value. It has been observed that there are some businesses in the tourism industry that have not been impacted much by the Saudi Seasons. P8 said that for his business, whilst arrivals increased during the first year they have since declined. In a similar vein, P16 added that they also did not find the need to increase the staff during the peak season time, whilst P20 suggested that there was not much of a difference in business after the Saudi Seasons were completed. This was especially true for the travel agents like P20 and P21 who felt like due to online bookings the customers are not choosing their organisations. Moreover, P2 added that their business was encountering a decline in demand as many people could arrange online bookings to participate in the Saudi Seasons. These findings are contrary to that in the literature that suggest that tourism growth leads to a rise in employment opportunities of the businesses that are involved in the tourism sector. That being said, the difference in the findings could be due to a number of reasons. Firstly, such differences can be due to a difference in the methodology and research methods. Additionally, as mentioned before, this can also be explained due to a change in the nature of the business. For example, travel agents are now being replaced by online forums for booking tickets and channels like TripAdvisor or Trivago. In a similar manner, it could also be that some of the restaurants that have not been able to increase their business despite the growth of tourism in

the economy because the quality of their services may not meet the standards of emerging tourist markets.

In addition to this, this study also found that some tourism industry were adversely affected by the Saudi Seasons and felt that tourism led to a disruption in either their work or personal lives. P3 felt that tourism has led to overcrowding, while P8 felt that, ‘the places that were chosen in the Ad Diriyah area in the Riyadh season were successful, but they are forced to close shops to open events in the Ad Diriyah area in Riyadh. A public street with the police, the municipality, and the shops were closed for the Formula race.’ At the same time, P18 displayed disappointment over the fact that the shops were forced to close during the events, which indeed affected their business in a negative manner. This shows the costs of tourism that some in the society had to experience, mirroring literature that also highlights that tourism can lead to a disruption of those that are exposed to increased tourism (see Tosun, 2002). Moreover, it can also be seen that tourism has led to changes in Saudi Arabia, and these changes are recognised by the citizens of Saudi Arabia. P10 highlighted that previously Saudi Arabia was very strict and had regulations. For example, women were not allowed to step outside in the public without an Abaya (an overcoat that fully cover the body). However, such restrictions have been relaxed now to promote international tourism. P18 added that Saudi Arabia is changing its laws to attract tourists in Saudi Arabia. For example, previously, men and women who were not legally married could not stay together in a hotel room and to book a room they had to show evidence of their marriage. This law too has changed now. P18 further added that Saudi Arabia is also changing its infrastructure to attract tourism and constructing worth seeing places in Saudi Arabia, like the tallest building in the world. P23 talked about how employment and visa laws have changed in Saudi Arabia and have become much more relaxed. Lastly, P22 also added that the perception of people towards Saudi Arabia is changing gradually now. He argued that tourism has been a facilitator of change for Saudi Arabia in terms of global perceptions of the country. These findings are consistent with that of the literature and many scholars have researched that tourism has led to a change in the culture of nations in the past. Indeed, an earlier study by Spanou (2006) highlights that tourism had already started to influence the culture of Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Andereck and Nyaupane (2010) also observed that tourism results in a change of lifestyle and everyday norms, including the way people enjoy leisure and how they socialise (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2010).

5. Conclusions

5.1 Summary

Saudi Arabia is now attempting to promote itself as a tourist destination that not only attracts religious tourism but other forms of leisure and entertainment tourism. The aim of Saudi Arabia is to become a leading tourist destination by 2030. To achieve this, the country has changed a number of policies including relaxing the visa policies (Poncet, 2020). Saudi Arabia has also recently established the Saudi Seasons, which is a series of calendar events that aim to provide entertainment for all demographics, in an attempt to promote tourism and attract international tourists in Saudi Arabia. The events hosted by the Saudi Seasons, which are held in many cities of the Kingdom, include theatre, musical concerts, cultural events, and even local arrangements (SEERA, 2019). Such seasons have been able to increase tourism in Saudi Arabia based upon emergent data. For example, the Saudi Season held in Taif received an influx of more than 2.5 million national and international visitors (SEERA, 2019). That said, this initiative remains relatively new (the Saudi Seasons were developed in 2017), and based upon the findings from this study, it has yielded both positive and negative impacts. It is therefore crucial that the Saudi government attempts to find ways to maximise the positive impacts and minimise the negative impacts. This study aimed to identify these impacts and to critically analyse how successful the Saudi Seasons have been for so far from the perspective of tourism industry stakeholders. Moreover, this study has contributed to the gap in knowledge regarding contemporary tourism development in Saudi Arabia and the specific use of major events to attract greater numbers of domestic and international tourists.

According to contemporary research (pre-COVID-19), international tourism is expected to grow further (Algieri et al., 2018; UNWTO, 2017). It is therefore that the impacts of the industry are continuously reappraised, especially in emergent destinations or regions. Tourism offers many economic advantages for the host country. It is a vehicle for economic growth and prosperity, a source for foreign exchange, a means of employment, and an opportunity for businesses to grow, flourish, and expand (Samimi et al., 2011; Narayan et al., 2010). That being said, tourism also frequently comes at a cost, and can result in significant environmental and socio-cultural impacts if it is not regulated properly (Krippendorf, 1982). It is also known to create overcrowding (i.e. overtourism), and put undue pressure on the infrastructure of the tourist destination (Pizam & Milman, 1993). In a similar vein, tourism is also known to be

detrimental for the environment as many tourist activities result in different forms of pollution and the exploitation of the resources of the economy (Pizam & Milman, 1993).

Therefore, keeping in mind the socioeconomic context of Saudi Arabia and the above literature, this research used qualitative means of data collection and interpretation to find out the main impacts of tourism on the economy of Saudi Arabia, focusing on the role of the Saudi Seasons in particular. The study was also designed to cover a range of geographical settings across Saudi Arabia: Riyadh, Jeddah, and Al-Ula, as these three cities were prominent locations for the Saudi Seasons to take place. Thus, these findings are of broader value to Saudi Arabia's tourism industry and the future directions of the Saudi Vision 2030. The findings of this research confirm that tourism in the form of Saudi Seasons has led to many economic advantages in Saudi Arabia. It has led to growth and stability of businesses involved in the tourism sector, along with employment opportunities as many of the respondents felt the need to hire more workers on account of the increased demand of their goods and services. However, the findings of this study also suggest that the Saudi Seasons strategy can be improved further by increasing the duration of the events, providing better tourist facilities and infrastructure, and by developing a wider array of events and attractions to have a greater appeal to tourists from different cultural backgrounds (especially international tourists).

This study also found that tourism comes at a price and can lead to a number of negative impacts for the host country, such as overcrowding of the tourist destinations, while increase in the price levels of several products and services in the host economy has been seen as a cost of tourism for both local people and local businesses. Lastly, this research suggests Saudi Arabia can attract international tourists through highlighting its climate diversity and its heritage. In addition to this, new forms of marketing that aim to increase awareness of Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination and mitigate negative images, was identified as an important step in developing international tourism further according to several participants in this study.

5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

There are several ways in which this research can be built upon in the future. There is an opportunity for a similar kind of study to be applied in different cities across Saudi Arabia that host the Saudi Seasons like Al-Soudah and Al-Taif. This may be of particular value as they offer very different kinds of climate and attractions compared to the cities that have been included in this academic research. For these reasons, they attract many different types of tourists that may also impact on host communities in different ways. In addition to this, another region that should be investigated is the Eastern province, as this vibrant region is at a distance of just 60km from Bahrain. Hence, it will be potentially of value to analyse how the Saudi Seasons strategy performs in cities that are bordering with other countries in the Middle East. This research can also be extended to other countries in the Middle East that are attempting to host events as a means of promoting tourism.

One of the findings that came forward in this study was that some of the people felt that tourism did not have an impact on their business, while other believed that the Saudi Seasons actually inhibited their businesses. Therefore, future research should focus on these findings and further explore how events can yield negative impacts on tourism industry stakeholders, especially in settings whereby tourism is seen to be a vehicle for economic growth. Moreover, when conducting the primary research, many of the respondents talked about the changes in the social structure of Saudi society that have taken place in recent years, in part, due to tourism. How tourism further changes the culture and society of Saudi Arabia – and the views of host communities on these changes – will be an important line of inquiry. It is also suggested this research should be carried again after 2030 and the same methodology applied to compare and analyse if Saudi Arabia has been able to achieve the Vision 2030. Such a study will add to the current bank of literature and examine longitudinal change over a period of 10 years. In this manner, it will be a very interesting study that will allow the readers to understand the journey of Saudi Arabia and the progress it has made in the last decade to achieve its goal to become one of the top tourist destinations in the world. In summary, this pioneering research has opened many new avenues for future studies to take place. Thus, it has been able to set a path for other academic scholars and researchers to explore the tourism industry of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

5.3 Limitations

Although this study has provided some useful insights into the impacts of the Saudi Seasons, there will be opportunities to expand on the themes identified. For example, by increasing the number of respondents from other cities that host the Saudi Seasons, this study may offer alternative perspectives, especially amongst tourism stakeholders in smaller towns. In addition to this, the ratio of male-to-female in this research is not proportional and for this reason, women are under-represented in this study. Therefore, by making a deliberate effort to include more females in any future study will help remove the issue of gender bias. This study has been conducted only two years after the launch of the Saudi Seasons. Hence, Saudi Arabia is still new to the idea of leisure tourism and for this reason the data obtained for this study is not only preliminary in nature, but also represents only tourism within a brief moment of time. Therefore, this study is limited in that it cannot make any long-term claims or prediction. Nonetheless, this study is important step that not only contributes to the current body of the literature but also provides opportunities for academic scholars and experts to build their own research studies upon.

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