

# Tourism as an Engine for Economic Diversification: An exploratory study of Saudi Arabia's Tourism Strategy and Marketing Initiatives

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the importance of economic diversification for the Natural resource rich nations with a special focus on Saudi Arabia. The paper will concentrate on Saudi Arabia's efforts to achieve diversification by investing in tourism industry. Natural resources are the real wealth of nations. The availability of resources can directly influence a country's ability to grow. But at the same time a nation's economy may suffer significant and unfavourable repercussions if it is overly reliant on one or two resources, this phenomenon is called as "resource curse". Economic diversification must therefore be successfully implemented for an economy to enjoy long-term prosperity. Saudi Arabia has made notable efforts in diversifying its economy to reduce its reliance on oil and mitigate the resource curse. With tourism industry being one of the largest non-oil contributors and one of the biggest jobs creating sector, the Saudi Arabian government recognizes the importance and ability of the tourism industry and considers it as one of the prime drivers in efforts of diversifying the economy. The paper will analyse role of tourism marketing in establishing a growing and glowing tourism sector. Finally, we examine the Saudi Arabian government's tourism marketing initiatives and the results it yielded.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Tourism Marketing, Diversification, Economy, Saudi Arabia.

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## INTRODUCTION

Natural resources can be considered as the real wealth of nations. They directly contribute towards the fiscal revenue, income and poverty reduction of a nation. They are natural capitals out of which other forms of capitals are made.<sup>[1]</sup> But while the resources abundance can directly have positive effects on the growth and developmental outcomes of a nation. At the same time the researches have shown that natural resource dependency in the long term has a negative impact on economic growth [2]. This phenomenon is labelled "the resource curse" or "the paradox of plenty".

The term "resource curse" describes the paradoxical circumstance in which a nation experiences economic underperformance despite having access to valuable natural resources. A resource curse is generally caused by too much of the country's capital and labour force concentrated in just a few resource-dependent industries [3]. By failing to make adequate investments

in other sectors, countries can become vulnerable to declines in commodity prices, leading to long-run economic underperformance. The idea that resources might be more of an economic curse than a blessing emerged in debates in the 1950s and 1960s about the economic problems of low and middle-income countries [4]. The abundance of natural resources and weak economic growth were strongly correlated, according to a seminal 1995 study by Jeffrey Sachs and Andrew Warner [5]. As of 2023, hundreds of researches had assessed how resource riches affected a variety of economic outcomes and provided numerous justifications for how, why, and when a resource curse is likely to occur.

A resource curse may emerge for a number of reasons, but the main one is when a country starts to concentrate all of its production resources on a single industry, such mining or oil production, and neglects investment in other important industries. It may also

result by an excess of labour and capital flowing into just a few sectors, which could damage the rest of the economy and hurt the whole nation. This kind of issue is frequently seen in emerging economies that find significant natural resource resources.

The industry tends to attract available investment capital once a natural resource is discovered. With its attractive earnings and potential for economic growth, this new industry attracts people to put their savings into it and grows to be a relatively prosperous sector of the economy. Long-term, this dynamic may cause countries to become heavily dependent on the price of that particular commodity, which will make it challenging to keep the economy growing [6]. The resource curse is considerably noticeable when it comes to one particular natural resource: petroleum. The political science department at the University of California, Los Angeles, conducted a study, analysing the correlation between natural resource wealth and politics. It concluded that a resource curse did exist in petroleum-rich countries [3]. A nation's economy may suffer significant and unfavourable repercussions if it is overly reliant on one or two resources. Economic diversification must therefore be successfully implemented for an economy to enjoy long-term prosperity. In order to improve a nation's institutions, its citizens' lives, and its beautiful, thriving environment, diversification is essential. To comprehend the argument, let us take real world examples of Angola and Saudi Arabia;

### Angola

Angola, which lies in Southern Africa's west, has about 34.5 million people living there [7]. However, its economy is very reliant on raw materials, especially oil and gas. Approximately 75% of Angola's national income, according to the International Trade Administration, come from the oil and gas industry [8]. Since almost all of the country's income depends on this one industry, Angola's economy is incredibly sensitive to any significant or long-lasting decrease in the price of oil. Angola's abundant oil reserves may have been a burden in this regard (International Trade Administration [8]).

### Saudi Arabia

Another country that relies heavily on selling oil to other nations is Saudi Arabia. The value of the kingdom's oil exports exceeded \$202.1 billion in 2021 [9].

But unlike Angola, Saudi Arabia took steps to steadily diversify its economy and move away from its natural resource dependency [10].

### Economic Diversification of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has made notable efforts in diversifying its economy to reduce its reliance on oil and mitigate the resource curse, which is a phenomenon where countries with abundant natural resources face

economic challenges, such as overdependence on a single commodity, volatility in revenues, and potential negative impacts on other sectors [11]. While the success of these diversification efforts may vary, here are some effective strategies with which Saudi Arabia has attempted to address the resource curse in comparison to other resource-rich countries:

- **Vision 2030:** In 2016, Saudi Arabia launched Vision 2030, an ambitious and comprehensive economic reform plan aimed at diversifying the economy away from oil. The plan focuses on various sectors, including tourism, entertainment, healthcare, education, and manufacturing. It also aims to develop the private sector (Marwa Rashad (24 April 2016) [12]).
- **National Transformation Program (NTP):** As part of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia introduced the National Transformation Program to accelerate the implementation of economic and social reforms. The NTP outlines specific targets and initiatives for diversifying the economy and reducing its reliance on oil revenues [13].
- **Focus on Non-Oil Sectors:** Saudi Arabia has been actively investing in non-oil sectors to spur economic growth. For instance, the country has placed emphasis on developing its tourism industry, renewable energy sector, mining, and information technology. It aims to increase non-oil GDP from 16% to 50%. In this regard, a financial sector Development Program was launched in 2017, to boost the country's private sector, develop a capital market and enhance financial planning [14].
- **Foreign Investment:** The Saudi government has been actively seeking foreign investment to support the development of non-oil industries. It has introduced economic reforms to make the investment environment more attractive, such as easing regulations, increasing foreign ownership limits, and establishing special economic zones. The vision maximizes the opportunities for large MNC's to invest and emerge in local market. The aim is to increase foreign direct investments from 3.8% to international level of 5.7% of GDP [15].
- **Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs):** Saudi Arabia has encouraged public-private partnerships to stimulate economic growth and diversification. These partnerships have led to the establishment of joint ventures and the privatization of certain state-owned enterprises. It intends to increase the private sector contribution from 40% to 60% of GDP and SME contribution to GDP from 20% to 35% [16].
- **Human Capital Development:** Recognizing the importance of skilled human resources in a diversified economy, Saudi Arabia has invested in education and vocational training programs to develop a skilled workforce that can contribute to various industries [17].
- **Economic Cities:** The country has planned the development of economic cities, such as King

Abdullah Economic City, designed to attract investment and stimulate economic activity in specific sectors [18].

- **Financial Reforms:** Saudi Arabia has taken steps to improve its financial sector and increase access to financing for non-oil industries. This includes the development of a local capital market and initiatives to promote financial technology [19]. The country aims to increase non-oil GDP from 16% to 50%. In this regard, a financial sector Development Program was launched in 2017, to boost the country’s private sector, develop a capital market and enhance financial planning [20].
- One of the important strategic industries outlined for development in Vision 2030 is the tourism and hospitality sector. The Saudi Arabian government recognizes the importance and ability of the tourism industry and considers it as one of the prime drivers

in efforts of diversifying the economy. This sector is one of the largest non-oil contributors to the kingdom’s GDP. According to the world Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) in 2018, the tourism sector in Saudi Arabia added 9% to the kingdom’s total economy which is worth \$65.2 billion [21].

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Relevant research articles were identified using both electronic and manual bibliographic search methods. Altogether, 138 articles were identified in 49 academic journals, trade & tourism magazines, government official websites and newspapers published during the period 1991-2023. Each article was content analysed along six major dimensions, namely authorship profile, manuscript characteristics, research design, scope of research, research methodology, and topical area.

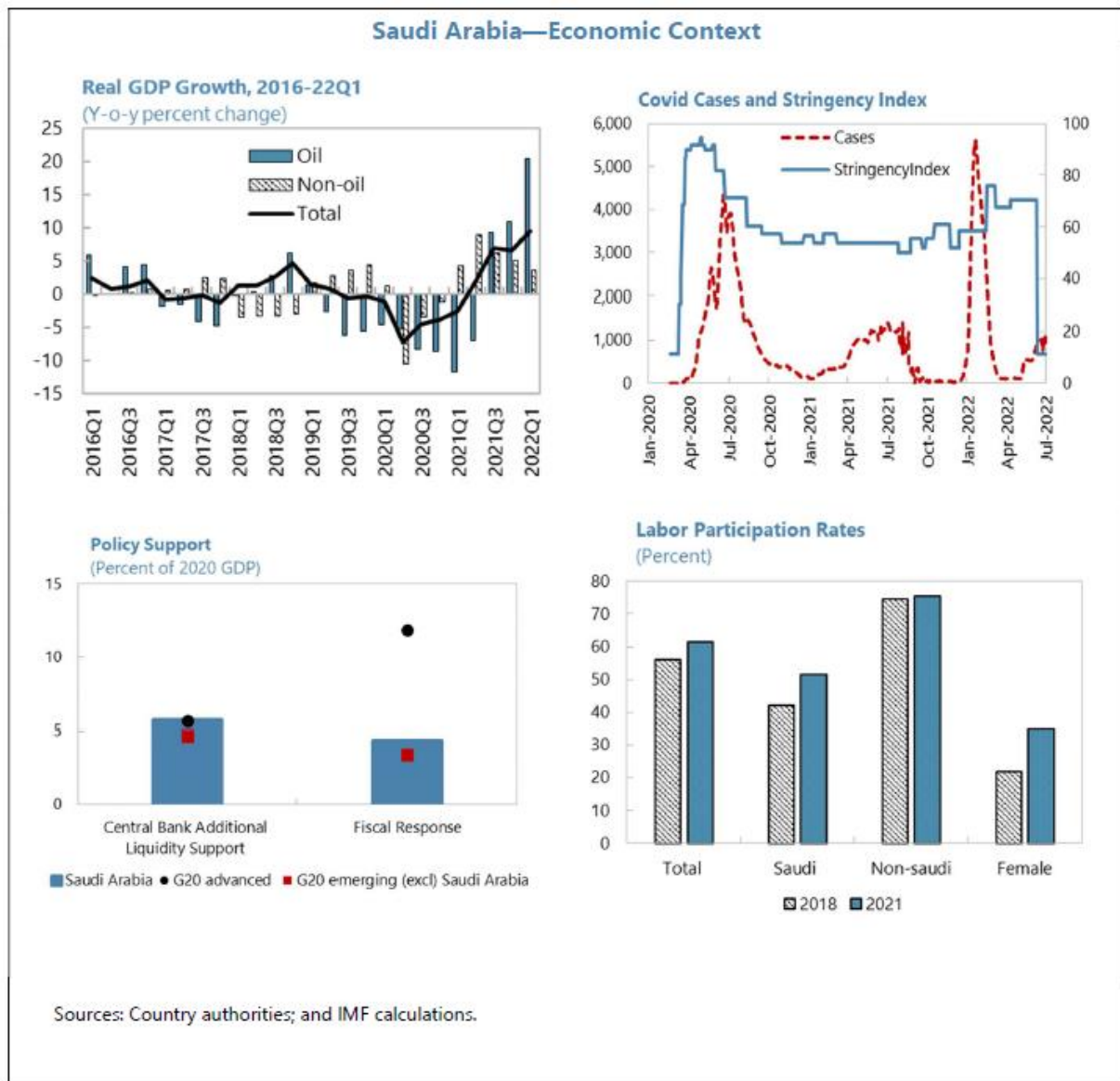


Figure 1: Saudi Arabia—Economic Context by IMF

### Tourism as a Prime Driver of Economic Growth, Development and Diversification

There have been lengthy discussions in the literature about the type of relationship that exists between economic growth and increased investment in the tourism sector. The inquiry was “Does raising investment in the tourism sector have a positive relationship with economic growth in the short and long run?”. According to empirical research by Akan and colleagues, there are both short- and long-term positive multiplier effects between economic growth and increasing tourism-related investment in a wide range of developing and established countries [22].

The tourism industry is a way to increase stability and compensate for a lack of economic diversification. [23] Investing in the tourism industry has the potential to create jobs, broaden the economy, and improve environmental protection. In other words, by investing in the tourism industry, it is feasible to achieve a balance between the social, economic, and environmental sectors. Because the tourism industry encompasses a variety of diverse economic activities and offers a wide range of goods and services, tourism demand also fluctuates less. Moreover, overseas visitors are a crucial component in stabilizing the level of tourism demand in the face of local shocks [24].

Growths in the tourism industry and job generation are also strongly correlated [25]. With regard to the labour market, the tourism sector is a job generator, especially for local citizens, low-skilled workers, and for students and women who seek part-time jobs. In fact, one-fifth of all global jobs created over the past decade have been within the travel sector [25]. Thus, this sector’s outputs are non-traded goods and services that usually generate an immense number of direct or indirect jobs through retail, construction, manufacturing and telecommunications [23]. Prior to the pandemic, Travel & Tourism (including its direct, indirect and induced impacts) accounted for 1 in 4 of all new jobs created across the world, 10.3% of all jobs (333 million), and 10.4% of global GDP i.e US\$9.6 trillion in 2019 [26].

Another channel through which tourism could have an impact on diversification is as a source of foreign exchange, which is needed to import intermediate inputs for industry. It permits countries to lift binding balance of payments constraints thereby making it possible to enhance productive capacities and diversify economies. Tourism revenue also makes it possible for countries to invest in infrastructure which is a driver of diversification and development [27].

Tourism industry involves multi-faceted activities which together produce the ‘tourist product’. A wide range of activities, including industry, services, education, transportation, infrastructure, culture, communications, and health are influenced by tourism activities, both directly and indirectly. Due to its

extensive engagement in economic activities, investments in the tourist sector have stronger multiplier effects than those in other economic sectors [28].

To comprehend and support the argument, let us take the example of Maldives and compare the country's economy before and after the tourism boom to see how the expansion of the tourism sector impacted the Maldives economy. Pre-tourism boom economy: [29]

- **Agricultural-based Economy:** Prior to the tourism boom, the Maldives had a predominantly agricultural-based economy, with fishing, coconut and tropical fruit production as the main sources of income. The country relied heavily on traditional industries and had limited economic diversification [29].
- **Relatively Low GDP:** The GDP of the Maldives was relatively low, and the country faced challenges in terms of economic growth, infrastructure development, and employment opportunities. The economy was susceptible to external shocks and fluctuations in commodity prices [29].
- **Limited Foreign Exchange Earnings:** The Maldives had limited foreign exchange earnings, and the economy relied on external aid and remittances from Maldivians working abroad to meet its foreign currency requirements [29].
- **Limited Infrastructure:** Infrastructure development in the Maldives was relatively limited, particularly in remote atolls. Access to basic services such as electricity, clean water, healthcare, and transportation was a challenge in many areas [29].

### POST-TOURISM BOOM ECONOMY

- **Tourism-Led Growth:** The tourism boom transformed the Maldivian economy into a tourism-led growth model. The sector became the main driver of GDP, employment, and foreign exchange earnings. The Maldives has recorded significantly positive incline in their GDP in the last decades; real GDP growth averaged about 7.4 percent per year during 1986-2014 [30]. Annual real GDP growth averaged 5.7 percent from 2000 to 2019 and real per capita income rose from US\$ 5,539 in 1995 to US\$ 10,208 in 2019. For Maldives tourism which accounted nearly a third of GDP, almost half of the budget revenues, and greater than 80 percent of total expenses before the COVID – 19 pandemics which had hit globally [31].
- **Increased GDP and Foreign Exchange Earnings:** The tourism sector contributed significantly to the increase in the Maldives' GDP. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), travel and tourism's direct contribution to the Maldivian GDP was approximately 34% in 2019. Foreign exchange earnings from tourism skyrocketed, providing a substantial revenue stream for the country. In 2019, tourism receipts accounted for over 60% of the Maldives total export earnings [32].

- **Infrastructure Development:** The tourism boom led to substantial investments in infrastructure development. The Maldives witnessed the construction of modern resorts, hotels, airports, transportation networks, and other tourism-related infrastructure to accommodate the growing number of tourists [33].
- **Employment Opportunities:** The tourism sector became a major source of employment in the Maldives. The industry directly employed a significant portion of the local population and indirectly created job opportunities in supporting industries such as hospitality, transportation, and tour operations. According to a survey “World

Development Indicators” released in May 2023 by World Bank, the unemployment rate of Maldives has dropped from 11.7% in 2009 to 4.88% in 2022.

- **Regional Development:** The tourism boom helped reduce regional disparities by bringing economic development to remote atolls. Resorts and tourism-related businesses were established in previously underdeveloped areas, creating job opportunities and boosting local economies [34].
- **Investment in Services and Infrastructure:** The tourism boom spurred investments in services and infrastructure such as healthcare, education, telecommunications, and transportation, benefiting both tourists and locals [33].

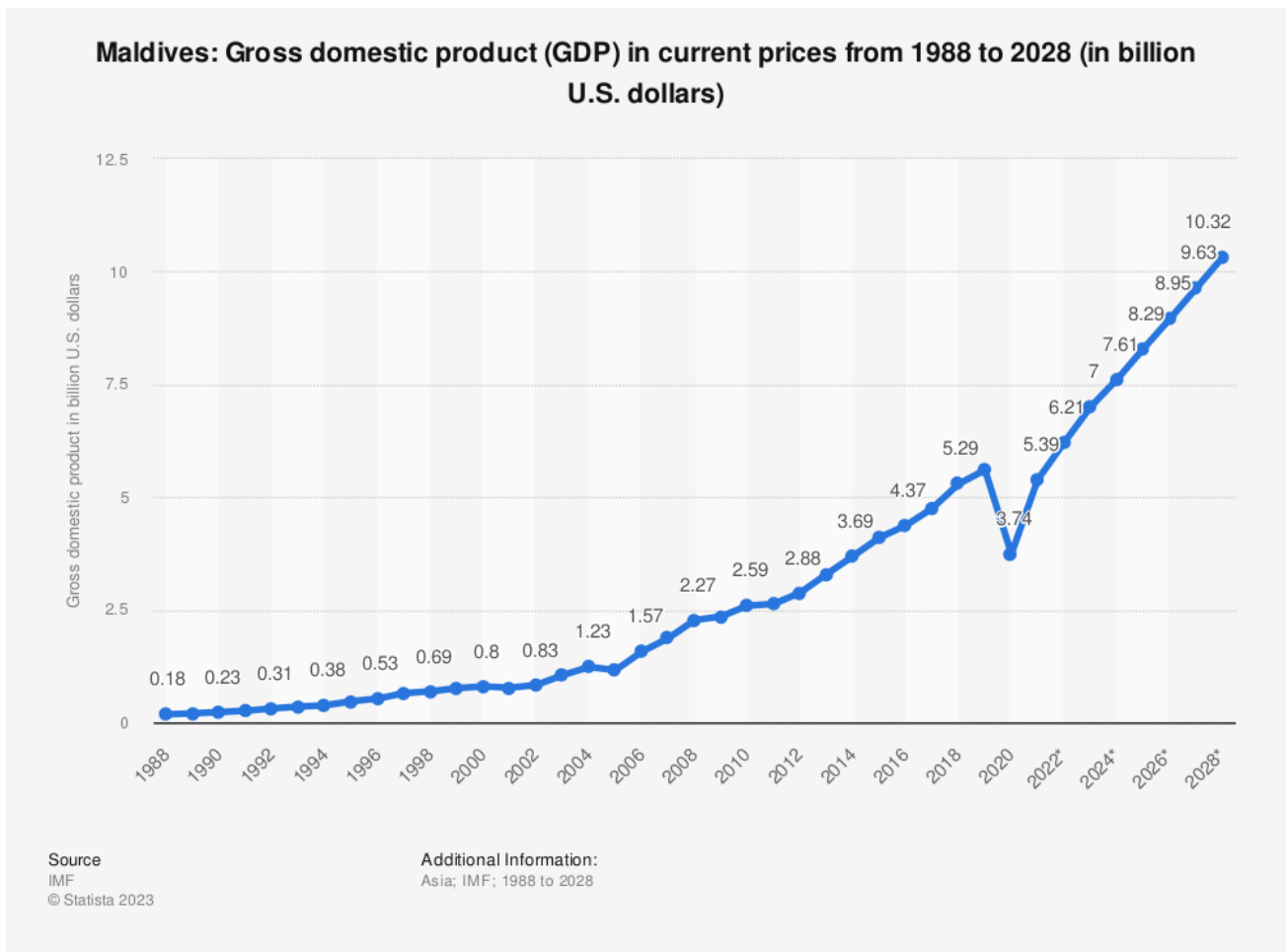


Figure 2: Maldives GDP Projection from 1988 to 2028 by IMF

**Tourism Strategy in Saudi Arabia**

The Saudi Arabian government recognizes the importance and ability of the tourism industry and considers it as one of the prime drivers of economic growth. To the credit of Saudi Arabian government. Saudi Arabia has outlined its tourism aspirations to align with the 2030 vision [35].

- Raise the contribution of the tourism sector to the domestic product to more than 10%.
- Provide one million additional job opportunities.

- Attract 100 million annual visits by 2030, with a planned investment of \$1 trillion in the tourism sector under the National Tourism Strategy.

In Dec 2022, the Ministry of Tourism has launched ten new regulations to develop the tourism sector to keep pace with Saudi Arabia’s renaissance [35].

1. **Tourist Visa issuance:** In the last quarter of 2019, Saudi Arabia began receiving visitors and tourists from outside the Kingdom with a valid entry visa for

a full year, allowing them to stay inside the Kingdom for a maximum of 90 continuous days.

2. **Tourism Development Fund:** The Tourism Development Fund was launched to encourage tourism investments in Saudi Arabia and open doors for cooperation with investors directly by providing support in all matters related to tourism projects leading to the development of the sector in the Kingdom, such as restaurants, hotels, and other tourist destinations.
3. **National Tourism Monitoring Platform:** This platform was launched to monitor the performance of accommodation facilities and tourism movement in Saudi Arabia, and to be a centre for collecting statistics and data related to the tourism sector.
4. **Tourism Licenses:** In an effort to achieve an integrated digital transformation of e-government procedures, and to facilitate service providers and applicants, the Ministry of Tourism provides a number of electronic services related to tourism licenses.
5. **Tourist Attractions in Saudi Arabia:** The government is developing various tourist attraction spots all over the kingdom. Al-Ula, Neom, Al Umluj, Jeddah water front, Mersal village, Masmak Palace, The National Museum, Diryah Gate, King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra) in Dhahran, Oriental Art Exhibition (Urban Art) in Al-Khobar being few of them.
6. **Kingdom's national heritage sites:** The Kingdom added the Al-Ahsa Oasis to the UNESCO List of World Heritage sites in 2018, which increased the number of sites enrolled in the UNESCO List to 5 heritage sites. This contributed to selecting Al-Ahsa Governorate by the Council of Arab Ministers for Tourism to be the Capital of Arab Tourism for 2019 and introducing the rich heritage of Al-Ahsa governorate. The Kingdom increased the number of heritage sites to introduce the Kingdom's national, Arab and Islamic Heritage by increasing the number of visitable national heritage sites.
7. **Virtual Reality visiting Tourist sights and landscapes virtually:** The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is keen to keep ahead of digital development and provide many facilities in the tourism sector, especially the field of digital travel, by supporting the applications of extended reality (Virtual Reality). Some virtual reality applications for digital travel within the Kingdom are:
  - **Virtual Reality Experience for the Two Holy Mosques:** In order to achieve the Kingdom's Vision 2030 and within the framework of coordination between ministries to achieve this vision and support the development of domestic and international tourism within the Kingdom, the General Presidency for the Affairs of the Grand Mosque and the Prophet announced a new application called "Haramain Exhibition," which enables visitors from all over the world to go to the Exhibition of Architecture of the

Merciful In Makkah Al-Mukarramah by default and inspect the antiquities and photographs displayed in it, and get acquainted with all its information. The app allows all users a virtual 3D visit to the Two Holy Mosques Architecture Gallery and lets users view the information in Arabic and English.

- **Explore Al-Ula through virtual tours:** Al Ula City, one of the most important tourist destinations within the Kingdom, is a vibrant living museum in the open air and a place rich in heritage sites, making its development a top priority of the Kingdom. The Kingdom has enabled all those around the world to explore Al-Ula through virtual Al-Ula tours that offer a unique experience for all areas of the city, giving the viewer a real vision and exceptional experience, all that see is just a one click on [www.experiencealula.com](http://www.experiencealula.com).
1. **Digital Tourism Strategy:** This strategy is designed to improve the procedures that regulate the digital tourism space, develop smart regulations that operate according to a specific framework and ensures the realization of the Kingdom's strategic objectives of playing a role and leading efforts in supporting the tourism sector both locally and internationally.
  2. **Tourism Human Capital Development:** In order to empower the national youth energies and cadres and develop their capabilities, and to develop the tourism sector and enable it to receive tourists and reflect Saudi Arabia's image in an authentic way, the Kingdom, represented by the Human Capital Development Agency at the Ministry of Tourism, has launched a strategy targeting recent graduates, job seekers, workers in the tourism sector, entrepreneurs and owners of small and medium tourism establishments by offering a number of possible programs, which will contribute to achieve the 2030 vision of Saudi Arabia.
  3. **Mobile Applications for Tourism and Travel Sector**  
Saudi Arabia has been actively working on these strategies to position the country as a unique and diverse tourism destination while promoting economic growth and job creation.

### **Tourism Marketing: Indispensable to Successful Growth of Tourism Industry**

Tourism is a very complex industry because of its multi-faceted activities which together produce the 'tourist product'. A wide range of activities, including industry, services, education, transportation, infrastructure, culture, communications, and health are influenced by tourism activities, both directly and indirectly [28]. By categorizing its activities into two tiers, the Canadian National Task Force on Tourism Statistics (1985) streamlined the tourist sector. Tier 1 includes all industries that are dependent on tourism,

including cruise lines and travel agencies. Tier 2 includes businesses that can operate without being reliant on

tourists, such as eateries, car rental businesses, gift stores, attractions, and events.

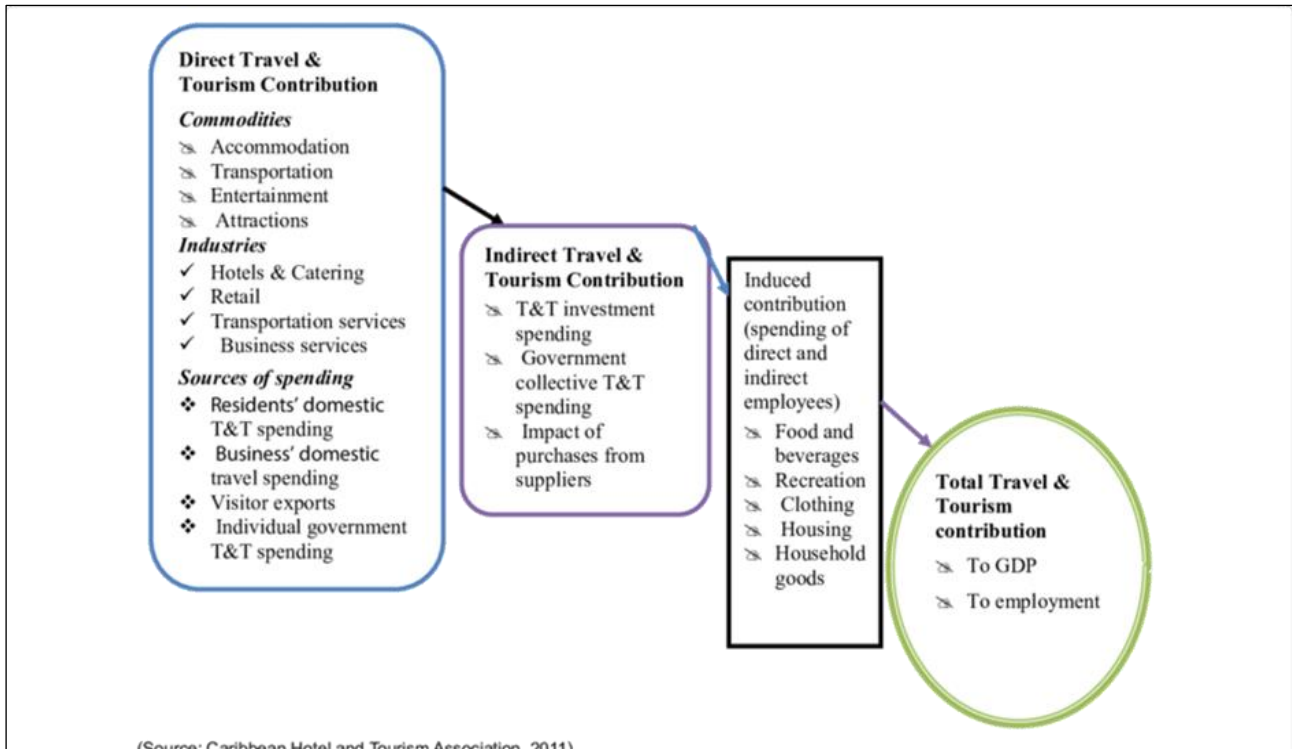


Figure 3: Tourism Marketing Mix

It is also complex because of various subsectors that are in themselves complex industries, if considered independently. Tourism business depends on the linkages of providers of Transportation, Accommodations and Amenities. The coordination of these subsectors is essential for the successful growth of tourism industry.

Apart from that tourism is also one of the world's largest industries, so it is extremely competitive. This means that businesses operating within the industry must find ways to stand out from competitors, promote themselves as the best option for tourists, and highlight some things that make them different, or superior. Marketing is essential for achieving this [36].

Tourism marketing is the collective name given to the various marketing strategies businesses use within the tourism industry. This includes, for example, hotels and other forms of accommodation, along with airlines, car rental services, restaurants, entertainment venues, travel agents, and tour operators [37]. It aims to promote the business, make it stand out from competitors, attract customers, and generate brand awareness. It encompasses both B2C and B2B marketing strategies.

Tourism marketing can have various goals ranging from increasing awareness of specific attractions to helping a hotel attract more guests. Tourism marketing

also helps in coordinating various subsectors and offers a well-coordinated package to attract tourists [36].

A solid marketing strategy is crucial in any business and the tourism industry is no different [38- 39]. Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries in the world and is also one of the best ways to boost a country's economy. With more and more destinations realising this and seeking to attract more tourists, the industry is becoming increasingly competitive. This is why it's now more important than ever to ensure that your marketing strategy is up to scratch [39]. The reasons why a good marketing strategy is vital to the tourism business are: [39].

- Identify the ideal target market. The first step to developing a successful marketing campaign is identifying who the ideal target market is. Depending on the experience on offer, the customer will vary.
- Attract new customers and develop loyalty. Once the ideal target market has been identified, a strategy to reach these potential customers must be developed. Because customer loyalty is key, a lot of time needs to be devoted to building brand awareness and creating ongoing, interconnected campaigns that both target previous guests, and attract new ones.
- Understand the customer journey. In tourism, the ultimate end goal is the sale of an experience – not a material object. This means that the

customer journey to making a purchase is rather different and comes with its own set of challenges. Understanding this journey that the customer takes before going through with a purchase is critical to a successful marketing campaign.

- Stand out from competitors. As the tourism industry becomes more and more competitive, it's important to make sure that your business stands out. Highlighting what is unique or different about the business is one of the best ways to achieve this. A really good marketing strategy is able to communicate these points effectively to the customers in a way that speaks to them.
- Continuous Evaluation and Adaptation: To ensure the effectiveness of the marketing strategy, continuous evaluation and adaptation are essential. Analysing data, monitoring key performance indicators, and obtaining feedback from visitors can provide valuable insights for refining the campaign. By staying updated on market trends and adjusting the strategy accordingly, the destination can remain competitive and relevant.
- With the advent of internet technology, the tourism industry is continuously evolving the rules of marketing have been redefined all over the world. The internet has upended how consumers engage with brands. It is transforming the economics of marketing. Interactivity, as the main feature of the Internet, has enabled a new dimension of connection between all the participants in the market [40]. The new generation of travellers no longer just rely on local agencies to help them decide where to go. Gen Z people are getting inspiration online via various channels including Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and many other travel channels [41]. In order to successfully implement the tourism marketing strategies, it has become important that apart from using traditional tourism marketing methods, we should also incorporate the latest and innovative tourism marketing methods. Here are some most ideal tourism marketing methods [42].
- Digital Marketing: Utilizing online platforms such as websites, search engine optimization (SEO), social media, email marketing, and online advertising to reach -and engage with potential travellers. Tourism industry goes hand in hand with Digital Marketing. The new generation of travellers no longer just rely on local agencies to help them decide Issue where to go. Gen Z people are getting inspiration online via various channels. Digital Marketing is used by so many businesses of different industries and has proven its worth in delivering many more leads to them. And of course, more leads mean more business and more business

means more profit. The tourism industry is no different and has adapted well on the realm of digital world to increase their brands' awareness and be able to reach more possible customers as much as they could [41].

- Content Marketing: Creating and sharing valuable, informative, and engaging content such as blog articles, videos, photos, and interactive media to showcase the destination and its unique offerings. Content marketing is increasingly added to the marketing mix of advertising companies in the tourism industry [43].
- Website and SEO Optimization: Developing user-friendly tourism websites that provide comprehensive information about attractions, accommodation options, transportation, and visa requirements. These websites are often optimized for search engines (SEO) to ensure they appear in search results when potential visitors search for relevant keywords [44].
- Social Media Marketing: Social media engagement from travel and tourism companies is no longer a secondary form of communication; it is a necessity. Leveraging popular social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube to connect with travellers, share visually appealing content, run targeted ad campaigns, and engage with the audience [45].
- Influencer Marketing: Collaborating with influential individuals or social media personalities who have a significant following and credibility in the travel niche to promote destinations, hotels, activities, and experiences [46].
- Destination Websites: Developing user-friendly, visually appealing websites that provide comprehensive information about ,he destination, including attractions, accommodations, activities, transportation, and local insights [47].
- Print Advertising: Advertising plays is a crucial tool in developing the countries tourism by attractively presenting the nations points-of-interests, historical and cultural insights. Publishing advertisements in travel magazines, newspapers, brochures, and other print media to reach potential travellers who prefer traditional forms of information consumption [48].
- Trade Shows and Exhibitions: Trade fairs are fastly becoming a very popular marketing communication tool. Participating in trade shows, tourism fairs, and industry exhibitions is an increasingly important marketing activity for many companies in the tourism industry. It is efficient way to showcase the destination, establish business connections, and network with travel professionals [49].



- **Partnerships and Collaborations:** In tourism and travel industry collaboration & partnerships are an imperative and a crucial success factor in the fields of strategic management and marketing. Collaborating with airlines, tour operators, travel agencies, and other industry stakeholders to offer joint promotions, package deals, and cross-marketing opportunities [50].
- **Public Relations (PR):** Public relations is crucial in the promotional activities and the communications of companies and tourism institutions. Engaging with media outlets, journalists, and travel bloggers to secure media coverage, press releases, destination features, and travel stories [51].
- **Online Reviews and Reputation Management:** Monitoring and managing online reviews and ratings on platforms like TripAdvisor, Google Reviews, and social media to maintain a positive image and address customer feedback [52].

It's important to note that tourism marketing methods can vary depending on the target audience, budget, destination type, and overall marketing goals. A well-rounded marketing strategy often incorporates a mix of these methods to effectively reach and attract travellers.

### **Saudi Arabian Contextualization**

A solid marketing strategy is crucial in any business and the tourism industry is no different. [38][39] Tourism marketing is important for Saudi Arabia's growth. Tourism marketing is unquestionably important to enlighten travellers about the nature and importance of tourism goods. This will help improve tourist visitation as well as guest stay days. It also aligns with the Kingdom's 2030 aim to increase tourism-related spending. Due to the popularity of Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination, embracing tourism marketing will assist in encouraging regional tourism growth and help achieve Vision 2030 [53].

Saudi Arabian government realises the importance of tourism marketing and has recently launched a comprehensive tourism marketing campaign to promote the country as a desirable tourist destination. The campaign, known as "Welcome to Arabia," highlights the diverse attractions and cultural experiences the country has to offer. It focuses on showcasing historical sites, natural landscapes, modern cities, and unique cultural experiences. The campaign utilizes various marketing channels, including social media, television commercials, print advertisements, and collaborations with influencers and celebrities. It aims to change international perceptions of Saudi Arabia and attract both leisure and business travellers.

In order to determine Saudi Arabia's optimum approach and substantial advancements in its tourist

marketing campaign, we will now contextualize the country's tourism marketing management efforts with each of the aforementioned ideal tourism marketing methods.

### • **Digital Marketing**

His Excellency Ahmed Al Khateeb, Minister of Tourism of Saudi Arabia, on 2 Feb 2022 announced a three-year Digital Tourism Strategy, in the next step of the Kingdom's continued reform of the sector. His Excellency Ahmed Al Khateeb, Minister of Tourism of Saudi Arabia said: "The Digital Tourism Strategy will help us to redesign tourism in the Kingdom and achieve our ambitious Vision 2030 objectives of having Saudi Arabia become a world-leading tourist destination. The Kingdom's execution of this strategy over the next three years will inspire the tourism sector globally" [54]. The Digital Tourism Strategy aims to position the Kingdom as the global digital tourism leader. Application of the Strategy aims to provide tourists and stakeholders with a more seamless experience that enables a thriving tourism sector. The strategy focuses on a number of areas [54].

1. **Seamless Travel:** Providing digital solutions to simplify travel procedures
2. **Ease of Doing Business:** Launching a unified platform to connect tourism service providers and applications
3. **Innovation:** Creating an experimental environment that will allow technology innovators to test new digital tourism solutions
4. **Digital Travel:** Supporting tourism extended reality applications (g. virtual or augmented reality)
5. **Encouraging Sustainability:** Rewarding tourists for eco-friendly behaviors
6. **Informed Decision Making:** Building solutions that gather data and provide analytics for the tourism sector
7. **Skilled Digital Workforce:** Creating a generation of tourism professionals and entrepreneurs
8. **Investor Attraction:** Establish & engage a network of tourism investors through digital platforms

Falling in line with it, Saudi Arabia has also opened its doors to the world through its new tourist e-visa. Through the fast and easy-to-use online portal, international visitors from 49 eligible countries can apply for an e-Visa. It intends to utilize digital platforms and technologies in their visa application processes to allow travellers to apply for visas online, simplifying the application process and reducing paperwork. E-visas is a part of a country's efforts to enhance tourism, attract foreign investment, or facilitate business activities [55].

### • **Content Marketing**

Saudi Arabia has been actively promoting tourism through content marketing. The country has recognized the potential of content marketing to attract

tourists by showcasing its rich cultural heritage, natural landscapes, historical sites, and modern developments. Content marketing involves creating and distributing valuable, informative, and engaging content to attract and engage a specific target audience. Saudi Arabia has been leveraging different content marketing channels to highlight its unique tourism offerings and attract visitors. Here are some ways in which Saudi Arabia has utilized content marketing to promote tourism:

### 1. Video Marketing

Saudi Arabia has embraced video marketing as an effective way to showcase its tourist attractions. Through professionally produced videos, the country presents its natural wonders, historical landmarks, festivals, and cultural events. In 2021, Saudi Tourism Authority launched a program aiming to promote tourism through short films. In line with what the international festivals offer for tourism films recognized by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), STA has activated the field of "short films", which play a pivotal role in promoting local culture and products, and improving measures to make tourism an inclusive experience. Recently, the Saudi Tourism Authority (STA) introduced the "Saudi Winter for Media Excellence" award, aiming to enhance the presence of young creators in the "Tourism Media". It provided a platform for the citizen to show their artistic creativity, through "Short films to promote the winter tourist destinations and experiences that distinguish the Kingdom from other countries [56].

On the other front, in April 2023, the tech giant Google has also Launched Short Video Series on Social Media to Promote Tourism in Saudi Arabia. The initiative, called "Saraina ma Google - Google مع سرينا", (which means "Let's go with Google"), features three road trip experiences in Jeddah by Saudi content creators who explore hidden gems and destinations in history, art, and nature with the help of Google. The short videos are in Arabic with English subtitles to reach a wide audience of Arabic and non-Arabic speakers [57]. Also, in May 2023, MBC Media Solutions (MMS), the commercial arm of MBC Group, has announced the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Saudi Tourism Authority (STA) at the Arabian Travel Market in Dubai. The agreement aims to develop and produce high quality Saudi tourism content and promote it in the Gulf and the Arab world by broadcasting it across MBC Group's ecosystem & beyond, including TV, radio, digital, social media, Shahid VoD platform, Al Arabiya News Network and the Saudi Sports Company's digital & linear channels [58].

### 2. Online Travel Guides and Blogs

Saudi Arabia has developed online travel guides and blogs that provide detailed information about popular tourist destinations, local attractions, cultural experiences, adventure activities, and travel tips. These resources help potential visitors plan their trips and

showcase the diverse experiences available in the country.

- **Website and SEO Optimization:** Saudi Arabia has invested in developing user-friendly tourism websites that provide comprehensive information about attractions, accommodation options, transportation, and visa requirements. These websites are often optimized for search engines (SEO) to ensure they appear in search results when potential visitors search for relevant keywords [59].
- **Social Media Marketing:** Social media platforms provide an excellent opportunity for Saudi Arabia to establish direct connections with potential tourists. By maintaining active profiles on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, the Kingdom shares captivating visuals, engaging videos, and informative content that showcase its unique offerings. Encouraging user-generated content and leveraging influencers amplify the reach and impact of social media campaigns. For Example, Saudi Arabia has taken to social media to highlight its potential as a tourist destination ahead of the official launch of its tourist visas in September 2019. A video which uses the hashtag #WhereInTheWorld – has been widely shared on Twitter. The 30-second long video depicts a number of destinations across the kingdom, comparing them to other global tourist destinations such as the Maldives, the Caribbean, Vietnam, Petra and the Colorado Rockies. In a separate post, the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage showed images of the city of Al Bahah, a long-time favourite of Saudi tourists because of its heavily forested areas and temperate climate [60].
- **Influencer Marketing:** Saudi Arabia utilises influencers and digital creators as global ambassadors, promoting a side of the Kingdom unknown to those beyond its borders, which in turn boosts its tourism industry. Since opening in 2021, its primary hotel, Habitas AlUla, has racked up 52.6 million views on TikTok. Influencers from all over the globe have shot content across its desert grounds, while brands such as Dior have used Al Ula to host show-stopping influencer events. Going influencer-heavy is a pattern that repeats across multiple #VisitSaudi projects. Creators from the UK, US, and beyond have vacationed in the Kingdom courtesy of the country's tourism board. To date, there are more than 143.6 million views on #VisitSaudi videos on TikTok, with the hashtag mainly populated by videos pushing lesser-known facts about or attractions in the country. Content is shifting within the country, too. Influencer advertising spending increased by 23.5% in 2022 [61].
- **Destination Websites:** Saudi Arabia has been promoting tourism through destination websites, recognizing the importance of having dedicated online platforms to provide comprehensive information and engage with potential visitors. These destination websites serve as official sources

of information, showcasing the country's tourism offerings, attractions, activities, and travel resources. They provide comprehensive information about the destination with visual appeal and interactive features. Some of the examples of these destination are [www.alula.com](http://www.alula.com), [www.neom.com](http://www.neom.com), [www.visitsaudi.com](http://www.visitsaudi.com), Haramain Exhibition app etc.

- **Print Advertising:** While digital marketing has become increasingly prevalent, Saudi Arabia has also utilized print advertising as a part of its efforts to promote tourism. Print advertising allows the country to reach a wide range of audiences through newspapers, magazines, brochures, and other printed materials. Some of the ways by which Saudi Arabia has used print advertising to promote tourism are:
  1. **Travel Magazines and Brochures:** Saudi Arabia has placed advertisements in travel magazines and brochures distributed locally and internationally.
  2. **Newspaper Advertisements:** Saudi Arabia has utilized print advertisements in newspapers to reach a broader audience. These advertisements may appear in national or regional newspapers, both in Saudi Arabia and in other countries. They showcase key attractions, upcoming events, and enticing offers to capture the attention of potential visitors.
  3. **Trade Shows and Exhibitions:** Print advertising plays a role in promoting Saudi Arabia's tourism at trade shows and exhibitions. Brochures, flyers, and print materials are distributed at booths or information centres, providing attendees with tangible resources that highlight the country's tourism offerings.
  4. **Airline Magazines:** Saudi Arabia collaborates with airlines to feature destination-specific advertisements in their in-flight magazine.
  5. **Tourist Information Centres:** Print materials are often available at tourist information centres within Saudi Arabia and at international locations. These centres distribute brochures, maps, and guides to visitors, providing them with a tangible resource to learn about the country's tourism opportunities and plan their trips.

It's worth noting that while digital marketing has gained prominence, print advertising can still be an effective strategy for reaching specific target audiences, engaging with potential tourists, and complementing digital efforts. Saudi Arabia's use of print advertising demonstrates a multi-channel approach to promote its tourism offerings and capture the attention of diverse segments of the population [48].

- **Trade Shows and Exhibitions:** Saudi Arabia has utilized trade shows and exhibitions as a platform to promote its tourism industry and attract visitors. Participating in trade shows and exhibitions allows Saudi Arabia to showcase its diverse attractions,

cultural heritage, and tourism infrastructure to a targeted audience of travel industry professionals and potential tourists. Saudi Arabia has been participating in major international travel and tourism trade shows, such as ITB Berlin, World Travel Market (WTM) London, Arabian Travel Market (ATM) in Dubai, South Asian Travel & Tourism Exchange (SATTE), One World Travel Market (OTM) and more. These events attracted industry professionals, travel agents, tour operators, and media from around the world. Saudi Arabia's presence at these trade shows allowed it to highlight its tourism offerings, network with key players in the industry, and forge partnerships for promoting the country as a tourist destination [62- 63]

- **Partnerships and Collaborations:** Saudi Arabia has actively pursued partnerships and collaborations as part of its strategy to promote tourism. By joining forces with various organizations and stakeholders, Saudi Arabia aims to leverage their expertise, networks, and resources to enhance its tourism offerings and attract more visitors. Saudi Arabia's government is collaborating with the private sector to double tourism investments in the coming years and creating a sustainable and growing environment, according to a top government official. Speaking at the Future Hospitality Summit held in May 2023 at Riyadh, Deputy Minister of Investment Attraction Mahmoud Abdulhadi said the Kingdom's leadership is striving to present investors with the appropriate tools to boost funds into the sector [64].
- **International Tourism Boards and Organizations:** Saudi Arabia collaborates with international tourism boards and organizations to tap into their networks and benefit from their marketing initiatives. This includes partnering with entities like the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), regional tourism boards, and industry associations to promote Saudi Arabia's attractions and participate in joint marketing campaigns [65].
- **Airlines and Travel Agencies:** Saudi Arabia collaborates with airlines and travel agencies to develop and promote travel packages, itineraries, and special offers. Partnering with airlines enables the country to expand its reach to potential visitors. The national flag carrier of Saudi Arabia, SAUDIA has collaborated with the Saudi Air Connectivity Program (ACP) and Saudi Tourism Authority, to launch four new international destinations: Beijing (PRC), Birmingham (UK), Kano (Nigeria), and Johannesburg (South Africa). By collaborating with airlines to expand their operations in Saudi Arabia, ACP seeks to promote growth and development within the tourism and aviation sectors, working to strengthen the Kingdom's position as a leading destination for international travel [66]. On the other hand, China's Trip.com Group has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Saudi Tourism Authority to promote Saudi Arabia as a tourism destination. As part of the collaboration,

Trip.com and Saudi Tourism Authority will launch joint marketing campaigns in several markets to drive awareness and attract tourists to Saudi Arabia [67].

- Hospitality Industry Partnerships:** Saudi Arabia partners with international hotel chains, resorts, and accommodation providers to enhance the country's hospitality infrastructure. Collaborating with renowned brands helps attract luxury and business travellers and ensures quality accommodation options are available to meet the diverse needs of visitors. Recently, in May 2023 Global hospitality leader Hilton has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Saudi Tourism Authority (STA) to attract people from leading markets across the Middle East and Africa (MEA) to visit Saudi Arabia. The two entities will boost mutual cooperation opportunities and develop creative content to pursue Hilton's presence and growth in the Kingdom, where it currently operates 16 hotels and has an additional 51 in the pipeline. Hilton also plans to grow its portfolio to exceed 75 hotels in Saudi Arabia over the coming years, according to a press release [68]. Expanding its roster of collaborators, the Tourism Development Fund (TDF) has announced the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with an affiliate of Hyatt Hotels Corporation to establish luxury hotels across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The collaboration aims to develop several hospitality-led destinations which will enhance the tourism offering in Saudi Arabia [69].
- Public Relations (PR):** Saudi Arabia has utilized public relations (PR) as a key strategy in promoting tourism. Public relations initiatives aim to shape the perception of Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination, enhance its image, and engage with target audiences. Some of the ways Saudi Arabia has leveraged PR to promote tourism are Media Relations, Press Events

and Launches, Thought Leadership and Expert Positioning.

**Online Reviews and Reputation Management**

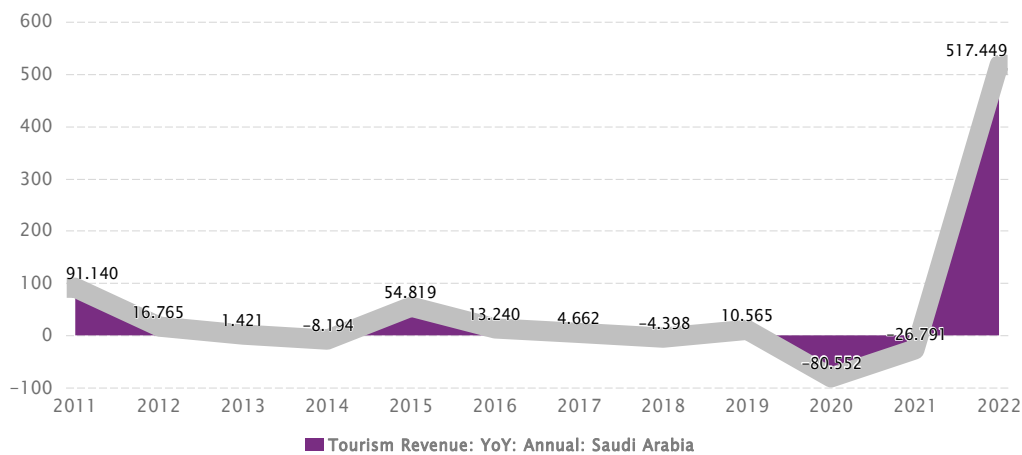
Saudi Arabia recognizes the importance of online reviews and reputation management in promoting tourism. Positive online reviews and a strong reputation can greatly influence potential tourists' decisions when considering a destination. Government official Social media handles have been actively interacting with the users by replying to their queries and reviews.

**OUTCOMES**

The strategies and efforts of the Saudi Arabian government are yielding positive results, as Saudi Arabia has been ranked as the second fastest-growing tourism destination in the world in 2022. According to World Tourism Organisation, the Kingdom ranks 13th globally, in countries receiving international tourists in 2022. In 2022, Saudi Arabia welcomed a staggering 16.6 million international tourists for all purposes which put the country on the 13th spot – taking a giant leap of 12 places from its previous ranking [70].

Saudi Arabia Tourism Revenue grew 517.4 % YoY in Dec 2022, compared with a decrease of -26.8 % YoY in the previous year. Saudi Arabia Tourism Revenue Growth rate data is updated yearly, available from Dec 2005 to Dec 2022. The data reached an all-time high of 517.4 % in Dec 2022 [71].

The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) has revealed the Travel & Tourism sector in Saudi Arabia is expected to grow at an average of 11% annually over the next decade, making it the fastest growing Travel & Tourism in the Middle East [72]. The Kingdom is expected to reach 22.1 million in international arrivals by 2025, which would be nearly 40% higher than Dubai's current visitors [73].



**Figure 4: View Saudi Arabia's Tourism Revenue Growth Chart from 2005 to 2022**

According to the forecast from WTTC's latest Economic Impact Report (EIR), the annual growth is more than six times the 1.8% growth rate of the country's

overall economy. This will bolster the economic recovery of the Kingdom [72].

By 2032, the Travel & Tourism sector’s contribution to GDP could reach nearly SAR 635 billion, representing 17.1% of the total economy. The forecast also reveals Travel & Tourism employment could double

over the next 10 years, creating more than 1.4 million jobs, to reach almost three million employed within the sector by 2032. [72].

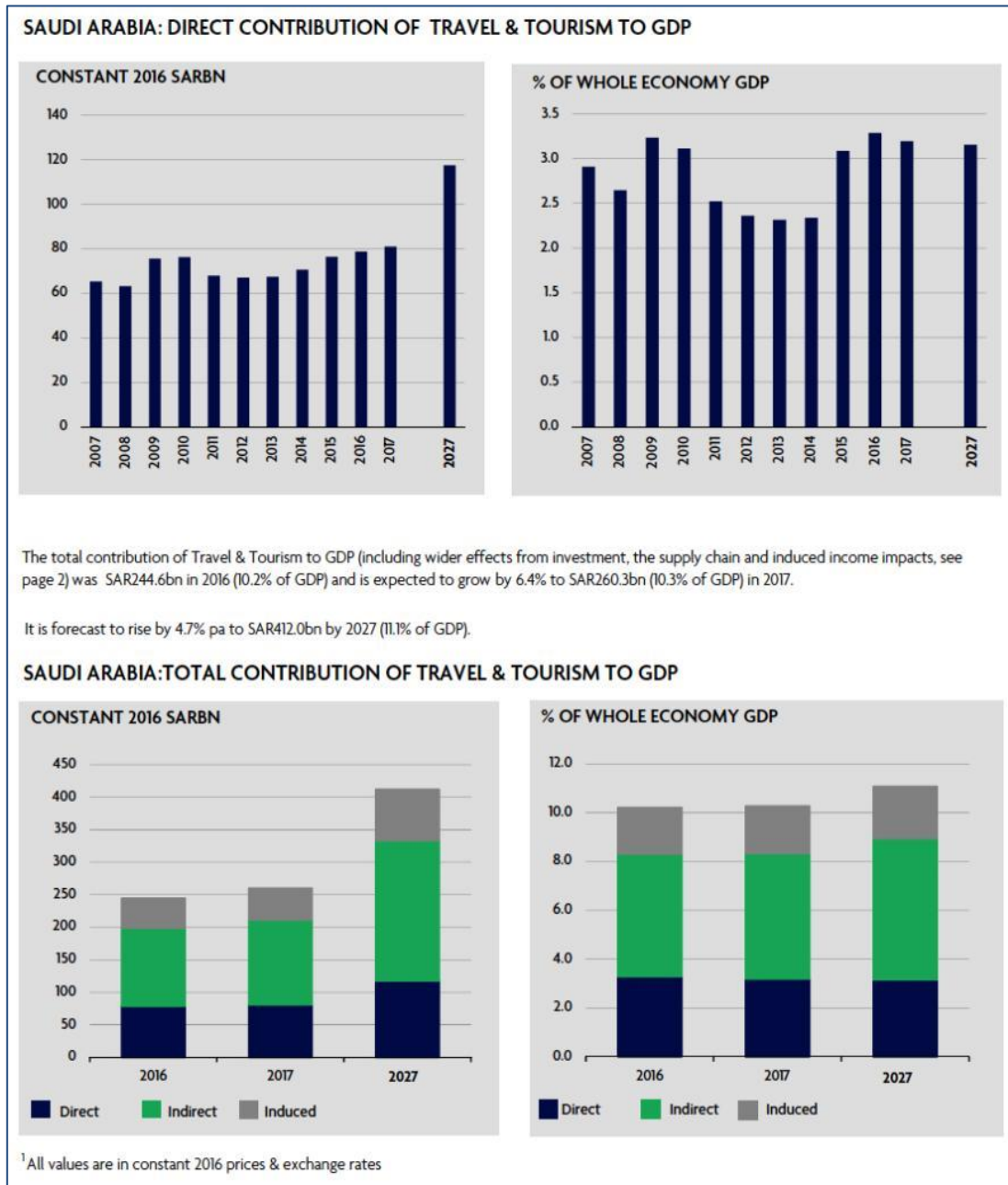


Figure 5: Travel & Tourism contribution to Saudi Arabia’s GDP

The projections for both employment and the sector’s contribution to the Kingdom's economy surpass the ambitious goals set out by the government’s Vision 2030 strategic framework [72].

**CONCLUSION**

It is important for resource rich countries to diversify economically to mitigate the resource curse. Saudi Arabia recognizes this importance of economic diversification and is actively leveraging tourism as a prime driver for achieving this goal. Tourism marketing

strategy plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of a thriving tourism sector, it raises awareness & attracts visitors. Saudi Arabia understands this and is putting great efforts to position itself as an attractive tourist destination with diverse attractions, cultural experiences, and modern infrastructure. The strategies and marketing efforts of the government are indicating positive results, according to World Tourism Organisation (WTO) the country has been ranked as the second fastest-growing tourism destination in the world in 2022.

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