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Analyzing the role of Riyadh Season in supporting economic and tourism growth in Saudi Arabia

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Final Project – 2

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20 June 2026 – second Trimester 2026

Table of Contents:

Research Background:	3
Research Problem:	3
Research Significance:	4
Research Questions:	4
Research Objectives:	5
Research Hypotheses:	6
Research Model:	7
Scope of The Study:	7
The Suggested Project Structure:	8
Literature Review:	9

Research Background:

The economy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been predominantly dependent on oil revenues as the primary source of national income for several decades. This heavy reliance on a single commodity has rendered the Saudi economy structurally vulnerable to fluctuations in global energy markets, a vulnerability that became particularly evident during the oil price decline of 2014–2016. In response to these challenges, the Saudi government launched Vision 2030 in 2016 as a comprehensive national strategic framework aimed at restructuring the economy and reducing its dependence on hydrocarbon exports. Within this framework, the tourism and entertainment sectors were identified as key pillars for achieving economic diversification, generating employment opportunities, and enhancing the quality of life for citizens. Al Naimi (2022) analyzed economic diversification patterns across the Gulf Cooperation Council states and concluded that Saudi Arabia had begun undertaking substantive structural measures to expand its non-oil economic base, with particular emphasis on the service and tourism sectors.

Despite the scale and apparent success of Riyadh Season, the academic literature examining its role in supporting economic and tourism growth remains limited. The majority of available information regarding the event's economic impact derives from official government reports and media coverage rather than from independent, peer-reviewed empirical research. Al-Mohammad and Butler (2022), in one of the few academic studies directly addressing the Saudi Seasons initiative, observed that while tourism stakeholders generally held positive perceptions of the program, significant questions remained regarding the distribution of economic benefits, the sustainability of visitor growth, and the capacity of small and medium enterprises to capture meaningful gains from the initiative. Alharbi (2023), in a doctoral dissertation examining Saudi.

Research Problem:

Riyadh Season has emerged as one of the most significant entertainment initiatives in the Middle East region within a relatively short period, attracting tens of millions of visitors and generating substantial economic activity. However, the rapid growth of the event has outpaced the development of rigorous academic research capable of critically evaluating its contributions to economic diversification and sustainable tourism development. An examination of the existing scholarly literature reveals notable gaps at both the theoretical and practical levels, which constrain

the ability of researchers and policymakers to fully understand the mechanisms, outcomes, and limitations of this initiative. The following subsections delineate these gaps and present the main research question guiding this study.

Research Significance:

This study derives its significance from addressing a rapidly evolving phenomenon that has not yet received adequate academic scrutiny, namely the role of Riyadh Season in supporting economic and tourism growth in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Research Questions:

Main Research Question: To what extent do stakeholders perceive Riyadh Season as an effective instrument for driving economic growth and tourism development in Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030?

Sub-Questions:

- To what extent do tourism and entertainment sector professionals perceive Riyadh Season as a significant contributor to non-oil GDP growth in Saudi Arabia?
- What is the perceived impact of Riyadh Season on tourist spending behavior, average length of stay, and revisit intention among domestic and international visitors?
- How do business owners and managers in the hospitality, retail, transportation, and food service sectors evaluate the economic spillover effects generated by Riyadh Season on their respective industries?
- To what extent do employees and human resource managers perceive that Riyadh Season creates quality employment opportunities in terms of skill development, fair compensation, job stability, and alignment with Saudization targets?
- How do visitors and tourism professionals rate the influence of Riyadh Season on Saudi Arabia's destination image, international attractiveness, and soft-power positioning?
- What are the perceptions of residents, local business operators, and municipal officials regarding the environmental and social pressures associated with Riyadh Season, including infrastructure strain, congestion, waste management, and noise levels?

- How do event management professionals and policymakers assess the competitive positioning of Riyadh Season relative to comparable recurring mega-events in the Gulf region in terms of economic return, visitor satisfaction, and operational efficiency?

Research Objectives:

Main Objective: To examine the extent to which Riyadh Season serves as an effective instrument for driving economic growth and tourism development in Saudi Arabia within the framework of Vision 2030, based on stakeholder perceptions.

Sub-Objectives:

- To assess the perceptions of tourism and entertainment sector professionals regarding the contribution of Riyadh Season to non-oil GDP growth in Saudi Arabia.
- To measure the perceived impact of Riyadh Season on tourist spending behavior, average length of stay, and revisit intention among domestic and international visitors.
- To evaluate how business owners and managers in the hospitality, retail, transportation, and food service sectors perceive the economic spillover effects generated by Riyadh Season on their respective industries.
- To investigate the extent to which employees and human resource managers perceive that Riyadh Season creates quality employment opportunities in terms of skill development, fair compensation, job stability, and alignment with Saudization targets.
- To determine how visitors and tourism professionals rate the influence of Riyadh Season on Saudi Arabia's destination image, international attractiveness, and soft-power positioning.
- To explore the perceptions of residents, local business operators, and municipal officials regarding the environmental and social pressures associated with Riyadh Season, including infrastructure strain, congestion, waste management, and noise levels.
- To compare stakeholder assessments of Riyadh Season's competitive positioning relative to comparable recurring mega-events in the Gulf region in terms of economic return, visitor satisfaction, and operational efficiency.

Research Hypotheses:

Main Hypothesis: Riyadh Season has a statistically significant positive effect on economic growth and tourism development in Saudi Arabia as perceived by stakeholders.

Sub-Hypotheses:

H1: There is a statistically significant positive perception among tourism and entertainment professionals that Riyadh Season contributes to non-oil GDP growth in Saudi Arabia.

H2: Riyadh Season has a statistically significant positive perceived impact on tourist spending behavior, average length of stay, and revisit intention among domestic and international visitors.

H3: There is a statistically significant positive perception among business owners and managers in the hospitality, retail, transportation, and food service sectors regarding the economic spillover effects of Riyadh Season on their industries.

H4: There is a statistically significant positive perception among employees and human resource managers that Riyadh Season generates quality employment opportunities aligned with Saudization objectives in terms of skill development, fair compensation, and job stability.

H5: Riyadh Season has a statistically significant positive perceived influence on Saudi Arabia's destination image, international attractiveness, and soft-power positioning as assessed by visitors and tourism professionals.

H6: There is a statistically significant negative perception among residents, local business operators, and municipal officials regarding the environmental and social pressures associated with Riyadh Season, including infrastructure strain, congestion, and waste management challenges.

Research Model:

The conceptual model of this study is built around one independent variable and two dependent variables, moderated by contextual factors.

Independent Variable: Riyadh Season (measured through six dimensions):

1. Non-oil GDP contribution
2. Economic spillover effects across sectors
3. Employment generation and Saudization alignment
4. Tourist spending, length of stay, and revisit intention
5. Destination image and soft-power positioning
6. Environmental and social pressures.

Dependent Variables:

1. Economic Growth (measured by perceived contribution to non-oil GDP, sectoral revenue increase, job creation quality, and investment attraction)
2. Tourism Development (measured by perceived impact on visitor volume, spending patterns, destination image, revisit intention, and international competitiveness).

Scope of The Study:

1. Thematic Scope: This study focuses on analyzing the role of Riyadh Season in supporting economic growth and tourism development in Saudi Arabia. It examines six thematic dimensions: the event's perceived contribution to non-oil GDP, its economic spillover effects on key sectors, its role in employment generation and Saudization, its influence on tourist spending and revisit intention, its impact on Saudi Arabia's destination image and soft-power positioning, and the environmental and social pressures it generates.
2. Geographical Scope: The study is geographically limited to the city of Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia and the host city of Riyadh Season.
3. Temporal Scope: The study covers the period from the inception of Riyadh Season in October 2019 through the current sixth edition (2025–2026). Primary data collection through the questionnaire is planned during the active period of the 2025–2026 season
4. Human Scope: The study targets five stakeholder categories: domestic and international visitors, business owners and managers in affected sectors, employees and human resource managers, tourism and entertainment professionals and policymakers, and Riyadh residents living near event venues.

The Suggested Project Structure:

This study is organized into five chapters, each serving a distinct purpose in addressing the research questions and achieving the study objectives. The structure is as follows:

Chapter One: Introduction This chapter establishes the foundation of the study. It presents the research background, outlining Saudi Arabia's economic transformation under Vision 2030 and the emergence of Riyadh Season as a flagship entertainment initiative. It then identifies the research problem by highlighting both theoretical and practical gaps in the existing literature. The chapter proceeds to articulate the research significance at the theoretical and practical levels, followed by the research questions, objectives, and hypotheses. It also presents the conceptual research model, explains the research methodology, defines the scope of the study, and concludes with this structural outline.

Chapter Two: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the relevant academic literature. It begins with an examination of economic diversification theories and their application to oil-dependent economies, particularly in the Gulf context. It then reviews event tourism theory, including mega-event models, festival economics, and the economic multiplier effect. The chapter also covers destination branding and soft-power theory as they relate to state-sponsored entertainment initiatives. A dedicated section reviews prior studies on Riyadh Season and the broader Saudi Seasons program, as well as comparable recurring mega-events in the region. The chapter concludes by synthesizing the reviewed literature, identifying the specific gaps this study aims to address, and positioning the current research within the existing body of knowledge.

Literature Review:

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the theoretical and empirical literature relevant to analyzing the role of Riyadh Season in supporting economic growth and tourism development in Saudi Arabia. The chapter is structured around the two core constructs of the study: the independent variable, Riyadh Season as a recurring mega-entertainment event, and the dependent variables, economic growth and tourism development. For each variable, the review addresses its concept and definition, its importance and strategic relevance, its key dimensions as identified in the literature, the strategies associated with it, and additional thematic areas that enrich the understanding of how the variable operates within the Saudi context. Each section concludes with a review of at least four previous studies that provide empirical evidence and methodological insight relevant to the present research. A dedicated section then examines the relationship between the independent and dependent variables, drawing on theory and prior findings. The chapter concludes by synthesizing the reviewed literature, identifying gaps, and establishing the conceptual bridge to the research model proposed in Chapter One (Al Naimi, 2022; Kiani, 2026).

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