

Midocean University

Faculty of Management

Department/Specialization: Bachelor of Management



The Impact of International Exhibitions on Foreign Direct Investment in Saudi Arabia

Halimah Mohammed Ali

232000343

Graduation project- 1

Faculty of Management – Midocean University

Supervisor

Dr. Abdul Rahim Nader – Faculty of Management – Midocean University

3/04/2026-first semester 2026

Table of Contents

Chapter One: General Framework of Research.....	4
1.1. Introduction.....	5
1.2. Research Problem Statement	7
1.2.1 Theoretical Gap	7
1.2.2 The Practical Gap	8
1.3 Significance of the Study.....	8
1.3.1 Scientific Significance	8
1.3.2 Practical Significance	9
1.4 Research Questions.....	9
1.5 Research Objectives	10
1.6 Research Hypotheses.....	11
1.7 Diagramming the research model	12
1.8 Research Methodology	13
1.9 Field Study Location	14
1.10 Proposed Research Structure	15
Chapter Two: Previous Studies.....	16
1.2 Introduction.....	17
2.2 Conceptual Foundations (Definitions & Concepts)	18
3.2.1 Theoretical Foundations.....	19
4.2Mechanism and Dimensions of Exhibition Impact on Investment	20
5.2Previous Studies.....	21
6.2 Summary of the Comparison and Research Gap:	24

6.2.1 Identifying the Research Gap	26
6.2.2 Transition to the Framework	26
7.2 The Proposed Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses	27
7.2.1 The Proposed Conceptual Framework.....	27
7.2.2 Research Hypotheses	28
8.2 Chapter Conclusion:	29
References	30

Chapter One: General Framework of Research

1.1. Introduction

In light of rapid geopolitical and economic shifts, globalization has fundamentally reshaped patterns of international trade and investment (UNCTAD, 2023).

Countries are increasingly competing to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) as a strategic tool for achieving economic growth, transferring technological knowledge, and creating high-quality jobs (Ministry of Investment, 2024). FDI plays a crucial role in boosting productivity, developing infrastructure, and diversifying national economies (UNCTAD, 2025; Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2021).

In this context, international trade fairs have emerged as a strategic platform that transcends the traditional concept of exhibitions, becoming a driving force for strengthening cross-border trade relations and attracting foreign investors (Jane and Weber, 2016). These fairs provide essential networking opportunities, highlight national competitive advantages, and overcome obstacles to international partnerships (Amkina, n.d.). Studies indicate that these major events contribute to creating an enabling environment that encourages increased and sustainable investment flows (Jane and Weber, 2016). This is evident in the growing role of the meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE) sector as a cornerstone of modern economic diversification strategies (Arab News, 2025).

In Saudi Arabia, the role of international exhibitions has expanded significantly within the framework of Vision 2030, as the Kingdom seeks to establish itself as a leading regional investment hub (Ministry of Investment, 2024). The development

of the MICE sector has boosted foreign direct investment (FDI) flows, exceeded targets and reached US\$26 billion in 2023 (Reuters, 2024). This sector has become a strategic priority for reducing dependence on oil and attracting international capital to promising sectors (General Authority for Statistics, 2025; Arab News, 2025). Despite this, empirical studies examining the direct impact of exhibitions on the volume of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the Kingdom remain limited (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2021). While exhibitions are theoretically supposed to stimulate investment, the nature of this impact still requires further investigation (Jane and Weber, 2016). Therefore, this study aims to analyze the impact of international exhibitions on FDI in Saudi Arabia and provide policymakers with insights into how to maximize these opportunities (UNCTAD, 2025).

1.2. Research Problem Statement

The rapid expansion of the exhibitions, conferences, and trade events sector in the Kingdom represents a strategic pillar for supporting economic diversification within Vision 2030. Despite the significant momentum in hosting international events, a challenge lies in the "weak systematic link" between these short-term events and sustainable investment commitments.

The problem can be precisely defined by the following gaps:

1.2.1 Theoretical Gap

Scarcity of Specialized Studies: Most previous studies focus on the "tourism" or "logistical" impact of exhibitions, while the academic literature lacks analytical models that directly and systematically link the MICE sector to foreign direct investment (FDI) flows in the Saudi environment.

Absence of Modeling: There is no clear theoretical framework that explains how an "exhibition visitor" or "foreign exhibitor" transforms into an "actual investor" in the local economy.

1.2.2 The Practical Gap

Measuring Sustainability vs Promotion: There is a gap in distinguishing between the "temporary" media and promotional impact of exhibitions and the "sustainable" economic impact that manifests in long-term investment contracts.

The Need for Analytical Data: Despite the abundance of official reports, they are often descriptive, creating a pressing need for an analytical study (like yours) that interprets this data to draw conclusions that support public policy decisions.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is of particular importance because it addresses a vital and rapidly growing sector within the context of the massive economic transformation underway in Saudi Arabia. The significance of this research is evident in two main dimensions:

1.3.1 Scientific Significance

Enriching the Academic Library: This study contributes to bridging the knowledge gap regarding the relationship between business tourism (MICE) and foreign investment flows, especially given the scarcity of Arabic studies linking these two variables in the Saudi market.

Establishing the Conceptual Framework: The study provides an updated theoretical framework that clarifies how international exhibitions transform from mere promotional events into economic platforms that support investment diplomacy.

1.3.2 Practical Significance

Supporting the Objectives of Vision 2030: The study aligns with national trends toward economic diversification and attracting quality investments in non-oil sectors.

Guiding Decision-Makers: The results of the analysis and extrapolation provide guidance data for the Saudi Exhibitions and Conferences Authority and the Ministry of Investment, helping to improve strategies for hosting major events to maximize return on investment.

Improving the Competitive Environment: It helps identify obstacles facing foreign investors during their participation in local events, paving the way for innovative regulatory solutions that enhance the efficiency of these platforms.

1.4 Research Questions

Main Question:

What is the role of international trade fairs (MICE sector) as a strategic platform for attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) to Saudi Arabia considering Vision 2030?

Sub-Question 1: What is the correlation between the increase in the number of international exhibitions and the growth in FDI flows, according to official indicators and reports?

Sub-Question 2: How do international exhibitions contribute to enhancing the attractiveness of the Saudi market as a safe and stimulating investment environment for foreign investors?

Sub-Question 3: What pivotal role does the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions (MICE) sector play in supporting the economic diversification strategy?

Sub-Question 4: What are the main and minor challenges that limit the effectiveness of international exhibitions in converting available business opportunities into actual foreign investments?

Sub-Question 5: What strategic approaches can policymakers adopt to maximize the benefits of these exhibitions as a sustainable economic tool?

1.5 Research Objectives

Main Objective:

To analyze and extrapolate the strategic role of international trade fairs (MICE sector) as a catalyst for attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Sub-Objectives:

Sub-Objective 1: To examine the relationship between the frequency of international trade fairs and the volume of FDI inflows, based on historical data and official reports.

Sub-Objective 2: To analyze the mechanisms by which trade fairs contribute to building confidence among foreign investors and enhancing the attractiveness of the local investment environment.

Sub-Objective 3: To assess the alignment of MICE sector growth with the economic diversification strategy and the objectives of Vision 2030.

Sub-Objective 4: To identify the key challenges hindering the optimal utilization of international trade fairs in transforming opportunities into tangible and sustainable investments.

1.6 Research Hypotheses

Main Hypothesis:

There is a statistically significant relationship between hosting international exhibitions and the flow of foreign direct investment (FDI) into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Sub-Hypotheses:

Sub-Hypothesis 1: International exhibitions contribute to increasing foreign investors' interest in investment opportunities in the Kingdom.

Sub-Hypothesis 2: The development of the MICE (Merchant-Information Technology, Innovation, and Markets) sector contributes to enhancing the Kingdom's ability to attract foreign investment.

Sub-Hypothesis 3: Some economic sectors benefit more than others from hosting international exhibitions.

Sub-Hypothesis 4: Effective organization of exhibitions contributes to enhancing opportunities for establishing new foreign partnerships and investments.

1.7 Diagramming the research model

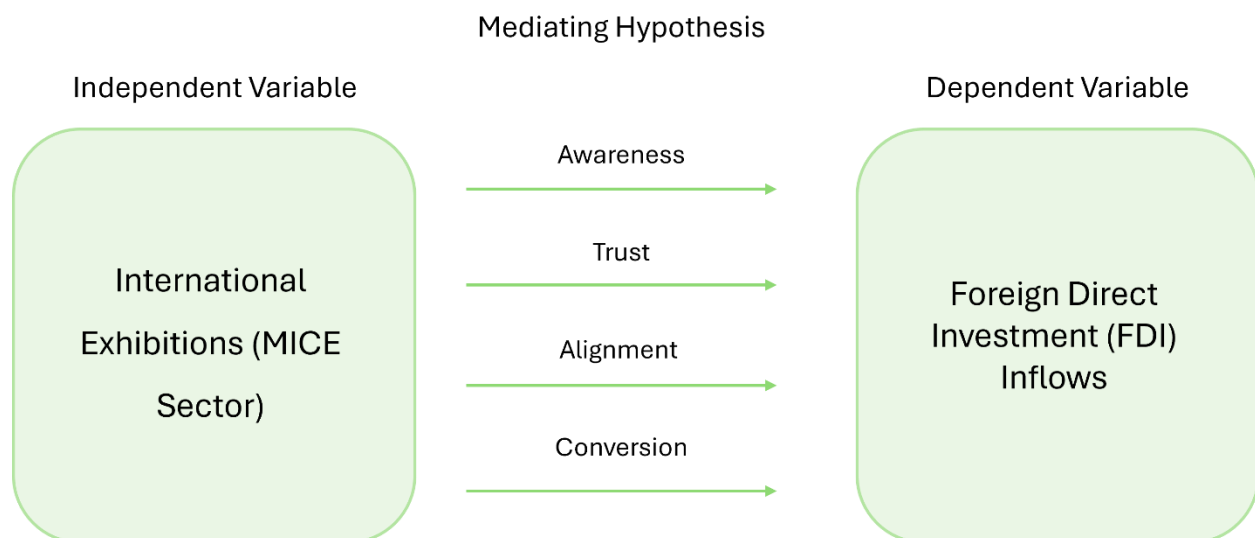


Figure 1: The conceptual framework of the study

1.8 Research Methodology

This study employs a descriptive-analytical approach using secondary data. The methodological framework is summarized as follows:

Research Philosophy: Positivism – Reliance on numerical facts and official reports.

Research Approach: Deductive – Testing hypotheses based on available data.

Research Strategy: Documentary Research – Analyzing the content of reports and documents.

Time Horizon: Cross-sectional Study – Focusing on the Vision 2030 period.

Data Collection Tool: Analysis of annual reports (Ministry of Investment, Exhibitions Authority, Central Bank).

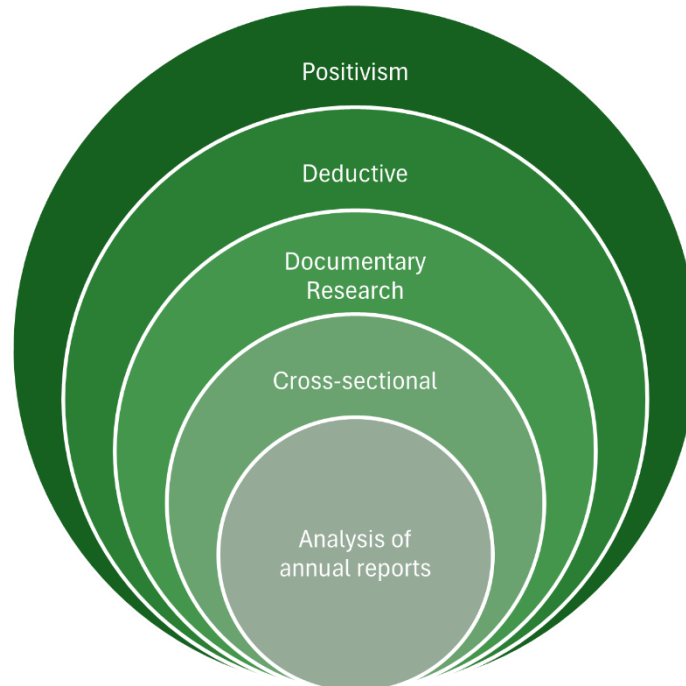


Figure 2: Summary of the research methodology

1.9 Field Study Location

The field study will be conducted in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, focusing on major cities that are prominent economic hubs and host a large number of international exhibitions and events: Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam.

Reasoning for Choosing the Study Location

Economic and Regulatory Importance:

These cities are among the most important economic centers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, hosting numerous major international exhibitions and events, such as LEAP and Cityscape Global, which are organized under the auspices of the Saudi Exhibitions and Conferences Authority.

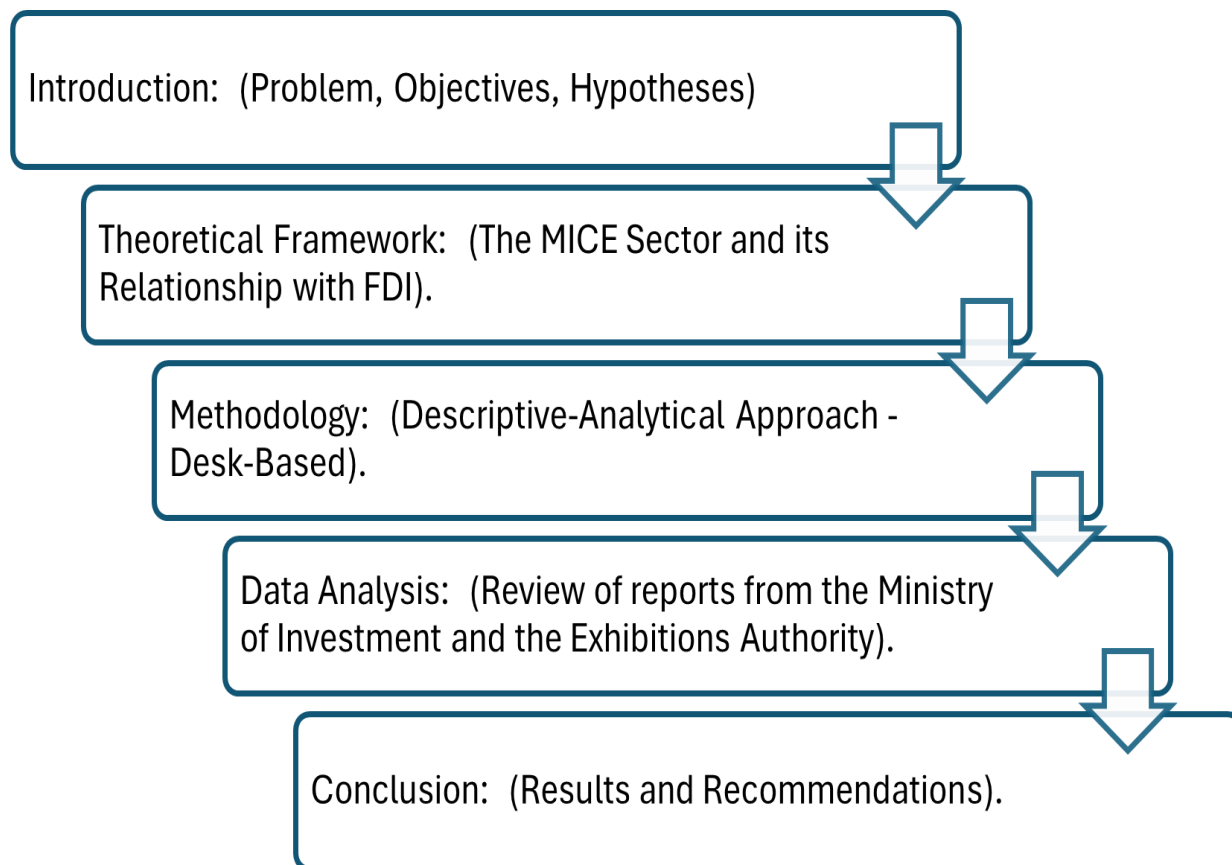
Investment Attraction:

These cities represent key attractions for international companies and foreign investors, witnessing broad participation from international institutions and investment entities, thus enhancing opportunities for economic cooperation and the exchange of investment opportunities.

Abundant Data and Target Audience:

These cities provide a suitable environment for collecting field data from the study sample, which may include foreign investors, exhibition organizers, and representatives of participating companies. This contributes to analyzing and measuring the impact of these events on the flow of foreign direct investment, in line with the objectives of the Kingdom's Vision 2030.

1.10 Proposed Research Structure



Chapter Two: Previous Studies

1.2 Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is undergoing a radical transformation in its national economic model. Vision 2030 has identified attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) as a strategic objective, aiming to increase its contribution from 0.7% to 5.7% of GDP. In this context, the exhibitions and conferences sector has emerged as a vital tool for promoting this trend. Major events are no longer merely promotional platforms but have become strategic channels for knowledge transfer and building institutional trust.

This research seeks to analyze the interactive relationship between the growing activity of international exhibitions in the Kingdom and FDI inflows, relying on official data issued by the Saudi Exhibitions and Conferences Authority and UNCTAD reports, to address the research gap in how to translate regulatory momentum into a long-term investment commitment.

2.2 Conceptual Foundations (Definitions & Concepts)

1. International Exhibitions: Periodic, cross-border economic platforms that serve as interactive environments, bringing together the key players in the production process (investor, producer, consumer), and functioning as "market laboratories" for exchanging innovations and forging strategic alliances.
2. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI): The transfer of capital, technical expertise, and managerial skills from a foreign entity with the aim of establishing a significant presence in the local economy, which the Kingdom seeks to promote through international events.
3. The Business Events (MICE) Sector: The overarching umbrella encompassing meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions, viewed in this study as a high-value economic driver that transcends traditional tourism impact to attract capital investments.

3.2.1 Theoretical Foundations

A sound research project cannot be built without relying on theoretical pillars that explain why exhibitions attract investment:

Push and Pull Factors Theory:

Explains the role of exhibitions as a "pull" factor that highlights the competitive advantages of the Saudi market.

The Dunning OLI Framework:

This is considered the cornerstone of your research. It focuses on three dimensions:

- Ownership: What do foreign companies have to offer?
- Location: Why Saudi Arabia? Here, exhibitions serve as a tool to demonstrate the quality of the location and the availability of infrastructure.
- Internalization: How does the company maintain its competitive advantage within the Saudi market?

4.2 Mechanism and Dimensions of Exhibition Impact on Investment

1. Timeline (When is the investor convinced?):

Before the exhibition (Awareness): Here, the exhibition acts as a massive advertisement. An investor in America or Europe hears about the "International Defense Exhibition" in Riyadh and begins to read about Saudi Arabia. This sparks their curiosity.

During the exhibition (Evaluation): This is the most important stage. The investor attends in person, sees the security, observes the infrastructure, and meets with Ministry of Investment officials. Here, "information asymmetry" disappears, and doubt transforms into certainty.

After the exhibition (Implementation): This is where the numbers become clear. Memoranda of Understanding signed at the exhibition are transformed into "commercial registrations" and actual licenses.

2. Qualitative Dimensions (What does the investor gain?):

Knowledge dimension: The exhibition is a place for "technology transfer." The investor sees that there are Saudi engineers and local companies ready for partnership, giving them a "knowledge advantage" to enter the market.

The legislative aspect: New laws (such as the new investment law) are often announced at the exhibition. The exhibition saves investors from having to read thousands of pages of legal texts by providing direct explanations from officials.

The logistical aspect: When investors see Saudi Arabia's airports, metro, and hotels, they are reassured that their project's supply chains will be successful.

5.2 Previous Studies

The researcher reviewed the literature related to foreign investment and business events, which can be categorized and compared according to the following axes:

Axis One: Studies on the Determinants of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)

A number of studies focused on the traditional factors attracting investment in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:

- Barbary and Tawfiq's study (2024) focused on the reciprocal relationship between foreign direct investment and export growth, emphasizing that investment acts as an engine for economic growth.
- Belloumi and Alshehry's study (2018) examined the impact of domestic and foreign investments on growth and concluded that overall policy stability is the greatest attractor.

- Comparison and Commentary: We find that these studies focused on macroeconomic variables such as interest rates and growth, while the current research differs by highlighting regulatory and promotional variables (international exhibitions) as a non-traditional tool for attracting investment.

The second axis: Studies in Events and Exhibitions Tourism (MICE)

These studies addressed the exhibitions sector from a tourism and marketing perspective:

- Getz and Page (2016): This study established a general framework for events tourism, considering exhibitions as a means of developing cities and improving their public image.
- Jin and Weber (2016): This study focused on the "brand value" of exhibitions and how a good reputation leads to increased participant satisfaction.
- Comparison and commentary: We note that international studies tend to analyze exhibitions from an administrative and marketing perspective, while the current research seeks to link this "marketing" to the actual "capital investment" decision, a connection less common in previous literature.

The third axis: Investment studies under Vision 2030

These are the most recent studies that have kept pace with the transformations in the Kingdom:

- Sultan and AlTunisi (2025): This study analyzed the frameworks for protecting foreign investment in Saudi Arabia and emphasized that legislative clarity is the primary guarantee for investors under the Vision.
- Comparison and Commentary: This study aligns with our current research regarding the timing of the "Vision," but it focused on the legal and preventative aspects, while our research focuses on the executive and promotional aspects, specifically exhibitions as a platform for showcasing these legislative frameworks.

6.2 Summary of the Comparison and Research Gap:

The preceding review reveals the following research gap:

1. Specialization: Most previous Saudi studies addressed FDI in general and did not specifically examine "international exhibitions" as an influential independent variable.
2. Relationship: Studies that addressed exhibitions (globally) focused on tourism aspects, while the academic office lacks studies linking "exhibitions" to "investment decisions" in emerging markets like Saudi Arabia.
3. Timing: There is a pressing need to document the impact of the current boom in exhibitions (2024-2026) on updated investment figures, which is what the current research aims to provide.

Table (2-1): Summary of previous studies and qualitative comparison with the current study

Author & Year	Targeted Variables	Methodology	Key Findings	Gap / Distinction of the Current Study
Dunning (2000)	Location Advantages and International Investment.	Theoretical Analytical	Location advantage is the primary driver for attracting Multinational Enterprises (MNEs).	A general theoretical study; the current study applies the concept to "Exhibitions" as a locational tool.
Getz & Page (2016)	Event Tourism and Local Growth.	Literature Review	Events enhance the country's brand image and stimulate the local economy.	Focused on tourism and marketing; the current study focuses on the investment dimension.
Belloumi & Alshehry (2018)	FDI and Economic Growth.	Quantitative Analysis (VAR)	A long-term positive correlation exists between FDI and growth in Saudi Arabia.	Focused on macroeconomic variables; the current study investigates promotional tools (Exhibitions).
Barbary & Tawfiq (2024)	FDI and Export Growth.	Empirical Study	Foreign Direct Investment stimulates the Kingdom's export capacity.	Focused on "post-investment" outcomes; the current study focuses on "pre-investment" catalysts (Exhibitions).
Sultan & AlTunisi (2025)	Investment Protection Frameworks and Vision 2030.	Legal Analytical	Advanced legislation is the fundamental guarantee for attracting and sustaining investors.	Focused on legal aspects; the current study focuses on organizational and competitive aspects.

General Commentary:

Based on the information reviewed in Table (2-1), a divergence in the research approaches of previous literature is evident. Classical studies (such as Dunning, 2000) focused on general theoretical frameworks for international investment, while more recent local studies (such as Barbary & Tawfiq, 2024; Sultan & AlTunisi, 2025) have focused on analyzing the Kingdom's legislative and macroeconomic environment within the context of Vision 2030. Despite the richness of these studies, there is a clear scarcity of research addressing the international exhibitions sector as a direct and catalyst for foreign investment flows, which reinforces the rationale for the current study.

6.2.1 Identifying the Research Gap

Through comparative analysis, the researcher identified a research gap in two key areas:

1. The conceptual gap: International exhibitions have been treated in most literature as a tourism or marketing activity (event tourism), without delving into their role as a channel for economic diplomacy, that attracts capital.
2. The contextual gap: The academic literature lacks applied studies that examine the impact of the qualitative leap in Saudi business events during the last two years (2024-2026) on foreign investor decisions.

6.2.2 Transition to the Framework

Based on the above, and relying on the points of intersection between economic theories and tourism literature, the researcher sought to build an integrated business model that links these variables. This framework aims to explain the mechanism by which international exhibitions transform into actual investment flows, which is clarified in the following section through the proposed conceptual model and the study's hypotheses.

7.2 The Proposed Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

7.2.1 The Proposed Conceptual Framework

Based on a review of previous literature and economic theories (such as Dunning's OLI model), a conceptual framework was developed to illustrate the hypothetical trajectory of the relationship between international trade fairs and attracting foreign direct investment. The framework rests on the assumption that international trade fairs act as an environmental catalyst, reducing the information gap and stimulating investment decisions.

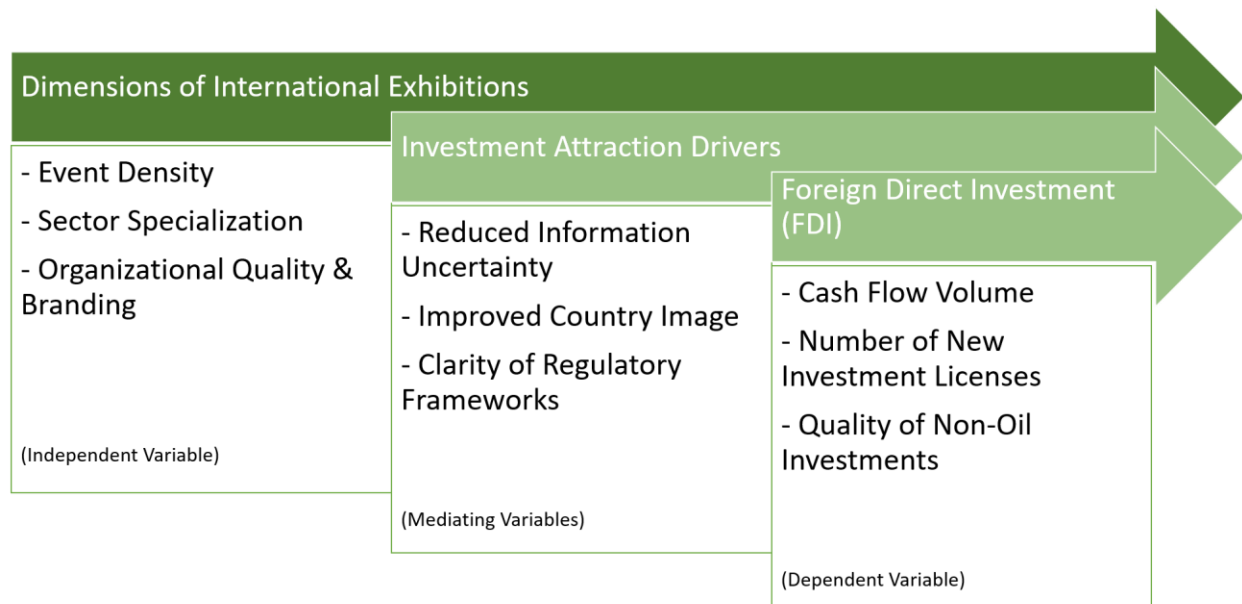


Figure 3: Conceptual Model Showing the Mediating Role of Investment Attraction Drivers

7.2.2 Research Hypotheses

To translate this model into measurable results, the researcher formulated the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1 (H1): There is a statistically significant positive relationship between the development of the international exhibitions sector and the increase in foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
- Hypothesis 2 (H2): Sectoral specialization of international exhibitions (such as energy and technology exhibitions) leads to attracting high-quality foreign investments that align with the objectives of Vision 2030.
- Hypothesis 3 (H3): "Investment attraction drivers" (such as information risk reduction) play a mediating role in enhancing the impact of international exhibitions on foreign investors' decisions to enter the Saudi market.

8.2 Chapter Conclusion:

This chapter provided a theoretical foundation for the relationship between international exhibitions and attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) according to the OLI model. It culminated in the development of a conceptual model that identifies the desired impact pathways and research gaps. Building on this framework, Chapter Three will explain the research methodology and the statistical procedures necessary to test the study's hypotheses by analyzing historical data on investment flows and comparing them with the growth of the business events sector in the Kingdom.

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