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Saudi, Welcome To Arabia: Analysing Saudi Arabia's New Age of Nation Branding: How does the educational exchange program Gateway KSA reflect Saudi Arabia's nation branding goals?

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Saudi, Welcome To Arabia:

Analysing Saudi Arabia's New Age of Nation Branding

How does the educational exchange program Gateway KSA reflect Saudi Arabia's nation branding goals?

Abstract: This paper critically assesses how Gateway KSA, a complimentary trip for a selective group of mostly Western university students which presents its participants with Saudi cultural heritage, political values and an innovative vision of the future, embodies and communicates Saudi Arabia's identity in alignment with the broader objectives of Vision 2030. The analysis focuses on self-representation and external reception, exploring how Gateway KSA contributes to this national brand. By situating this within the theoretical constructs of strategic narrative and representation, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of educational exchange programs in contemporary nation branding strategies.

Key words: Saudi Arabia, nation branding, auto-ethnography, education, cross-culture exchanges

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Introduction of the study

On April 25th, 2016, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced Vision 2030, a government multi-year plan to enrich Saudi Arabia economically, socially, and culturally. This plan, to be completed by 2030, would make the Kingdom less dependent on oil revenues, would permit social reforms and would develop non-Hajj tourism.¹ The program birthed many initiatives to make the state appear more economically and culturally attractive and gain a better reputation with foreign (especially Western) audiences. The Gulf is home to some of the youngest nation-states; many have turned outwards to differentiate themselves from their neighbours and attract international diplomats and tourists. While the UAE and Qatar are well on their way to setting themselves apart and attracting a wide-ranging audience, Saudi Arabia is on an unseen-before rapid trajectory to rebrand.

As the literature suggests, nation branding has quickly become one of the most important aspects of soft power in international relations. The power of the state within international affairs relies heavily on its image; even authoritarian states have started seeing the benefits of a strong image abroad, as the popularity of their branding within citizen groups could trickle up to policy-makers' shortlists.

Saudi Arabia is only starting to be researched, as it reached international headlines with its investments in sports and tourism. Yet, no research has gone into the message the Kingdom wants to send through the education exchange program Gateway KSA, created by the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic studies, chaired by Prince Turki Al Faisal Al Saud. This complimentary trip for a selective group of mostly Western university students presents its participants with Saudi cultural heritage, political values and the innovative vision of the future. This thesis explores aspects of the education exchange program Gateway KSA, which I had the honour of attending in 2024, through ethnographic research.

¹ Hajj is the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, SA. It accounts for most tourism in the Kingdom. (Ministry of Tourism, "Inbound Tourism by Purpose," 2023, <https://mt.gov.sa/tic/dashboard/inbound-tourism>.)

Theoretical Framework

Soft Power

Nye argued that soft power, “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment,”² cannot effectively be wielded until a nation unleashes the full talents of its civil societies.³ Hence, authoritarian states cannot have successful soft power. However, as more states applied the principles of soft power, such as China and Russia,⁴ academic attention shifted from whether authoritarian leaders legitimate their rule to *how* they do it.⁵ As Carr understood: “Power over opinion is no less essential for political purposes than military and economic power; it is always associated with them.”⁶

While public diplomacy was long seen as the primary way to operationalise soft power,⁷ new movements within IR have determined nation branding as a better description of the strategy of authoritarian states. Public diplomacy and nation branding are sometimes used interchangeably; Szondi argued that the overlap between the concepts can be complete, inclusive or exclusive.⁸ The main argued difference is in the audience, as public diplomacy is aimed at ruling elites while nation branding tends to be more mass-oriented.⁹ Melissen concluded that both are distinct approaches, but “they both come down to clearly similar activities” and best work in tandem.¹⁰ Alderman resolved that nation branding is a practice of authoritarian regime legitimation while public diplomacy aims at promoting soft power to rulers.¹¹ Alderman and Eggeling studied how nation branding efforts could be found back in diverse arrays of projects, notably investments into prestige projects around higher education,

² Joseph S. Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (March 2008): 94, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311699>.

³ Nye in Michael Barr, Valentina Feklyunina, and Sarina Theys, “Introduction: The Soft Power of Hard States,” *Politics* 35, no. 3–4 (November 2015): 213, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12210>.

⁴ Abdullah Keşvelioğlu, “The Paradox of Authoritarian Soft Power: The Case of Russia and China,” n.d.

⁵ Petra Alderman and Kristin Anabel Eggeling, “Vision Documents, Nation Branding and the Legitimation of Non-Democratic Regimes,” *Geopolitics* 0, no. 0 (2023): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2023.2165441>.

⁶ E. H. Carr (2001, p.102) through Najah Al-Otaibi, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power: A Case Study of Saudi Arabia’s Image Projection in the UK” (doctoral, University of East Anglia. School of Politics, Philosophy, Language and Communication Studies, 2019), 16, <https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/86949/>.

⁷ Joseph S. Nye, “Countering the Authoritarian Challenge - Public Diplomacy, Soft Power, and Sharp Power,” CIRSD, accessed September 29, 2023, <http://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-winter-2020-issue-no-15/countering-the-authoritarian-challenge-public-diplomacy-soft-power-and-sharp-power>.

⁸ Gyorgy Szondi, “Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding: Conceptual Similarities and Differences,” January 1, 2008, 14.

⁹ Szondi, 16.

¹⁰ Melissen, 2005 in Szondi, 26.

¹¹ Petra Alderman, *Branding Authoritarian Nations: Political Legitimation and Strategic National Myths in Military-Ruled Thailand* (New York: Routledge, 2023).

sports, arts and culture or urban development.¹² Szondi claims that nation branding relies heavily on visuals and symbols, unlike public diplomacy, which relies more on behaviour.¹³ Al-Tamimi argues that nation branding and public diplomacy have a complementary relationship: where nation branding seeks to raise awareness of a country's identity through innovative marketing and advertising techniques, public diplomacy creates an understanding of that identity to achieve political goals."¹⁴ As can be observed, scholars have multiple theories as for the differentiation and similarities between public diplomacy and nation branding. Throughout this paper, we stick with nation branding as a concept in itself.

Nation Branding

The concept of 'nation branding' emerged in the mid-1990s. Simon Anholt is often credited with the term's invention, describing it as constructing and communicating a unique image about a nation to the rest of the world through public diplomacy, trade, export promotion and tourism.¹⁵ Branding is the process of designing, planning and communicating the name and the identity, to build or manage the reputation of the state.¹⁶ Anholt writes, "all responsible governments need to discover what the world's perception of their country is and to develop a strategy for managing it."¹⁷

Anholt and other scholars compare the branding efforts of states to that of companies. Fan defines nation branding as "applying branding and marketing communications techniques to promote a nation's image."¹⁸ Kerr and Wiseman also apply corporate marketing techniques to states to improve their international relations reputation.¹⁹ Erman and Hermanik argue that "residents, visitors or investors should create a special relation to the place being branded to

¹² Alderman and Eggeling, "Vision Documents," 7.

¹³ Szondi, "Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding," 16.

¹⁴ Nawaf Al-Tamimi, Azzam Amin, and Nourollah Zarrinabadi, "Terminological Definitions," in *Qatar's Nation Branding and Soft Power: Exploring the Effects on National Identity and International Stance*, ed. Nawaf Al-Tamimi, Azzam Amin, and Nourollah Zarrinabadi, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023), 27, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-24651-7_2.

¹⁵ Simon Anholt, *Competitive Identity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007), 3, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230627727>.

¹⁶ Anholt, 4.

¹⁷ Anholt, 2.

¹⁸ Ying Fan, "Branding the Nation: What Is Being Branded?," *Journal of Vacation Marketing* 12, no. 1 (January 2006): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356766706056633>.

¹⁹ P. Kerr and G. Wiseman, *Diplomacy in a Globalizing World: Theories and Practices* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 354, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=9cp8tAEACAAJ>.

identify with the place where they live and be proud of it, come back to visit the place, and invest and keep investing in that place.”²⁰

Many scholars agree that nation branding condenses culture, history, people, government and businesses into a vision.²¹ Szondi claims that nation branding aims to identify the ‘uniqueness’ of the nation’s people, culture, or landscape to draw on distinguishing features.²² Fan concurs, writing that “a nation brand is the total sum of all perceptions of a nation in the minds of international stakeholders, which may contain some of the following elements: people, place, culture, language, history, food, fashion, famous faces (celebrities), global brands and so on.”²³ There exist a couple of ways that these elements have been identified by scholars: Fauve addresses nation branding through global-actor network theory, considering not only the national interest as state actors but also “the clothes, buildings, money, spectacles, symbols, and discourses [which] constitute the micro-foundations of a macro-phenomenon, namely the self-legitimation of the state, both externally via global sporting events, overseas diplomatic–political conventions, transnational financial networks and international academic conferences, and internally by acting as a regional hub for the attraction of global elites.”²⁴ Hassan and Mahrous identify two categories of nation brand determinants: tangibles and intangibles. Tangibles include slogans and logos, celebrity endorsement and cultural elements which impact the nation branding intangibles, such as reputation and perceived personality.²⁵ Anholt developed the Nation Brand Index (NBI), consisting of what he considers the pillars of a strong image (see next page):

²⁰ Ulrich Ermann and Klaus-Jürgen Hermanik, eds., *Branding the Nation, the Place, the Product*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315393261>.

²¹ Anholt, *Competitive Identity*, 405.

²² Szondi, “Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding,” 16.

²³ Ying Fan, “Branding the Nation: Towards a Better Understanding,” *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 6, no. 2 (May 2010): 98, <https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2010.16>.

²⁴ Adrien Fauve, “Global Astana: Nation Branding as a Legitimization Tool for Authoritarian Regimes,” *Central Asian Survey* 34, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 121, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2015.1016799>.

²⁵ Salah Hassan and Abeer A. Mahrous, “Nation Branding: The Strategic Imperative for Sustainable Market Competitiveness,” *Journal of Humanities and Applied Social Sciences* 1, no. 2 (January 1, 2019): 150, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JHASS-08-2019-0025>.



The Nation Brand Hexagon ©2000 Simon Anholt

Another framework for nation branding is the Destination Branding Framework designed by Giannopoulos, Piha and Avlonitis.²⁶ The process of destination branding can be conceptualized through a two-stage framework made of Development and Maintenance. In the Development Stage, three critical steps are identified: Brand Analysis involves understanding tourists’ needs, analyzing competitive offerings, and evaluating the nation’s internal strengths and limitations, forming a foundation for strategic positioning. Second, Brand Positioning Development clarifies the destination’s unique identity, ensuring it is realistic, credible, appealing, and distinctive, thereby differentiating the destination and guiding marketing activities. Third, Shared Brand Values emphasizes the alignment of internal stakeholders, such as local population, organisations and ministries, fostering a unified understanding and consistent delivery of the brand promise. Following that, the Maintenance stage ensures long-term brand success through four key actions: Continuous Coordination of Marketing Activities to maintain consistency across tourist interactions, Government Long-Term Commitment to support brand values and stakeholder collaboration, Proper Destination Brand Portfolio Management to harmonize diverse offerings under a cohesive brand, and Periodical Monitoring of Brand Performance to assess and refine branding strategies based on feedback and evolving expectations. This framework integrates theoretical insights with practical applications. However, it makes me question whether the steps are as linear as the scholars consider them to be; when looking to the writings of Szondi and Melissen previously mentioned, nation branding strategies are not necessarily a linear curve. Nevertheless, this framework is one of the clearest

²⁶ Antonios A Giannopoulos, Lamprini P Piha, and George J Avlonitis, “‘Desti–Nation Branding’: What for? From the Notions of Tourism and Nation Branding to an Integrated Framework,” n.d., 5.

in the academic world to identify the stages of nation branding. Thus it is a framework used to check the stage of Saudi Arabia's nation branding in this thesis.

Strategic narrative and representation

In exploring how the Gateway KSA educational exchange program reflects Saudi Arabia's nation branding vision, the concepts strategic narrative and representation are critical to understanding the program's strategic objectives, implementation, and impact. These concepts provide a lens through which the role of Gateway KSA in shaping and projecting Saudi Arabia's national image can be analysed.

Strategic narratives are defined by Miskimmon as “ means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors.”²⁷ In the context of nation branding, leaders can work to find points of narrative alignment to foster cooperation and a sense of shared destiny both internally and externally.²⁸ Strategic narrative serves as an important theoretical framework for nation branding in the context of Saudi Arabia's Gateway KSA initiative, by enabling the country to craft and communicate a cohesive story that reshapes its national identity and global image. This allows Saudi Arabia to align its branding efforts with the broader goals of Vision 2030, which focuses on modernization, economic diversification, and cultural openness.²⁹ By constructing a strategic narrative that emphasizes these themes, Saudi Arabia aims to transition its perception from a nation, as can be read in Chapter 1, is defined by oil wealth and traditionalism to one that is innovative, diverse, and forward-looking.

The concept of representation refers to how cultural identities are presented, both by the group itself and by others. It is equally crucial in this context, as it encompasses the ways in which Saudi Arabia presents its cultural identity through Gateway KSA. This program can be seen as a strategic vehicle for self-representation, where the Kingdom selectively emphasizes certain aspects of its culture, values, and societal progress. The concept of representation involves not

²⁷ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Jinghan Zeng, *One Belt, One Road, One Story?: Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative* (Cham, SWITZERLAND: Springer International Publishing AG, 2020), 21, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/leidenuniv/detail.action?docID=6436006>.

²⁸ Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Zeng, 21.

²⁹ “Full Text of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030,” *Saudi Gazette*, April 29, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160429180619/http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/features/2016/04/26/Full-text-of-Saudi-Arabia-s-Vision-2030.html>.

only the projection of national identity but also the reception and interpretation of these projections by foreign publics. The success of Gateway KSA as a tool for nation branding depends on its ability to bridge the gap between Saudi Arabia's intended self-presentation and the actual perceptions formed by participants and their respective societies. This dynamic underscores the importance of examining both the internal processes of cultural identity formation and the external factors influencing the reception of Saudi Arabia's nation branding efforts, and thus the relevance of this thesis in the wider study of nation branding.

In short, strategic narrative and representation are closely linked to nation branding, where a nation uses its cultural assets to foster mutual understanding and build a positive international image. Saudi Arabia's approach to nation branding through Gateway KSA likely involves strategic messaging, where specific elements of Saudi culture and identity are highlighted to influence perceptions positively.

In this regard, my thesis will critically assess how Gateway KSA embodies and communicates Saudi Arabia's cultural identity in alignment with the broader objectives of Vision 2030. The analysis will focus on the dual aspects of self-representation and external reception, exploring Gateway KSA's contributions to Saudi Arabia's national brand. By situating this within the theoretical constructs of strategic narrative and representation, this thesis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of educational exchange programs in contemporary nation branding strategies.

Methodology

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that blends elements of autobiography with ethnography, as researchers use personal experiences to understand and analyse cultural, social, or community phenomena in a systematic way.³⁰ Through autoethnography, researchers explore the connections between individual experience and cultural context, providing insights that are both deeply personal and culturally significant. When doing ethnography, one studies a culture's practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers) better understand the

³⁰ Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 36, no. 4 (138) (2011): 273.

culture.³¹ Ethnographers do this by becoming participant observers in the culture - that is, by taking field notes as well as their part in and others' engagement with happenings.³²

In autoethnography, researchers use their own stories, memories, and experiences as data. These narratives are typically written in the first person, offering detailed descriptions of the researcher's thoughts, feelings, and actions. By doing so, the researcher's personal experiences are contextualized within a broader cultural, social, or community framework. This means that personal narratives are linked to cultural phenomena, societal norms, and communal practices. While autoethnography often employs traditional ethnographic methods such as participant observation, it is enhanced by self-reflection.

In the case of this thesis, my research question is deeply reliant on the Gateway KSA student program; there is no better way to research and evaluate the nation branding values of Saudi Arabia than by having my experience as a young Western student attending the program be the main source for analysis. Through the usage of autoethnography, not only can the primary experiences of myself and other participants be best presented, as well as the potential shortcomings of the nation branding strategy targeted towards the target youth group, but also be a base on which supportive secondary resources can be confirmed or denied. Ultimately, autoethnography provides a deep, nuanced understanding of the researcher's experiences and offers insights into the culture being studied that differentiates this thesis from comparable research in the field. It delivers a unique insider perspectives that might not be accessible through other research methods, engaging readers on an emotional level and making the research more relatable and impactful.

Ethical considerations

One of the main drawbacks of autoethnography is that the method lacks objectivity: findings from autoethnographic research are often specific and involves sensitive personal disclosures, raising ethical concerns about privacy and the impact of sharing personal stories. Indeed, this thesis is based around evidence of my visit to the Kingdom under the Gateway KSA program from January 2024, meaning that external factors may not be experienced if visiting at a different time or if the program is adjusted at a later cycle. I have specifically requested some of the male participants from the program to share some experiences they had that they believe

³¹ Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 273.

³² Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 274.

we as female participants may not have experienced. Reflexivity is a crucial component of autoethnography as one must continually reflect on their positionality, considering how their personal experiences intersect with the culture they are studying. It is essential to be aware of and transparent about biases, assumptions, and the influence this may have on the research process.

Chapter 1: Background

Branding 1.0: Historical nation branding of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia was formed in 1932 when King Abdulaziz Al Saud, also known as Ibn Saud, united the four warring tribes and regions of the Arabian Peninsula, Najd, Hejaz, Al-Hasa, and Asir, into a single, cohesive nation. This unification marked the conclusion of over three decades of military campaigns and political alliances.³³ Prior to the unification, the Arabian Peninsula was a fragmented and volatile region, characterized by rival tribes, Bedouin nomadic traditions, and religious divides, with the holy cities of Mecca and Medina serving as spiritual centers of the Islamic world.

Hard power and oil

The discovery of oil in 1938 and the nationalisation of the oil company Aramco led to vast economic prosperity for the Kingdom. Since the 1973 oil embargo, Saudi Arabia has become a regional leader and main hard power promoter of Arab interests abroad. Saudi Arabia is one of the founding members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), pursuing oil pricing policies that secure stability to “sustained development of the Saudi Arabian economy and social welfare.”³⁴ Its role as the major oil producer allows it to pressure European and American leaders, making it an important ally in the region to many states.³⁵ It also has the most well-developed military of the Arab countries.

³³ Giulio Gallarotti and Isam Yahia Al-Filali, “Saudi Arabia’s Soft Power,” *International Studies* 49, no. 3–4 (July 2012): 238, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020881714532707>.

³⁴ Al-Otaibi, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” 51.

³⁵ Al-Otaibi, 45.

Saudi Arabia's political structure has been that of an absolute monarchy since its creation.³⁶ The King wields supreme power, with the royal family playing a central role in governance. However, the leadership style and focus of the monarchy have evolved over time. Notable reforms and challenges included managing the oil embargo of the 1970s, fostering relations with Western allies, addressing regional conflicts, and managing the complex dynamics of the Gulf region.

While King Salman remains the official head of state since 2015, it is widely recognized that the current Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has assumed the role of de facto ruler.³⁷

From its origins as a fragmented tribal society to its current role as a global economic and political power, Saudi Arabia's history reflects a unique blend of tradition, religion, and modernization. The Kingdom's leaders, particularly Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, now face the dual challenge of preserving its historical and cultural identity while embracing the demands of a rapidly changing world.

Religion and state affairs

The founding of Saudi Arabia was deeply intertwined with the principles of Wahhabism, a revivalist movement of Sunni Islam established in the 18th century. This alliance between the Al Saud family and the followers of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab laid the foundation for the Kingdom's religious and political identity, which remains central to its governance.³⁸ The Kingdom's name itself, derived from the ruling Al Saud family, reflects the personal and dynastic nature of the state. Another pillar of Saudi power is its importance as the location of Islamic holy sites. Looking at UK-Saudi relations through a nation branding lens, Al-Otaibi writes how Saudi soft power originated through its role in the Hajj³⁹ and its founding of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).⁴⁰ Domestically, Islam is a source of political, social, and cultural values as well as an important part of Saudi national identity.⁴¹ Religious

³⁶ Talal Alqahtani, "The Persuasive Use of Public Relations in Saudi Arabia 2030 Vision" (Ph.D., United States -- Pennsylvania, Duquesne University, 2023), 41, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2813482323/abstract/6AB7C4BE1C854833PQ/1>.

³⁷ Alqahtani, 41.

³⁸ Alqahtani, 41.

³⁹ Al-Otaibi, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," 47. See footnote 1 for explanation on Hajj.

⁴⁰ Al-Otaibi, 49.

⁴¹ Al-Otaibi, 47.

power facilitates domestic and regional support to rein in other countries that seek to influence the Middle East, such as Iran and Qatar.⁴²

Branding 2.0: Vision 2030

Since its publication in 2016, the program has served as the parameter of the nation's economic, social and cultural policymaking, helping to create "a vibrant society, thriving economy and ambitious nation."⁴³ These plans, financed mainly through the revenues of Aramco, have allowed for historic reforms: women were granted more autonomy and the ability to drive, the cinema ban was lifted, and non-Muslim tourist visas became available through which non-Muslim women do not require to veil.⁴⁴ These have motivated many Western countries, critical of the women's rights policies of the country prior to the reforms, to support Vision 2030. The Kingdom has continuously fuelled interest by communicating the projected forecasts achieved by 2030 and sharing progress updates.⁴⁵ Yet, academia is critical of the role of 'vision papers' by authoritarian states: Alderman and Eggeling, having analysed Qatar, Kazakhstan, and Thailand's vision papers, write that "national vision documents [are] vague, short policy planning documents that lay out a course of political, economic, social, or managerial action in the face of considerable uncertainty by making references to a rather distant future."⁴⁶ They argue that "national vision documents are more aspirational than promissory and thus present a safer option for non-democratic regimes to commit their plans to paper. They moreover seek to challenge the traditional geopolitical scripts of the prosperous democratic 'West' and impoverished autocratic 'East' by offering an attractive alternative: a modern, glossy authoritarianism that is culturally unique, politically resilient, and economically more than competitive."⁴⁷ It remains to be determined if this is the case with Vision 2030 as well.

⁴² Jens Heibach, "Public Diplomacy and Regional Leadership Struggles: The Case of Saudi Arabia," *International Politics*, May 28, 2021, 9, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-021-00310-7>.

⁴³ "Saudi Vision 2030," in *Wikipedia*, October 27, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Saudi_Vision_2030&oldid=1182112444#cite_note-1.

⁴⁴ Omar A. Al-Khamees, Brian Yecies, and Christopher Moore, "Cultural Policy Aspirations and the Turn in Saudi Arabia's Video Game Industry," *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, November 2, 2022, 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2022.2135705>.

⁴⁵ Alqahtani, "Public Relations in 2030 Vision," 194.

⁴⁶ Alderman and Eggeling, "Vision Documents," 8.

⁴⁷ Alderman and Eggeling, 9.

Government-sponsored Educational Exchanges

Anholt argued the importance of perceptions on heritage accrued from music, films, art, and literature and perceived excellence in sports. Emphasis on these sectors influences other strands of the index, such as tourism.⁴⁸ Marat concurs and writes that states must approach their international PR campaign strategically because of the wealth of possibilities to form an appealing image. “Unlike national flags and anthems, a country’s international image can be formed [through] scientific innovations, tourist destinations, historical and cultural attractions, famous persons, literary works, nature, movies [etc].”⁴⁹

A scheme used primarily by the United States, Cull writes how inviting international students or professionals to experience the nation’s values can positively affect the state’s image abroad.⁵⁰ A challenge for the Kingdom achieving Vision 2030 comes from negative images by Western audiences. Negative terms such as “dangerous”, “tense mood”, and “unfriendly” were recorded by Hader in his research due to 9/11 attacks.⁵¹ To remedy its bad image abroad, Saudi Arabia has responded by undertaking several public diplomacy initiatives, such as subsidies to Saudi students studying abroad to promote their homeland, applying seven locations to the World Heritage list at UNESCO, ramping up its humanitarian aid contributions to the United Nations and regional NGOs and organizing historical visits, such as between King Abdullah and Pope Benedict XVI in Rome, despite Saudi Arabia having no diplomatic representation within the Vatican.⁵² It has also attracted famous sportsmen, such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Karim Benzema, who speak positively of their experience at Saudi football clubs.⁵³

Most recently, Saudi nation branding has been lucratively disseminated through influencer and student cultural exchanges. In 2019, the Saudi Arabia Ministry of Tourism launched the #VisitSaudi campaign to encourage tourism to the Kingdom. Over 50 influencers worldwide

⁴⁸ Anholt, *Competitive Identity*.

⁴⁹ Erica Marat, “Nation Branding in Central Asia: A New Campaign to Present Ideas about the State and the Nation,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 7 (2009): 1128.

⁵⁰ Cull, 34.

⁵¹ Majed Hader, “American College Students’ Perceptions of Saudi Arabia as a Travel Destination,” *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (M.S., United States -- New York, Rochester Institute of Technology, 2017), 86, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2002556682/abstract/275F3313A3EB4C71PQ/1>.

⁵² Al-Otaibi, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” 22.

⁵³ Fabrizio Romano, “Karim Benzema Signs Deal to Join Saudi Arabia’s Al-Ittihad from Real Madrid,” *The Guardian*, June 5, 2023, sec. Football, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2023/jun/05/karim-benzema-signs-deal-saudi-arabia-al-ittihad-real-madrid-lionel-messi>.

were invited on a week-long trip through the country by Gateway KSA.⁵⁴ During their stay, influencers were encouraged to take photos at the country's landmarks.⁵⁵ This program has now been tailored to target students from high-ranking Western universities.

⁵⁴ Eden Gillespie, "The Instagram Influencers Hired to Rehabilitate Saudi Arabia's Image," *The Guardian*, October 11, 2019, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/12/the-instagram-influencers-hired-to-rehabilitate-saudi-arabias-image>.

⁵⁵ Gillespie.

Chapter 2: Data collection and key themes

The package of the trip was presented as an educational program for “young men and women who can see beyond today’s headlines and tweets to imagine and shape a future of openness, collaboration, and innovation together.”⁵⁶ The program was designed to invite “a small and diverse cohort of exceptional students from elite universities to undertake a personal learning journey.”⁵⁷ The goal of the program was to “challenge each other to learn more about themselves and [Saudi’s] vibrant country’s ambitious young population.”⁵⁸

As per the requirements that made me the target audience, the group consisted of:

Gender	Origin	Particularities
Male	German	Interest in security
Male	English	Mining and energy studies
Male	American	Middle-Eastern studies
Male	Spanish	Energy and precious metals studies
Female	Indian	Learning Arabic in Lebanon
Female	English	Came from Indian background
Female	French	War and anti-terrorism studies
Female	American	Middle East minor
Female	Italian	Lived in Lebanon
Female	Danish	Refugee studies
Female	English	Muslim; Ghanese heritage
Female	French	Learning Arabic


Table 1: Description of other participants

The target audience consisted of students from North American and European universities with a pre-existing interest in themes that, as we came to learn through this program, played an important role in Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 goals. Keeping all of this in mind, I was the ideal target audience, attending an elite Dutch university with an interest in learning more about the region. It is interesting to point out that one participating student researched flows of migration, a study with a slightly different scope. Moreover, only one participant identified as Muslim,

⁵⁶ “Who Is It for | Saudi Arabia,” Gateway KSA, accessed October 6, 2024, <https://www.GatewayKSA.com/who-is-it-for>.

⁵⁷ “Who Is It for | Saudi Arabia.”

⁵⁸ “Who Is It for | Saudi Arabia.”



SAT 13	SUN 14	MON 15	TUES 16	WED 17	THURS 18	FRI 19	SAT 20	SUN 21	MON 22	TUES 23	WED 24
Riyadh	Riyadh	Riyadh	Riyadh	Riyadh	Riyadh	AlUla	AlUla	Jeddah	Jeddah	Jeddah	Jeddah
Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast
Panel Discussion Dr. Wael Al Idrissi 9:00 - 10:30	Almaramat 10:00 - 11:00	Koforlet 10:00 - 11:00	KAPSARC 9:30 - 11:00	Travel Time 06:00				Jeddah Chamber of Commerce 10:00 - 11:00			
KCFRS Tour 10:30 - 10:50	STC Academy 10:00 - 14:30	Gulf Research Centre 12:00 - 13:30	Lunch at Riyadh Front 12:00 - 13:00					Ettel University 11:45 - 12:45	ALUST 9:00 - 15:00		Boat Trip 09:00 - 15:00
Panel Discussion Dr Mansour Al Marzouqi 11:00 - 12:20	Lunch at Mama Nouza 12:30 - 13:30	Lunch at The Zone 14:00 - 16:00	Break at the Hotel 14:00 - 16:30					Travel Time			
Arrival Day	Lunch at KFCBS 12:30 - 13:30	Break at the Hotel 14:00 - 17:00	Break at the Hotel 16:00 - 18:00					Break at the Hotel 14:30 - 17:00			
Panel Discussion Dr. Huda Al Hadi and Dr. Ghazi Bin Zayd 13:40 - 15:30	Driyah Tour and Dinner 17:00 - 19:30	Dinner at Hayti Village 18:30 - 20:00	Boulevard City Tour and Dinner 16:00 - 19:30					Lunch at Maqaber 13:30 - 14:30			Break at the Hotel 16:30 - 19:00
Dinner at The Zone 18:30 - 20:00								Break at the Hotel 14:30 - 17:00	Opinion Piece Submission 18:00		Firewall Dinner 19:00
								Arrival to Jeddah			First Departures

● All activities highlighted in this colour require formal and Medical advice
● The item is of high priority/very formal
● All activities highlighted in this colour indicated travel time
● All activities highlighted in this colour indicated Short Casual attire needed

which further explains the scope of the target audience as being non-Muslim, thus not interested in a Hajj. Lastly, more young women than men were invited onto the trip, which can be seen as the Kingdom wanting to persuade especially young, educated, non-Muslim women to learn about the new nation branding. Starting with this target audience, which already has studied subjects related to the region or have a background in Middle Eastern studies, is sure to facilitate the cultural similarities as they are already familiar with the norms and values of the

region. Per such, students having looked at the history of the region and knowing the recent past of Saudi Arabia are more likely to see progress where those who have not might see deficiencies.

The program was split over 10 days in which we visited three separate locations: Riyadh, where we had formal panel discussions on subjects related to International Law, Saudi international policy, and the role of women in Saudi Arabia through Vision 2030. We also visited the King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Centre (KAPSARC) while in Riyadh. We then travelled to Al Ula for three days where we learned about the cultural heritage of Saudi Arabia. Lastly, we travelled to Jeddah, a city that was promoted to us as being the “most liberal” Saudi city. At the end of the trip, we were required to write an opinion piece about our experience on the trip and our perceived strengths and weaknesses of Saudi Arabia. This will become relevant later. I would like to focus on events that covered the Nation Brand Hexagon by Anholt:

People and Governance: Panel Discussions with Dr. Wael al Idrissi & Dr Mansour al Marzouqi

One of the first activities we took part in when arriving to Saudi Arabia was a full day in Riyadh of panel discussions with experts in international relations and foreign affairs. I believe that the goal of this was to give us a lens through which the rest of the trip could be viewed. Note that all the speakers had been educated in the United States at top universities and held high ranking positions in the current government. They were all well versed in government policies and Saudi Arabian stances and spoke flawless English.

First was Dr. Al Idrissi, who spoke mainly on Saudi Arabia’s international law instrumentation. Through the panel discussion it became clear that Saudi Arabia is sceptical about international

law principles and is more interested in bringing about *Islamic* international law principles. According to Dr Al Idrissi, Islamic Sharia law focuses on peace and coexistence. He mentioned that according to Islamic law, all Muslims must abide by signed contracts, resolution to peace through arbitration, the acceptance of refugees and following rules in war, such as not attacking children, women, wounded and war prisoners (naming the Geneva Convention as their pillars of humanitarian law). When asked what the difference was with the UN Charter, he mentioned that Islamic systems allow for the respect of national culture and differences in interpretation. He gave the example of same-sex marriage, something that Saudi Arabia does not want to recognise. Saudi Arabia also does not like recourse to the ICJ and prefer settlement in bilateral agreements. In this, he spoke of a “legislative renaissance” through multilateral and bilateral partnerships in line with Vision 2030. The panel discussion made it clear that Saudi Arabia’s role in international law is its recognition of cultural interpretation. He did mention the importance of environmental protection as a human right and names the Saudi Green Initiative (planting 1 billion trees by 2030) as examples of Saudi Arabia doing so.

When asked about Saudi Arabia’s participation in the war in Yemen, he named the Houthis “who violate Saudi sovereignty” as the cause: “they were created by Iran, which is the creator of disorder in the region”. He named the coalition made up of the United Arab Emirates with Saudi Arabia as having for goal to restore peace in Yemen, endorsing the 2216 UN Security Council resolution. In all, when debating the responsibility to protect (R2P) versus non-interference, Saudi Arabia’s policy is “one of peaceful solution for all conflict in which force must be only used as a last resort.” When asked about Palestine, he mentioned the importance of a two-state solution with Israel and the role that Saudi Arabia plays in humanitarian efforts and diplomatic negotiations. He denounced colonial occupation yet welcomes normalisation with Israel when a Palestinian state is created and recognised, thus ending the occupation. He named the war crimes in Gaza and calls them ‘catastrophic’.

Dr. Mansour Al Marzouqi was our second speaker, who focused mainly on Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy and ambitions in the international sphere of influence. He started off running us through what he considered to be the philosophical colonial biases in the academic and mediatic focuses of the Middle East. He considered ‘Arabhood’ not to be ethnic, but a cultural sphere on the basis of the Arabic language. He declared Arabhood as a system of values that are in essence adopted into Islam (so Islam equals Arab?). He made a couple of statements,

such as the fact that the Arab Spring was created by Tunisia's elite, not the people, expelling an anti-West president. He uses World Systems Theory,⁵⁹ placing Saudi Arabia into the semi-periphery: "countries in the periphery are always compared in their similarity to the West in order to be considered modern. Saudi Arabia is often only study to anthropology instead of through international relations theories." Yet, he called Saudi Arabia as "the cradle and bridge of civilisations". To him, Saudi Arabia:

1. Is a status-quo power.
2. Is a middle-size, swaying power which is important to foreign affairs.
3. Sees the world through prisms of nation-state for peace and for legitimate violence. This is a very realist perspective, not supportive of international organisations.
4. Considers itself to be surrounded by failed states; "we cannot for our security allow that."
5. Has an economic capacity greater than their market: "for 8,000 years we have been a trading nation for men and women. Back then, caravans and spices, now oil and gas, the future is hydrogen and solar."

According to him, Vision 2030 cannot succeed without an Iranian economy; the Middle East must be stable through a prosperous Iran, Iraq, Morocco, and a stable, Yemen, Egypt, and Jordan. An interesting point was his argument that "morality is a secondary justification to war; the main one being trade routes." For example, he did not consider weaponizing oil a smart move.

He said Saudi Arabia wants to unite people to the "glorious political force of the first Kingdom." He considers that to avoid ending up in a "development trap", Saudi Arabia needs stability and good management. He considered one of the strengths to be the young, highly educated population in Saudi Arabia (about 47% of the population being under the age of 30). "Saudi Arabia already has a seat; nothing can be done in the region without us".

Export and Investment/Immigration: KAPCARC

We attended a multi-paneled discussion with executive directors of KAPSARC. In this meeting we spoke about macroeconomic sustainability programs and climate change agreements.

⁵⁹ World Systems Theory was created to define the power dynamics on a international scale. I will define this further in Chapter 3.

According to the speakers, Saudi Arabia's main priority is an economy away from oil (they mention Vision 2030). They mentioned that macro-economic impacts public policy on energy, fiscal, environmental, financial and monetary policies. They also spoke on how OPEC, led by Saudi Arabia, would bring stability to the oil market to avoid volatile economic changes. Yet, they mentioned that the oil revenue is impacted/constrained by climate agreements and that they deem climate agreement on the international level as unfair, limiting developing countries from growing. This is a thematic that comes back multiple times.

They were critical of the 2015 Paris Agreements; "it is not going to be reached for a multitude of reasons." Firstly, they argued that petrochemicals are still irreplaceable in our world today. Secondly, they mention that it is an aspirational goal and that 2030 was way too early of a date to plan this by, and that is why they said they would a net zero by 2050. Furthermore, they considered climate agreements to be a battle of narratives between normative and formative approaches. "On one side the EU, the United States and Canada are arguing for environmental policies on a global level. With them poorer countries which receive aid but due to a lack of infrastructure would only be able to participate with the financial aid of the EU, the US and Canada. On the other side, countries such as China, Saudi Arabia and India, which are current emerging economies who will receive no aid but will be expected to make the changes." They are fearful that if policies of environmental climate change-related impacts are put into place, "they will lose their position on the international stage as emerging powers and once again become poor." However, KAPSARC acts hopeful of renewable energy being cheaper on the long term and points to the importance of choosing between mitigation and adaptation projects which do not cost the same, do not hold the same market interests and have different outcomes.

Culture/ heritage and Tourism: Al Ula Tombs visit

Our visit to Al Ula manifested the cultural heritage feature of the program, of which the tomb visit was one of the highlights. It became clear that the Kingdom intends to make the region a touristic hotspot similar to Petra in Jordan, showcasing the 3,000-year-old heritage of the Kingdom while legitimizing current rule.

While visiting the Sharaan Nature Reserve, the area within the Al Ula region that the government is currently developing for tourism, we visited the Museum of Al Ula's history which detailed the archaeological findings of the region dating from 100-900 BCE to modern times, including the Roman presence, pre-Islamic Nabatean Kingdoms (heavily emphasised)

and the Islamic Golden Age. We then visited the Dadan Lion tombs (ancient burial sites by pre-Islamic kingdoms), the Elephant rock (a rock shaped like an elephant within the overall rocky desert environment of Al Ula which now houses a majlis café area underneath for tourists) and received a guided tour through the ancient burial houses of the Nabatean people, the same society that built the Petra burial houses in Jordan. While on the tour through the tombs area, we were told of the pilgrimage routes and the crossing of many different religions and languages over Saudi history, from pre-Islamic faiths and Nabatean ancient Arabic. In this, the guide explained that Saudi Arabia “has always been a tolerant Kingdom of trade and passage for all religions”. The recognition of the 8 heritage sites in the Hegra region by UNESCO was heavily discoursed.

People/ Culture: Women Rights experience in Al Ula street party and Dr. Huda Al Halabis

We participated in a panel discussion on the role of Vision 2030 in improving the rights of women in the Kingdom. Dr. Huda Al Halabis, the speaker, was the first woman on the Shura Council in Saudi Arabia as part of the 2013 women quota of approximately 20% of the council put in place by the king. She sat on the council seat for 12 years before passing the torch on to new generation of women. She said that since 1948, the Kingdom changed due to oil being found: the infrastructure went from desert to cities at a fast pace, and with that, historically traditional rules changed too.

She argued that gender progress had been difficult in the Kingdom for a couple of reasons, the first being its identity as a tribal society, which is patriarchal by nature. It took many years before girls’ education became acceptable: the first school for boys was opened in 1942; the first elite girl school in 1961. The female literacy rate was 2% in 1962 while now it is 99%. This first school allowed elite young girls to go study in France. Notice that this applied only to girls from wealthy families. To her, education is everything: “we need knowledge for the job market”; in this progress in Saudi Arabia has been economically, led by the need to use the entire population in the workforce. Secondly, religious backlash to changes had been very important in the last couple of decades. She argued that the conservative nature of Saudi Arabia started to only become implemented at national level in 1979, with the Iranian Islamic Revolution giving birth to a very conservative movement of Islam in the region. She mentioned that prior to the revolution, women driving in the countryside was not seen as shocking and only became so afterwards. She said that one still sees remnants of this in rural societies in Saudi Arabia. When asked questions about the religious police, she said that “they have

disappeared for women. They now focus mainly on drug usage.” Indeed, she mentioned that the veil is no longer mandatory to be worn, and that the King had also liberalised the wearing of the abaya.

She argued that while laws change quickly, mentalities move slowly. Nevertheless, women already marry later and have less children and 37% of the country’s women are in the workforce. This is mostly young women. Yet, she maintained that “you need laws for change to become status quo.” She argued that for young people to believe in women’s rights, they need to hear it from young leaders. There is currently still a quota in place in the Shura Council, seeing as “there would not be enough votes for women without it.” She said that “Saudi Arabia has learned from the West. We have taken what worked and have left what did not work”.

She further argued that Saudi Arabia is improving the situation of women faster than some Western countries and denounced the loss of “the family unit which solidify society” from Western countries. She argued that one does not need to imitate the West to be modern. “Identities, live without traditions, family, values and religious emphasis”. She gave the example that childcare should be encouraged: “women should be facilitated, not challenged, in having families *and* careers”. She asked that all of us remember the following from our trip:

1. Respect the values of each country and their religious background.
2. Actually listen to the demands and requests of women.
3. The pace and the goal are organic. It cannot be forced over a couple of months. It takes education, understanding and patience.

In this, Vision 2030 is again mentioned as an important step. She also brought up as an example the democratisation of sports in the country. She said that they observed a 368% increase in sports of women from 2019 to 2023. She concluded with advice: “talk to people, keep an open mind and fight stereotypes. We are all very similar. There is no one value system that is better than others, discover the riches of Saudi Arabia, listen and give back”.

Yet, on our trip to Al Ula, we stopped at a new district of Al Ula, which was built to resemble the old city centre, to have some local cuisine at a majlis-style table. There was live music that night, and some girls and I were excited to go join the festivities after dinner. After we ate, we journeyed with the whole group to the music area, but quickly came to notice that the women

were not dancing. While the men grouped together in the middle of the square to dance and sing together, the local (all fully veiled, including the niqab unlike in Jeddah and most of Riyadh) women were softly clapping to the rhythm on the side. While the boys in our group were immediately allowed into the group of men dancing, we were not allowed to join in.

Note about our stay: we were put in luxury hotels throughout our trip; in Al Ula, we stayed in a 4-star desert resort surrounded by the ancient cliffs and a big pool. When in Jeddah and Riyadh, we stayed at internationally recognized hotel chains. While there was a pool, I did not as a woman feel comfortable using the mixed amenities.

Speaking to locals: we got to speak to some locals on this trip; all spoke impeccable English and were well-versed in the subjects they presented to us. All the women were married with children. Some were veiled, veiled only at formal occasions or covered facially; the latter was our guide in Al Ula, whose nail art I complimented by the end of the visit. She shared with me that she removed it five times a day to pray as “prayer with nail polish is not heard”. She shared that unlike in Europe, “the full veil is not a challenge for me to have a career in Saudi Arabia”

Chapter 3: Analysis

Gateway KSA reflects Saudi Arabia's stages of nation branding

When considering the stages of nation branding as proposed by Giannopoulos, Piha, and Avlonitis as presented in our theoretical framework, it becomes evident that Saudi Arabia regards its Development Stage as complete. Through Vision 2030, the Kingdom has established and articulated its brand positioning, which, as described by Alderman and Eggeling, represents “a modern, glossy authoritarianism that is culturally unique, politically resilient, and economically competitive.”⁶⁰ The Gateway KSA program also demonstrates that these shared brand values have been disseminated to various stakeholders within the Kingdom: during the panel discussions, KAPSARC and Al Ula, the messaging of Vision 2030 was explicitly emphasized. Vision 2030 thus serves as a unifying framework throughout the Gateway KSA initiative, ensuring alignment with shared brand values and consistency in nation branding messaging, as per the framework.

Saudi Arabia has entered the maintenance stage of nation branding in which Gateway KSA plays a pivotal role. Portfolio Management is not yet fully complete, as the Kingdom continues to develop major projects such as the Al Ula Sharaan Nature Reserve. Its current stage remains critical for refining brand positioning to resonate more effectively with target audiences. Feedback during this phase is vital to assess the nation brand's performance, authenticity, and credibility. The existence of Gateway KSA now is not a coincidence: programs such as Gateway KSA serve as a continuous marketing mechanism of the target audience (to be discussed in detail in the next section). Cross-cultural educational exchange programs like this function as deliberate tools to express and promote Saudi Arabia's evolving identity, emphasizing its commitment to education, cultural exchange, and international collaboration. Saudi Arabia's nation branding strategy is evident not only in the structure of the Gateway KSA program but also in the systematic monitoring of brand performance during this maintenance phase. For instance, Gateway KSA collects feedback from participants through opinion pieces and live discussions, identifying potential shortcomings and areas for improvement in the branding broadcasting. In this way, Gateway KSA serves as a direct instrument for

⁶⁰ Alderman and Eggeling, “Vision Documents,” 9.

broadcasting, monitoring, and reevaluating Saudi Arabia's nation branding goals. It is thus not unfitting to consider that the program will exist until the Institute decides that the desired representation has been achieved. In conclusion, through literature from Anholt as well as Giannopoulos, Piha, and Avlonitis, the Gateway KSA program aligns with Saudi Arabia's nation branding objectives. Beyond its operational aspects, the program itself embodies the Kingdom's commitment to advancing its global image and identity and helps us identify the stage of Saudi Arabia's nation branding strategy.

Gateway KSA reflects the target audience of Vision2030

As discussed in Chapter 2, I initially believed that Gateway KSA invited students from elite universities with an existing interest in the region to foster understanding of Saudi Arabia's vision and facilitating their positive reaction on the program. But upon further reflection, it is clear that this is the general target audience of Vision 2030: open-minded, diplomatic, and law-abiding intellectual elites. As supported by Fauve's research, convincing the intellectual elite of foreign countries to embrace an innovative brand is both strategic and effective, as it enhances authenticity and credibility.⁶¹ Through Gateway KSA, Saudi Arabia engages the next generation of policymakers and business leaders, students from elite Western universities with globally-oriented academic backgrounds, to associate the Kingdom with welfare, opportunity, tolerance, and a strong system of Islamic values they hold on to. The participants of Gateway KSA become the broadcasters of Saudi Arabia's brand credibility. Their positive experiences during the trip are likely to influence the long-term perception of the Kingdom, and as these students progress into influential careers, they will propagate this image. This contradicts the perception by Szondi that nation branding must be mass oriented; Fauve's theory that nation branding has similarity to public diplomacy targeting elite audience is thus more accurate. Therefore, Gateway KSA exemplifies a strategic approach to nation branding, demonstrating that targeting an elite audience, rather than the masses, can yield long-term influence and foster meaningful, credible global perceptions of Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, the luxurious accommodations and exceptional hospitality provided throughout the trip underline the Kingdom's intention to attract an audience that values such experiences, and willing to pay for similar offerings in the future. Additionally, Saudi Arabia aims to engage

⁶¹ Fauve, "Global Astana," 120.

intellectual elites who are open to having their opinions altered and who can contribute to improving the Kingdom's global image. For instance, our visit to KAPSARC resembled a business pitch, particularly when presenting initiatives such as the mission to achieve Net Zero by 2050. They also seem very enthusiastic when people in the group mentioned their interest in working for the organisation. This highlights Saudi Arabia's dual goals: attracting elite foreign talent to enrich its economy in the long term, while drawing in high-end tourists on the short term.

Another notable aspect of the program is its promotion strategy, which, once again, aligns with the nation branding goals. Participants were encouraged to post their journey on social media throughout the trip. However, the program's direct online presence remains narrow, relying instead on word-of-mouth promotion and participant-generated content, such as social media posts highlighting Saudi Arabia's tourism destinations. This approach not only fosters exclusivity but also reinforces the image of Saudi Arabia as a high-end, ground-breaking, and modern country. The exclusivity of the program, as well as its reliance on participants as the primary sources of promotion, further reflects the deliberate branding strategy.

In the broader context, Gateway KSA embodies Alderman's theory that "economic development is placed alongside international recognition and prestige, with ultimate success reliant on cultivating the 'right' citizen behaviour; behaviour that aligns with the ruling elite's vision for the future."⁶² Gateway KSA engages the next generation of influential leaders, employing exclusive promotional methods, and leveraging the credibility of Western elites to advance the Kingdom's marketing and branding strategy. The representation of Saudi Arabia through the Gateway KSA program is very clearly intentioned; by targeting young individuals from diverse international backgrounds, Gateway KSA serves as a conduit for cultural diplomacy, with the potential intent of shaping favourable perceptions of Saudi Arabia among future global leaders. However, the effectiveness of this nation branding strategy is contingent upon how these representations are received and interpreted.

⁶² Alderman and Eggeling, "Vision Documents," 8.

Gateway KSA reflects Saudi Arabia as a trading nation

Gateway KSA clearly shows Saudi Arabia's goal of being viewed as an epicenter of trade in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia's economic policies have become more liberal, like neighboring UAE, but with Islamic values incorporated.

When creating strategic narratives, it is vital to create a branding that is rooted in a historical narrative.⁶³ In this, Al Ula serves the Vision 2030 nation brand as evidence of Saudi Arabia's long history as the epicenter of trade dating back to 100-900 BCE North Arabian Kingdoms all the way to modern times, while passing the Roman presence, pre-Islamic Nabatean Kingdoms (heavily emphasised) and the Islamic Golden Age. Al Ula Museum strategically traces back the importance of the Arabian Kingdoms in Saudi territory in the trade of silks, dyes and foods. It also cements Saudi religious hegemony, documenting the pilgrimage to Medina through Al Ula. By acknowledging its pre-Islamic past, the Kingdom *represents* itself as a site of cultural continuity, attracting foreign audiences while repurposing their cultural heritage into an economic brand consistent with its ideological commitment to Islam.

This links well with the current Saudi policy which prioritizes the economic strategic brand as a trade route. The speakers presented Saudi dedication to peace within the region to allow for prosperity, even if this requires military action. Quoting Dr. Al Marzouqi, "morality is a secondary justification to war; the main one being trade routes." Saudi Arabia views global relations through the lens of nation-state sovereignty, asserting that its military interventions, such as in Yemen, are essential for regional stability. According to Dr. Al Marzouqi, the success of Vision 2030 depends on a stable Middle East, with a prosperous Iran, Iraq, Morocco, and stable Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen as key to this vision. This would also explain consideration of normalization with Israel:⁶⁴ peace and coexistence for economic welfare. Thus, the cultural power it attributes through historical recognition on trade and economic epicenter provides justification for their political and military hegemony in the region, in line with the Vision 2030. This is done quite smartly; not only does the country become more economically interesting to foreign investment projects, but it also lets Saudi Arabia keep its unique selling

⁶³ Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Zeng, *One Belt, One Road, One Story?*

⁶⁴ Al Jazeera Staff, "What's Happening with Normalising Ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel?," *Al Jazeera*, accessed December 3, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/21/whats-happening-with-normalising-ties-between-saudi-arabia-and-israel>.

point as the Islamic world capital to its existing allies and provides policies with an allure of authenticity and consistency. Saudi Arabia has rendered their hegemony in the region as justifiable under economic prosperity, an extra layer that their previous nation branding (see Chapter 1) did not yet have.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia wants to put the emphasis on their young and inclusive workforce as evidence of their strength as a potential business partner. Saudi Arabia has made significant strides in creating supportive work environments that empower women to participate more actively in the workforce. Recognizing the economic and social potential of its female population, the country is implementing initiatives to make working more feasible and attractive for women. To this end, Saudi Arabia offers free childcare services, easing a substantial financial and logistical burden for working mothers. Financial incentives are also provided to working families, reinforcing the state's commitment to inclusive economic development. Dr. Al Halabi highlighted the broader importance of these changes, pointing out that Saudi Arabia could not afford to overlook 47% of its population, a demographic essential to achieving sustained economic growth and diversity in the workforce. While these reforms serve economic objectives, they also signal a growing recognition of women's essential contributions to society. The tour guide in Al Ula said that unlike in Europe, “the full veil is not a challenge for me to have a career in Saudi Arabia.” This approach demonstrates that modernization in Saudi Arabia does not need to compromise Islamic values, positioning the Kingdom as a leader of “modern Islam” in governance and workforce, which appeals to both broader world powers and conservative Gulf allies.

In short, Saudi Arabia's nation branding for Vision 2030 showcases the Kingdom as a historic trade center with deep cultural roots, particularly in the Al Ula region and through the travels to Medina and Mecca. This effort strategically balances economic liberalization and social reform within Islamic values, making Saudi Arabia attractive for foreign investment while preserving its unique position as the heart of the Islamic world.

Gateway KSA reflects Saudi Arabia as innovation hegemon

Saudi Arabia is determined to be branded the epicentre of innovation in the Middle East and wants to be perceived as a land of opportunities that plays by its own rules, outstaging existing powers and reclaiming their narrative in a strategic way.

Reclaiming Arabhood as a narrative

Firstly, Saudi Arabia is redefining its cultural sphere of influence through the Arabic language. One of the most interesting parts of the panel discussions we had was the cementation of the nation's foreign policy into the greater Vision 2030 brand. Dr. Al Marzouqi challenged the supposed philosophical colonial biases embedded in the academic and media discourses of the Middle East, presenting Arabhood as a system of values inherently adopted from Islam, effectively equating Arabhood with Islam. He also employed World Systems Theory to frame Saudi Arabia's geopolitical aspirations, positioning the Kingdom as a semi-periphery state striving to establish its *own* Core within the region. World Systems Theory, which categorizes nations into Cores (dominant economic and cultural centers), Semi-peripheries (states with intermediate influence), and Peripheries (dependent or marginalized states),⁶⁵ is particularly intriguing in this context. By using this framework, Dr. Al Marzouqi underscores Saudi Arabia's ambition to transition from a semi-peripheral state into a Core, exerting influence not only as the religious capital of Sunni Islam but also as the pacesetter of Arab values. Saudi Arabia is reclaiming 'Arabhood' to fit the Vision 2030 goals, thus reclaiming the narrative to benefit the representation of Saudi Arabia in their nation branding. It also places Saudi's foreign policy in the Core's scholarly language, it creates credibility and hones the preparedness of the Saudis for their aspiring role. This ambition aligns with the Vision 2030 goal of establishing Saudi Arabia as the religious, economic, and cultural leader of the Middle East. Gateway KSA reinforces this narrative, sharing to its visiting Core-nationals the message that Saudi Arabia is a trendsetting dominion.

Furthermore, Dr. Al Marzouqi's strategic usage of the terms 'positive neutrality' describing Saudi's foreign strategy, coupled with Dr. Al Idrissi's notion of a "legislative renaissance" through multilateral and bilateral partnerships under Vision 2030, reflects the Kingdom's adherence to realist principles while maintaining a critical stance toward Core-led institutions. As Dr. Al Idrissi highlights, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy priorities are rooted in Islamic Sharia law, advocating peace on its own terms. This selective engagement with international norms enables the Kingdom to reject principles it views as inconsistent with its religious values, such as same-sex marriage rights, while selectively adopting norms that align with its interests.

⁶⁵ P. Nick Kardulias, *World-Systems Theory in Practice: Leadership, Production, and Exchange* (Lanham (Md) Boulder (Colo.) New York [etc]: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

Additionally, Saudi Arabia's preference for bilateral agreements over reliance on the International Court of Justice illustrates its commitment to retaining control over conflict resolution, further asserting its sovereignty as part of the nation branding efforts.

Investment into mega-events

This does not mean that Saudi Arabia is not fully investing in their mass branding image simultaneously; indeed, they are aiming to become the capital of the Middle East in ambitious and innovative projects. In this, the plan to put forth the Kingdom is through the organization of mega-events of international importance. This was successfully done by the UAE and Qatar, hosting the COP 28 and the FIFA World Cup respectively.⁶⁶ In recent years, they have invested in organizing wrestling matches trying to attract events with an international audience, mainly young men interested in sports.⁶⁷ In November 2023, Saudi Arabia won the bid to organize the next World Expo in 2030, the year of the Vision 2030 plan, a symbolic opening of the Kingdom to the world.⁶⁸ The bid was aided by football star Cristiano Ronaldo, who plays for the capital's Al Nasser club since 2023.⁶⁹ They also have a desire to organize the Asian Winter Games in 2029 in the new Neom area of Saudi Arabia, a highly ambitious project to turn the mountain of the region into a luxury resort area,⁷⁰ and eventually the FIFA Women's World Cup in 2035,⁷¹ a huge step for the recognition of women in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia's attractiveness for Vision 2030, promoted through Gateway KSA, inclines towards hosting mega-events. Winning the Expo bid positions Saudi Arabia as a hub for international culture and innovation, allowing the world to witness its progress in the meantime. The pursuit of hosting other major events, including the Asian Winter Games in the futuristic city of Neom and a potential FIFA Women's World Cup in 2035, reflects a desire to engage international audiences; involving high-profile figures like Cristiano Ronaldo captures the attention of younger, global demographics and bolster its representation. Furthermore, the ambition to turn Al Ula, a relatively unknown region of the country, into an epicentre of

⁶⁶ Alyssa Guerrouche, "Looking The Part: Comparing Visual Modes Of Nation Branding During International Mega-Events In Qatar And Dubai, United Arab Emirates" (The Hague, Leiden University, 2023).

⁶⁷ Al-Khamees, Yecies, and Moore, "Saudi Cultural Aspirations."

⁶⁸ Kenny Linn, "Delivering Saudi Arabia's Pipeline of Mega-Events," accessed November 13, 2024, <https://www.pwc.com/m1/en/media-centre/articles/delivering-saudi-arabias-pipeline-of-mega-events.html>.

⁶⁹ Kenny Linn.

⁷⁰ Kenny Linn.

⁷¹ Kenny Linn.

environmental and outdoors, tourism, with a focus on cultural heritage through the recognition of many landmarks by UNESCO (currently eight recognized) is sign of their ambitions and their outlook onto the future.

Innovation through technocratic climate-change solutions

The Kingdom is using innovation solutions to climate change as part of the wider desire to rebrand into a forward-thinking, innovative global player on their own terms: KAPSARC was used on the program to showcase Saudi Arabia's upholding and furthering climate change-related policy and research. The KAPSARC visit taught us that exponential revenue allows the Kingdom to product innovative sustainability projects in a way many European countries can only dream of. The people we spoke to argued Saudi Arabia is an economic capacity greater than their market: "for 8,000 years we have been a trading nation for men and women. Then caravans and spices, now oil and gas, the future is hydrogen and solar." They explicitly mention their venture into green energy and the Saudi Green Initiative, which is striding to plant 1 billion trees by 2030. This reverses the previous branding of Saudi Arabia as an oil-based economy, and thus promotes its diversification. The usage of funds for sustainability projects, such as huge solar panel parks, has provided Saudi Arabia with the ability to genuinely take meaningful actions and become fully net-zero by 2050. Through institutions like KAPSARC, Saudi Arabia's environmental initiatives add complexity to its branding, presenting the Kingdom as a leader in sustainable innovation while diversifying its oil-based economy.

Moreover, this commitment to sustainability coexists with ongoing oil production, reflecting a pragmatic approach to economic growth. Saudi officials view certain climate agreements with scepticism, seeing them as potential restrictions on developing economies. This narrative positions Saudi Arabia as a responsible actor in environmental policy while also defending the interests of the BRICS powers, appealing to nations that share its critical view of Western-led climate initiatives. While some may see these sustainability efforts as greenwashing, the Kingdom's advancements in research and technology demonstrate a genuine interest in positioning itself as a leader in environmental innovation. This approach aligns with Vision 2030's goal of economic diversification, signalling a shift from an oil-dependent economy to one driven by knowledge and technology.

However, concerns around academic freedom and censorship could impact Saudi Arabia's credibility in the international academic community, as questions remain about the openness

of its research environment. It is also notable to point out that the sustainability goals are so far the only goal that is set further than 2030, which could indicate that the kingdom is prioritizing a brand that is economically and socially powerful than one that is uniquely sustainable. As the KAPSARC employees shared, Saudi Arabia is never planning of stopping its oil sale nor production. Its leadership considers the COP “a trap meant to keep developing countries poor.” Furthermore, executives consider climate agreements to be a battle of narratives between normative and formative approaches. Thus, their sustainability branding can be viewed as a slightly insincere policy with a lack of genuine belief in its purpose on a macro scale.

Gateway KSA reflects the need to expand gendered shortcomings

While the previous nation branding goals have been effectually promoted through the Gateway KSA program, the experiences of female participants were an observable shortcoming. Although it seems that much of the country has become more accommodating to non-Muslim women by lifting the mandatory veil requirement and easing regulations around the abaya, this shift has proven to be more symbolic than transformative. For example, all the women on our trip were still required to wear an abaya at every "formal" occasion, except for events at Al Ula. This reinforces the view that the abaya remains essential for women to be taken seriously in society, insinuating that choosing not to wear one can signal a lack of respectability or moral restraint, drawing parallels to stereotypes of Western women as 'loose' and implying that not covering up is inviting unwanted attention. By the time we reached Al Ula, however, wearing the abaya had already become second nature that most participants always kept in on. The men on the trip were not required to wear the traditional attire, indicating that the expectation of women to adjust to Saudi culture remains stronger than expat men.

Furthermore, when seeing the Saudi women, apart from our tour guide and the parliament member, we did not meet a single other woman of all ages that was not at least wearing an abaya. In the Al Ula area, which is more rural but opening itself for tourism, most women were also wearing a face-covering niqab. Gateway KSA made it clear that while most legal restraints have been removed, the cultural pressure for women still needs to change; An example of the inherent cultural pressure is the opposition between legal ability and cultural acceptance of women in public spaces: at the first hotel, we were told that we were allowed to use the outdoor pool. Yet, the pool's placement directly in view of the hotel lobby left me and others feeling as though our presence in a two-piece swimsuit would be judged or observed. The subtle feelings of shame came subconsciously that the female body was not entirely welcome in shared spaces.

Legally, we could use the pool, but the social pressures felt made that choice uncomfortable. The restaurant divisions were also interesting; while there is no more legal segregation of genders, no women were sitting next to the men on the general floor of the building, opting, like before the legislation change, for the upstairs area.

One could argue that even legally there are still some challenges in getting young Saudi men accepting of women in leadership; there is currently still a quota in place in the Shura Council, seeing as per Dr. Al Halabis, “there would not be enough votes for women without it.” This betrays a strong indication as to the genuine sentiment of the men in the country. When examining the sports that Saudi Arabia initially prioritized, such as hosting world-renowned football players and wrestling events, it could be interpreted as a strategy to pacify male opposition to social reform. These sports, which mirror the interests of the nation’s young male population, help to make the progress of gender equality less antagonistic, offering entertainment to mitigate potential criticism.

Through the visit to the Kingdom, it can be argued that the progress on gender equality terrain has been mostly observed in two areas:

- Areas of social class: women from socially-affluent families, who previously had the opportunity to study abroad and explore less gender segregation, were still reaping most of the benefits. While it is true that the laws have distributed progress more democratically, the cultural pressure to adhere to societal gender roles is far from gone.
- Areas of zero loss: women have benefitted from access to societal areas they did not previously access at all; in such, one cannot speak merely of inclusion but introduction. While the women participation in sports statistically shows an exponential growth, this shows only the initial hype; it remains to be seen if this stays the same over the coming years.

On the other hand, proponents of Saudi Arabia's nation branding program, like Dr. Al Halabis, emphasize that the Kingdom’s social reforms do not wish to imitate Western liberal feminism, but places gender equality within the cultural and historical context of the Kingdom. As Dr. Al Halabis stated, “talk to people, keep an open mind, and fight stereotypes. We are all very similar. There is no one value system that is better than others; discover the riches of Saudi Arabia, listen and give back.” This perspective underscores that modernization for Saudi

Arabia does not necessitate mimicking Western values but rather embracing and showcasing its distinct identity on the global stage, the strategic narrative as the leader of a modern Islamic trade nation.

Chapter 4: Concluding remarks

In addressing the central question ‘How does the educational exchange program Gateway KSA reflect Saudi Arabia’s nation branding goals?’, my thesis critically assessed how Gateway KSA embodies and communicates Saudi Arabia’s self-representation in alignment with the broader objectives of Vision 2030. The analysis focused on aspects of strategic narrative, exploring the extent to which Gateway KSA contributes to broadcasting its national brand. As outlined in Vision 2030, the Kingdom seeks to diversify its economy, attract foreign investment, and enhance its cultural presence on the global stage. Gateway KSA provides a mechanism for advancing these goals by targeting key audiences, namely elite students, who are instrumental in shaping international narratives. While the paper is building upon the works of Fauve and Giannopoulos, Piha and Avlonitis, a more authentic and realistic perception of Saudi Arabia’s nation brand has been accessed, something unique to this paper that would not have been achieved without using autoethnography as a method.

Gateway KSA as a tool for soft power

A central finding of this thesis is that Gateway KSA’s structure and activities are designed to address specific stereotypes and misconceptions about Saudi Arabia. By fostering direct interaction between participants and Saudi culture, the program enables challenging outdated perceptions and highlights the Kingdom’s ongoing transformation. This approach is consistent with contemporary theories of nation branding, which emphasize the importance of authenticity and direct engagement in altering global perceptions. The program’s focus on showcasing Saudi Arabia’s heritage, innovations, and aspirations serves to create positive associations with the Kingdom, fostering goodwill among participants. Gateway KSA leverages educational exchange to build bridges of understanding and cooperation. Through site visits and panel sessions, Gateway KSA offers participants an immersive experience that highlights the country’s cultural richness and economic potential. This experiential approach aligns with Nye’s concept of soft power, which underscores the role of culture, values, and policies in shaping global influence. By presenting Saudi Arabia as a forward-thinking and culturally vibrant nation, Gateway KSA reinforces the Kingdom’s soft power assets and contributes to its broader nation branding strategy.

Alignment with Vision 2030

Vision 2030 serves as the cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's nation branding efforts, articulating a comprehensive blueprint for economic diversification, social reform, and global engagement. Gateway KSA is intrinsically linked to this vision, reflecting its core principles and priorities. The program's emphasis on cultural exchange and educational diplomacy aligns with Vision 2030's commitment to fostering a knowledge-based economy and promoting international collaboration. Gateway KSA embodies this by targeting young participants, equipping them with knowledge and experiences that challenge stereotypes and foster cross-cultural understanding. Moreover, the program's focus on education and innovation underscores Saudi Arabia's ambition to position itself as a hub of knowledge and creativity, thereby enhancing its global competitiveness.

Addressing Misconceptions and Shaping Perceptions

A significant aspect of Gateway KSA's contribution to nation branding is its ability to address misconceptions about Saudi Arabia. The program provides a platform for participants to engage directly with Saudi society, enabling them to form their own perceptions based on firsthand experiences. This approach is particularly effective in countering negative stereotypes, as it replaces mediated narratives with authentic encounters. The thesis has highlighted several examples of how Gateway KSA has successfully reshaped my perceptions. These individual transformations contribute to a broader narrative shift, as participants become informal ambassadors who share their experiences with wider audiences in their home countries. This ripple effect underscores the program's strategic value as a tool for nation branding.

Leveraging Cultural Heritage and Modernization

Gateway KSA's dual focus on cultural heritage and modernization reflects a nuanced approach to nation branding. By celebrating Saudi Arabia's rich history and traditions, the program establishes a sense of continuity and authenticity. Simultaneously, its emphasis on contemporary achievements and future aspirations highlights the Kingdom's transformation into a modern, innovative society. This balance between heritage and modernization is a key element of Saudi Arabia's nation branding strategy, as it positions the Kingdom as a country that respects its roots while embracing global trends. Gateway KSA's programming, which includes visits to historical sites, discussions on Vision 2030, and exposure to cutting-edge sustainable developments, reinforces the Kingdom's multifaceted identity.

Challenges and Limitations

While Gateway KSA has achieved significant successes, this thesis also acknowledges the challenges and limitations associated with the program. For instance, the effectiveness of nation branding initiatives depends on the extent to which they reach diverse audiences. As Gateway KSA primarily targets select groups of students and professionals, its impact may be limited in terms of broader public engagement. Additionally, the program's reliance on short-term visits raises questions about the sustainability of its influence, particularly in the absence of follow-up mechanisms to maintain participant engagement. Addressing these challenges requires a strategic approach that expands the program's reach and enhances its long-term impact. Recommendations include leveraging digital platforms to amplify Gateway KSA's messages, incorporating alumni networks to sustain participant engagement, and developing metrics to assess the program's contributions to nation branding. The challenge of authenticity plays a role too in the long-term effectiveness of the strategic narrative, as the failure to show consistency between what is shared and what is observed, such as in our case the gender inequalities, might leave participants to cast overarching doubt on the validity of the entire nation brand being represented.

Broader Implications

This thesis could have broader implications for the study of nation branding and educational exchange. Gateway KSA exemplifies how educational exchange programs can serve as powerful tools for shaping international perceptions and fostering cross-cultural understanding. It underscores the importance of authenticity and open-mindedness in achieving nation branding strategies. Furthermore, the program's alignment with Vision 2030 highlights the potential of strategic frameworks to guide nation branding efforts. By integrating education exchange into its broader development agenda, Saudi Arabia demonstrates a holistic approach to nation branding that leverages multiple dimensions of soft power. However, the social reform parameters of gender equality are dependent upon Saudi Arabia's image as modern innovative and inclusive leading to economic prosperity, not the other way around. It would be interesting to see if the social progress legislation is put on a hold of the economic goals of Vision 2030 or not met. These are, however, only hypotheses.

In conclusion, Gateway KSA reflects Saudi Arabia's nation branding goals by serving as a dynamic platform for cultural exchange, educational diplomacy, and engagement. The program embodies the principles of Vision 2030, showcasing the Kingdom's transformation to become

the epicentre of trade and innovation with respect for Islamic ideology. In short, Gateway KSA reflects Saudi Arabia's global image aspirations and contributes to its strategic narrative as a leader in economic, innovation, and cultural power. It fosters dialogue, challenges stereotypes, and highlight the unique cultural and historical richness of Saudi Arabia.

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