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Introduction

Performing arts, encompassing music, dance, and theatre, can have a pivotal role in cultivating and amplifying a country's identity, connecting to people on a personal level, and facilitating the worldwide spread of cultural legacies (UNESCO 2018). The important role of the performing arts and cultural diplomacy in nation branding strategies (Ahn & Wu, 2013; Chong, 2010) and specifically destination branding and image formation have been highlighted in past studies. Recognizing the value of art and culture in image making and nation branding, state cultural policy often focus investing in the arts, humanities, and heritage to significantly influence national identity, contributing to nation-building, and to national branding to shape external recognition strategies (Ahn & Wu, 2013; Chong, 2010; Grincheva, 2010; Ratiu, 2009).

Vision 2030 articulates Saudi Arabia's ambitious future agenda and includes several strategic objectives aligned with the focus of this study including: 'Growing Saudi Arabia's contribution to arts & culture' and 'enable the development of the tourism sector' (Vision 2030). The Quality of Life Program, a central realization program of Vision 2030, was launched in 2018 to enable "culture, entertainment, sports and tourism to flourish in Saudi Arabia." To realize this vision, there has been substantial recent investment in the creative industries in Saudi Arabia (Arab News, 2022; Adileh, 2022; Oxford Business Group, 2022). Performing arts initiatives, such as the International Opera Festival, have propelled the country onto the global stage as a thriving cultural destination. Government entities such as the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH) and the General Entertainment Authority (GEA) are integral in shaping how the performing arts contribute to the wider objectives promoting cultural heritage and national branding (Oxford Business Group, 2022). Working in line with Vision 2030, which underscores the central role of tourism in the country's economic diversification and cultural progress, there is great potential to for the performing arts further enhance cultural enrichment opportunities for visitors and establish Saudi Arabia as a cultural tourism destination and boost global popularity (Ali & Salameh 2021; Vision 2030).

The aim of this study is to contribute further understanding of the role of the performing arts and national branding in Saudi Arabia. Based on in-depth interviews with government decision makers, performing arts professionals, experts in nation branding and/or performing arts, and tourists, the study contributes insights and recommendations beneficial to Saudi Arabia and other destinations aspiring to utilize performing arts for enhancing their brand.

Literature Review

Nation branding frameworks, such as Anholt's Nation Brand Hexagon and Dinnie's model, highlight various components of nation-brand identity and the communication of nation-brand identity, including exports, governance, culture, history, and tourism (Anholt 2006; Dinnie 2010). Central to these frameworks are the means of shaping diverse audience's, internal and external, nation-image. Performing arts and tourism have been acknowledged for their vital role in showcasing a country's cultural characteristics, advancing its values, and forging emotional connections with global audiences and enacting forms commercial nationalism (Bolin and Miazhevich 2018; Bhandari, 2022). Additionally, the concept of commercial nationalism within nation branding underscores the quest for international recognition (He, Wang, and Wu 2020).

Effective destination marketing strategies are central to enhancing commercial nation branding initiatives.

Governmental and non-governmental initiatives are key in recognizing the creative industry's role in enriching lives, celebrating national identity, and fostering global understanding (He, Wang, and Wu 2020). In Saudi Arabia, the performing arts intersect with various aspects of national brand development, including image, trade, tourism, diplomacy, and soft power. Performing arts intertwine with the nation's soft power and cultural diplomacy (Szondi 2008), incorporating modernizing initiatives and cultural heritage. Public diplomacy tactics emphasize understanding target audiences and tailoring strategies for successful initiatives (Wendt 1992; Clarke, DeNora, and Vuoskoski 2015).

Technological advancements are also shaping how the performing arts contribute to nation branding. The incorporation of technology, digital platforms, and social media into nation branding have a pivotal role in shaping global perceptions. Notably, the introduction of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies in promoting performing arts has led cultural organizations, museums, and artists to adopt these technologies for enhanced audience engagement and innovative experiences (Kim and Lee 2021; Baía Reis and Ashmore 2022; Hannam, Butler, & Paris, 2014).

Previous studies have examined nation branding through the performing arts in countries such as Japan, South Korea, the Baltic states, and Turkey and offer insights into customizing and applying successful techniques. Japan, for instance, utilizes Kabuki and Noh theatre in cultural diplomacy (Leiter 1999). South Korea's global success with K-pop and TV dramas, supported by the government (Doré and Pugsley 2019). The Baltic countries symbolize national identity through the Song and Dance Celebration (Muktupavela and Lake 2019). Turkey strategically employs Turkish folk music, TV dramas, and the Whirling Dervishes in nation branding (Vicente 2019; Cseriova 2022). These varied strategies demonstrate the global impact of performing arts on cultural diplomacy, economic growth, and international reputation, providing valuable insights into the dynamic interplay of culture, performing arts, tourism and nation branding.

Methodology

The study employed an exploratory research approach to examine how the performing arts contribute to Saudi Arabia's nation branding initiatives. Purposive sampling was used to select 23 participants from four groups: government decision makers in the performing arts and nation branding, professionals in performing arts, experts in nation branding and/or performing arts, and tourists from of diverse backgrounds. The semi-structured online interviews took place in Summer 2023, primarily via Zoom, were between 30 and 90 minutes long, and were supplemented with email conversations. Interviews were conducted in English and Arabic, with translations provided for non-English responses. The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019). NVivo software was to utilized to assist with the initial coding, organizing, and theme identification. Final themes were discussed and agreed upon by the authors. Through the in-depth interviews with decision-makers, professionals, and tourists, the next section of this extended abstract provides an initial summary of the findings, with a particular focus on the strategic use of performing arts by the Saudi government in enhancing the nation's image and the perceptions of Saudi performing arts.

Initial Summary of Results

Vision 2030: A Cultural and Economic Transformation

The performing arts have already had a central role in government nation branding, and have been activated as enabling initiatives for the tourism industry. Efforts to streamline tourist visa processes and promote previously unfamiliar regions have been employed to reshape global perceptions of Saudi Arabia. This alignment with nation branding involves engaging diverse stakeholders, including international tourists, cultural organizations, and the public, effectively influencing their perceptions (Gilboa 2008). Through the promotion of the performing arts, the government addresses stakeholders directly to shape their perceptions positively.

Innovative combinations of performing arts, such as Samurai sword fighting blended with traditional Arabic dancing, were proposed as a means to captivate and engage diverse audiences. This cultural fusion could augment artistic experiences and enhance global awareness of the nation's rich cultural tapestry. The findings suggest a shift in the performing arts, now embracing a more inclusive approach that extends beyond showcasing domestic talents to incorporating international artistic influences. This shift involves fostering robust relationships between the host country and the international community, promoting unique ideas and prominent figures, and achieving compelling cultural outcomes (Clarke, DeNora, and Vuoskoski 2015).

Vision 2030 is seen as a transformative vision for Saudi Arabia's cultural and economic landscape. Its initiatives have catalyzed artistic growth, global rebranding, and economic diversification, positioning the nation for a dynamic and evolving future. The launch of Vision 2030 has strategically focused on establishing Saudi Arabia as a desirable tourist destination and destination for investments in the creative industries.

The government will have a significant role in fostering authenticity and enhancing Saudi Arabia's cultural identity through the performing arts. The interviews highlighted a range of measures and strategies that could be implemented by the government to preserve cultural heritage and dispel stereotypes. These include blending modern and traditional elements in performances, leveraging technology, organizing international cultural festivals, and establishing foreign partnerships. The government will also have an instrumental role in promoting intercultural understanding, attracting tourists, and showcasing Saudi Arabia's artistic heritage globally, while supporting local artists, safeguarding authenticity, and integrating technology with social and digital media.

Challenging Stereotypes and Transforming Perceptions

Challenging stereotypes and misconceptions about Saudi Arabia was seen as a key endeavor within the performing arts sector. Initiatives like producing films in the historic Al'Ula region aim to counter the negative associations with terrorism and war that some American films shot in the same area have perpetuated. This project seeks to reveal Al'Ula's authentic charm and the rich cultural heritage of the region. Notably, in areas where cultural history is more revered, admiration for Saudi performing arts tends to increase. Common misconceptions include the belief that Saudi Arabia's artistic scene is limited by conservative views, overlooking the nation's substantial artistic legacy.

The study findings also highlight the transformative power of art in shaping national identity and perception. Participants advocated for creative fusions in performing arts to captivate audiences and enhance Saudi Arabia's cultural stature and influence. Key challenges include traditional arts

struggling to transcend regional boundaries, the absence of a cohesive advertising strategy, the delicate balance between tradition and modernity, and engaging the younger generations.

Technological Advancements and Global Promotion

The effective and creative deployment of technologies like AI, AR, and VR were proposed to extend the reach and appeal of Saudi performing arts to domestic and international audiences. Digital platforms and social media were seen as instrumental for fostering cross-cultural engagement and making Saudi arts globally accessible. A multifaceted approach will be vital for worldwide promotion, encompassing government support, cultural exchanges, and adapting to logistical challenges. Efforts will need to be concentrated on appealing to both local and international audiences. Effective translation and overcoming linguistic barriers are also crucial in making Saudi arts globally accessible and relatable, enhancing engagement and appreciation through performances in understandable dialects and translated materials. Discussions on the local versus global perception of Saudi Arabia's performing arts underscore the nation's efforts to balance tradition with modernity while amplifying its cultural influence on the global stage.

Conclusions

Navigating challenges in portraying a country's global image through performing arts is intricate due to political, social, and financial considerations. For Saudi Arabia, increased collaboration between the public and private sectors is essential; as is drawing upon lessons from other nations' successful nation branding campaigns (Tecmen 2018; Imran 2017). Challenges include authentically portraying Saudi cultural roots, developing targeted local storytelling, global campaigns focused on cultivating cultural tourism, and fostering international collaborations.

Technology will have a vital role in the evolution of Saudi Arabia's performing arts and innovative branding initiatives. Harnessing digital platforms, streaming, and social media can significantly boost the global engagement and access to global audiences. The integration of VR and AR in performing arts offers immersive experiences, enriching the artistic landscape. Effective management and allocation of resources are paramount. For instance, stringent monitoring of financial resource distribution within the performing arts sector ensures alignment with broader objectives.

Balancing traditional Saudi performing arts with contemporary representations can foster a multifaceted national identity. The study also proposes strategies to enhance the perception of Saudi arts and culture. Recommendations include establishing a cultural preservation council, supporting cultural celebrations, and encouraging regional performers. A focused approach is needed to balance cultural heritage preservation with modernization.

Lastly, educational institutions play a transformative role in Saudi Arabia's cultural revival, influencing narratives through curricula and training programs. Emphasis on education, training, and cultural interaction is vital. Initiatives for artists' education, cultural events, and incorporating different languages are essential to enhance global engagement. Tourism and the creative industries are fundamental components of Saudi Arabia's ambitious Vision 2030 agenda. The realization of this agenda will necessitate the mobilizing of soft power resources in the national branding strategy to balance out the country's assertive foreign policy, enhance its global image, and attract foreign investment.

The study offers practical lessons for destination branding illustrating the potential for examples of how government branding tactics may successfully employ the performing arts to promote

cultural and economic transformations. Saudi Arabia's strategic investment in the creative industries, especially in the performing arts, illustrates how such investments can both boost tourism while enhancing cultural influence and international recognition. The performing arts may help dispel myths and prejudices, strengthening both national and global perception. The case also highlights the importance of investing in technology and digital platforms, fostering public-private partnerships, and supporting innovative cultural fusions as effective strategies to attract international audiences (and visitors) while also preserving cultural heritage. The study also contributes insights into how performing arts influence soft power and international relations and the importance of policy-driven cultural investments.

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