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A REVIEW ON THE IMPORTANCE OF TOURIST SATISFACTION AND  
DESTINATION IMAGE IN KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

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**ABSTRACT**

Despite the extensive literature on tourism and tourist satisfaction, the consensus about the reasons of tourist satisfaction and the resulting consequences is lacking in Saudi Tourism Industry. This study peeps into the matter and put effort to fill this lacuna by highlighting the importance of tourist satisfaction in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Past researches, reports and news were explored to fetch the latest knowledge regarding the tourism sector in KSA and its destination image. The review of literature shows that Saudi Arabia has a geographical advantage since it is located at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and Africa. It has abundant natural and historical resources provided by a vast territory and rich history. One of the strong aspects of Saudi tourism is the authenticity available through its variety of cultural heritage (dress, food, drinks, entertainment etc). Therefore, it is important to study tourism related variables in KSA. With the hope of delivering the first comprehensive review and evaluation of destination image and tourist satisfaction as well as the interrelationship between them in the context of KSA, this study expected to provide tourism managers and marketers in KSA a scientific insight as foundation for their strategic marketing decisions.

**Introduction**

Over the past decade, the study of tourism and hospitality industry has become increasingly important because of the fiercely competitive marketplace (Pencarelli, 2020). Tourism and hospitality industry is developing at a very high speed all over the world. Travel and hospitality industry has not only outperformed the global economic growth but also outpaced several major sectors in 2016 around the world (Du, Lew, & Ng, 2016). From the last many decades, the industry has capitalized billions of dollars in destinations often laying the foundation for broader economic development. Due to globalization, the world has become

smaller and as almost every corner of the globe is more accessible for many, tourism is already a vital sector for development across all continents (Alhawaish, 2016).

In recent years, Saudi Arabia's prime focus has been to diversify the economy to mitigate the risk posed by over-dependence on oil-based revenue (Ahmed, 2021). SCTA is a state-run organization that was set up in 2000, intending to develop the tourism sector in Saudi Arabia (Mansour & Mumuni, 2019). The Kingdom enjoys economic superiority in the Arab region and with the investments from the private sector, it is predicted that the government will be able to develop its tourist sites to satisfy and invite more tourists from offshore. Satisfaction is pleasure or disappointment that results from the comparison of the product with the expectations. If the product/service does not meet the expectations, the customer is said to be dissatisfied (Baxter) and if the product/service meets expectations, the customer is said to be satisfied and if the product/service exceeds expectations, the customer is said to be delighted (Pan, Rasouli, & Timmermans, 2021). Satisfaction is a result of the customer's needs, expectations, and experiences with the product/service after use (Baxter).

Ryan (1995) described that tourist satisfaction is the conformity between tourists' expectations and destinations' characteristics. According to this point of view, tourist satisfaction can be figured out by subjective factors (emotions and needs of tourists) and objective factors (features of the product and service). While literature indicates that there is no consensus and homogeneity regarding the concept of tourist satisfaction (Correia, Kozak, & Ferradeira, 2013; del Bosque & San Martín, 2008; Kozak, 2001; Pizam, Neumann, & Reichel, 1978). In light of this, the higher level of tourist satisfaction plays its role in the successfulness of a tourist destination and the same has been argued repeatedly that the satisfaction of tourists leads the tourists to revisit and make recommendations to friends and family (Prebensen, Skallerud, & Chen, 2010; Wang, Tran, & Tran, 2017; Wardi, Abror, & Trinanda, 2018). The revisit and make recommendations to others refer to the tourist loyalty and this loyalty according to Ramseok-Munhurrun, Seebaluck, and Naidoo (2015) can be effective, cognitive or conative in nature. In this study, tourist satisfaction denotes the positive emotions, feelings, and expectations expressed by tourists with respect to tourist visitation (Le Chi, 2016). Furthermore, the emotional enjoyment, the perception and image of destination as well as quality of provided services also contributes to tourist satisfaction (Correia et al., 2013; del Bosque & San Martín, 2008; Du et al., 2016; Kozak, 2001; Le Chi, 2016; Mansour & Mumuni, 2019; Pan et al., 2021; Pencarelli, 2020; Pizam et al., 1978). Consequently, it can be regarded that tourist satisfaction is the combination of the features of a tourist destination and the perceptions of tourists. Despite the extensive literature on tourism and tourist satisfaction, the consensus about the antecedents of tourist satisfaction and the resulting consequences is lacking. This study peeps into the matter and put effort to fill this lacuna by highlighting the importance of tourist satisfaction in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

### **Tourism Potential In Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia is home to Islam's two holiest shrines in Makkah and Medina. Al-Masjid Al-Haram (Holy Kaaba) in Makkah is the ultimate goal of millions of Muslims to accomplish their Hajj - Islamic pilgrimage (Seise, 2019). In most of the cases Mecca and Medina are visited within the same package, therefore Al-Masjid Al Nabawi in Medina is also one of the most desired attractions for Muslim pilgrims during Hajj and Umrah (Abuhjeeleh, 2019). Hajj is a mega event that takes place once a year following lunar calendar. There is a lapse of 11 or 12 days between lunar and solar calendar which results in a continuous shift of Hajj, Ramadan and other Islamic events in the Islamic calendar. Islamic event may occur at all seasons and months of the solar calendar with slight alterations and this cycle restarts every 33 years. The effect of this calendar drift is positive for Saudi Arabia since visits are temporally balanced. However, spatial concentration is inevitable for 3 cities; Mecca, Medina, and Jeddah and this may lead to congestion if not well planned. The genesis of Islam in Saudi Arabia and its precious religious attractions give Saudi Arabia a unique platform for marketing itself as a tourism destination.

Saudi Arabia has a geographical advantage since it is located at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and Africa. It has abundant natural and historical resources provided by a vast territory and rich history. One of the strong aspects of Saudi tourism is the authenticity available through its variety of cultural heritage (dress, food, drinks, entertainment etc).

Saudi Arabia is a stable country in an uncertain region which is a positive indicator for tourism development. The country is a leading oil producer that enables strong commercial and political relationships not only with Arab and/or Muslim countries but also with the rest of the world (Gedefaw Birhanu & Wezel, 2020). KSA is an efficient member of international organizations such as G20, Arab League, Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Dense commercial and political relationships are also supported by global influx of expats and knowhow. This vibrant international exchange is coupled with information technology (IT) feeding a globalized, better educated new generation (Gedefaw Birhanu & Wezel, 2020). Saudi population is highly urbanized and young. Scholarships provided to young generations promote improvement in educational level.

One other major strength of Saudi Arabian tourism is the country's robust economy. Saudi Arabia's proximity to emerging markets like India, China, Turkey, and GCC member states facilitate its economic viability. Moreover; it has competitive tax regulations, fuel and energy supply for foreign investors. Depending on the oil price levels Saudi Arabia generally has a budgetary surplus allowing new mega-project investments.

### **Challenges for KSA Tourism**

In any country, economic progress cannot be achieved without securing fiscal sustainability. Researches by Alsumairi and Tsui (2017) and Ali (2018) show the extent of the importance of tourism to economic development, and are therefore relevant to this study. Euch, Omri, and Al-Tit (2018) identifies the importance of adopting a respective decision model to ensure fiscal sustainability in Saudi Arabia, as such model is also applicable in the tourism sector. Such sustainability is measured by various indicators, which are found plausible in the context of Saudi business tourism. In addition, it has become important to expand the horizons of economic diversification for the Kingdom despite the fact that it is an oil-dependent economy (Alshuwaikhat & Mohammed, 2017). Tourism is a sustainable alternative with the potential of replacing oil as the main source of income for the Kingdom. The rapid growth in tourism and its future potential makes tourism an important source of income for the economy .

Furthermore, Alshuwaikhat and Mohammed (2017) points out that the evaluation of the current state of tourism in Saudi Arabia is rather promising, saved for a few restrictions currently in place in Saudi Arabia. In this context, it can be indicated that the prospects of increasing tourism through various means including commencing business conference, expos, events, sports activities in Saudi Arabia might be limited to a certain extent (Almhrzi, Alriyami, & Scott, 2017). At the same time, Alshuwaikhat and Mohammed (2017) recognises the possibilities for Saudi Arabia to develop different sources of employment, which might expand the potential of the country to enhance its event tourism sector.

It is important to note that the development of tourism in Saudi Arabia is seen as a strategy to comply with the current domestic and global aspects of the tourism field. Irrespective of the challenges present at the respective sector, Saudi Arabia organisations are on the right course for developing competitive tourist products and services to address the evolving needs of clients (AL-Hazmi & Alkhateeb, 2020). New markets are constantly supported by the growing popularity of international business conferences, as Saudi Arabia plays a key role in providing flexible opportunities for investors from all over the world. It is important the country takes the chance to make a significant impact on the tourism sector. This would result in facilitating the image of the Kingdom, as many individuals would rethink and reassess the tourism possibilities provided by the country. Saudi Arabia has the potential of creating an environment that would facilitate business tourism despite its cultural differences with the Western world. This discussion provides an insight into the measures that the Kingdom has pursued in order to overcome the cultural differences prevailing between Saudi Arabia and other regions, which only attests to the ubiquitous nature of business tourism in the Kingdom.

According to the above statements, the tourism sector in Saudi Arabia is intended to enhance the stability of the national economy as well as to

reduce the Kingdom's economic dependency on the oil sector. Could tourism respond to the above expectations and support economic development in Saudi Arabia? This issue would be effectively addressed by referring to the current performance of the country's tourism sector and the involvement of the sector in the development of the Saudi Arabian economy. It would be also necessary to check the value of the tourism sector as a tool of economic growth in the global market and the sector's trend worldwide. In (Jamel, 2020) article, the co-integration of tourism and economic development is highlighted, along with the necessity of promoting policies to attract more international tourists. Moreover, Alshebli (2018) asserts that Saudi Arabia, being a semi-developed country, has consistently placed itself in a position where it takes full advantage of the tourism industry. With the dwindling income from oil and as the Kingdom engages in plans to diversify its economy with the Vision 2030 project, the tourism industry presents it with an opportunity to generate more income. It should be noted that Saudi Arabia has previously paid insufficient attention to developing a relevant tourism infrastructure based on social, political and economic factors. Business and conference travel represented approximately 17% of spending in the country (Al-Kawaz, 2005). Yet the tourism sector has extensively progressed in Saudi Arabia, becoming the third largest industry after the energy and manufacturing sectors. In 2016, the contribution of the travel and tourism sector to its GDP reached 10.2%, while for 2017; the relevant increase was estimated at 6.4% (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2017). A prediction was made in 2006 that between 2007 and 2017, the contribution of the sector to the country's GDP would have been between 4.7% and 11.1% (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2017). At the same time, in 2016, the internal trips of tourists in Saudi Arabia increased by 2.3% (Hotel & Tourism, 2017). Particular attention should be given to the fact that domestic trips represent the high majority of tourism trips in Saudi Arabia; indeed, in 2016, the domestic trips in the Kingdom reached 49.9 million, up from 46.5 million in 2015 (MAS Centre, 2016a). By comparison, the inbound trips were estimated at 19.1 million in 2016, up from 18 million in 2015, and the outbound trips were 21 million in 2016, up from 20.8 million in 2015 (MAS Centre, 2016a). It may be observed that an increasing trend is arising in travel tourism in the Kingdom, which is a positive indication for the sector.

Bakr (2017) argue that the effects of the tourism industry on Saudi Arabia's economy are both direct and indirect: the direct effects refer to the income of the country from tourism activities, such as travel and hotel-booking, while the indirect effects refer to the benefits for sectors dependent on tourism, such as the construction and manufacturing sectors. Despite the efforts made for the development of the tourism sector in Saudi Arabia, the growth of the sector is rather slow. The Kingdom may further develop its tourism sector by offering a well-researched, reliable plan of action focused on the industry, targeting both domestic residents and expatriates living in Saudi Arabia (Mansour & Mumuni, 2019). The 49,000 new hotels that are going to be incorporated

into the country's hospitality industry in the near future could effectively support the growth of the travel sector; such support is valuable if considering that by 2020 the arrivals of tourists in Saudi Arabia are expected to reach 20 million (Simpson, 2016).

### **Importance of Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Image of KSA**

The image of the tourist destinations is important, since it influences not only the choice of the destination by tourists but also their level of satisfaction. Often, destinations compete with each other through a little bit more than the image that they can create in the minds of potential travellers – the imagery. Therefore, tourist destination marketers' invest a great amount of resources to create a favourable and desirable image, which conquers potential travellers to visit or re-visit their destination or have destination loyalty. Though a lot of researches have been conducted on the destination image and tourist satisfaction but still authors believe that there are areas in the field of destination image and tourist satisfaction that are not yet explored.

Theoretical research is a logical exploration of a system of beliefs and assumptions. This type of research includes theorizing or defining how image of a destination is created and how it effects the tourist satisfaction. Every research has its own significance, in line to this current research has also some major contributions listed below.

Firstly, product or service image is an important concept in consumer behavior research and the wider buyer behavior research. The main objective of the consumer behavior research is the choice of a product or service. Since the image of a product or service is an important factor in the selection choices related to any product, service, place or a person, therefore, in the context of tourism it is logical that the image of a destination plays the most crucial role in decision making. The importance of destination image for marketing can be gauged by a plethora of papers on the topic. Due to the rising competition among destinations, as highlighted in the previous sections, the need to create a distinctive image to differentiate from the competitors is more critical than ever before, for the destinations. Destination image is central in the destination selection. Most if the studies have examined the antecedents of destination image and outcomes or its role on the tourist satisfaction have limited literature. For instance in the last ten years only one research is conducted on the outcomes of destination image in KSA.

Secondly, the line of research on destination image remains challenged by various problems (Pan et al., 2021; Pizam et al., 1978; Prebensen et al., 2010; Ramseook-Munhurrun et al., 2015) Among the most fundamental problems is the vagueness of destination image is conceptual vagueness, that is, a concept having unclear meaning(s) (Hurley 2008), is manifested mainly by the uncertain nature of destination image itself (internal vagueness), As it is being confused with other mental concepts (external vagueness), and the ambiguity of the mental image or even the human mind where destination image can be found.. Although past studies have proposed several conceptual frameworks and definitions, their contribution to reducing the conceptual

vagueness of destination image has been limited (see later). Therefore, the internal/ external/foundational vagueness of TDI remains to date, and this vagueness has resulted in doubts regarding the actual usefulness of this construct, potential miscommunication among academics, and limited progress toward the actual conceptualization of the construct.

Thirdly, several researchers have studied destination image as an independent variable influencing several consumer behavior variables, such as destination choice, decision-making and satisfaction. Both holistic destination image and specific destination attributes were found to influence consumer behavior variables related to before, during, and after destination visitation. Due to the importance of destination image in terms of its effects on tourist behavior, researchers have been trying to identify the determinants that define, modify, and strengthen this construct. Therefore, past studies have conceived of destination image as a dependent variable suggesting that several factors play a role in the destination image formation process (Pan et al., 2021; Pizam et al., 1978; Prebensen et al., 2010; Ramseook-Munhurrun et al., 2015; Tasci & Gartner, 2007; Truong & Foster, 2006; Wang et al., 2017). This study will use destination image as a mediator variable. Although considerable work has been conducted in establishing a theoretical framework of the image construct along with its determinants and effects, destination image as mediator in the studies “have remained largely atheoretical” (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). There is no clearly defined conceptual base leading destination image studies, especially the ones investigating causality between destination image and other concepts.

Fourthly, tourism satisfaction researches are limited in the context of Saudi Arabia, however, a few researches have been conducted in KSA but they are limited to outbound tourism or religious tourism. However, there is a dire need to explore the tourist satisfaction in KSA, as the economy is also moving from the oil based to tourism base. This research will examine the tourist satisfaction in the context of KSA inbound and domestic tourism.

Fifthly, emotions, service quality and safety has been acknowledged as antecedents of behavioural outcomes in marketing literature in case of tourism literature only one study has acknowledged the role of these antecedents on tourist satisfaction. This study will extend the role of these antecedents by testing them in both direct and indirect interaction with tourist satisfaction.

#### **Achieving KSA as Tourist destination**

This study have highlighted some practical implications for Saudi tourism industry. As the theories of destination image formation point out that the image of a destination is shaped by the sources of information before traveling and the actual experience at the destination. The strategies to improve the destination image of KSA to map out an effectively promotional strategy with a positive and clear image of Saudi Arabia as tourism destination is needed. If this effort works well, it would create a strong impact on tourists' decision making of destination choice. KSA uniqueness lies in its history, complex of monuments, food, peaceful atmosphere and hospitability. As it is anticipated that KSA tourism has great potential to differentiate its tourism product based on

its uniqueness in tourism resources. Prior researches confirm the importance of holistic and unique images in tourists' mind, as the chances of being selected is reduced if the destination lacks distinctive quality in their product benefit. There is a need to identify necessary strategies to communicate appropriate and unique holistic imagery, both functional and psychological, to the potential tourists through the mass media like internet, TV as well as through travel guidebooks, brochures and tourism magazines, etc.

In spite of many efforts in destination marketing and promotion activities, the destination has not yet been introduced effectively to the targeted markets due to the lack of funding, human resources and experience. The most challenge for the destination to launch its marketing and promotional activities is the financial issue. Due to the insufficient marketing and promotion budget, the destination image. KSA has not been adequately developed and introduced to the targeted markets. Tourism experts suggest that the fund for destination promotional activities can be raised from local government and tourism businesses. Nevertheless, in reality it is extremely difficult to call for the contribution from the local tourism businesses to the collective promotional fund of the city.

Now days, internet is the most prominent tool for tourists to find or to exchange information about tourism destination. People can use social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. to share their good or bad experience and this kind of "word of mouth" (WOM) is spread very quickly to those who are interested in. So internet seems to be the most helpful means to promote a place as long as that place can ensure that their tourists have positive experiences there. If what the tourists experience is unlike what are committed by the destination, the destination might face a lot of difficulties because of its disrepute.

"Cultural activities of the destination" – which are considered the key important determinants for tourists in selecting their vacation destination - is one of the attributes dissatisfying tourists the most in this study. This study will examine culture as influencing factor as the cultural attractions and festivals/events have a positive influence on the destination image as well as the tourist satisfaction. However, while tourists highly expect on these offers, their performances are rather poor and significantly dissatisfy the tourists.

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed at successfully building a winning destination image of KSA, highly satisfying the tourists and growing returning guests in KSA. With the hope of delivering the first comprehensive review and evaluation of destination image and tourist satisfaction as well as the interrelationship between them in the context of KSA, this study expected to provide tourism managers and marketers in KSA a scientific insight as foundation for their strategic marketing decisions. It implies that, if the destination promotes well its tourism image and improves the quality of tourism offers and services, the tourist satisfaction will be increased and accordingly the destination loyalty will be enhanced.

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