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

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. 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.

In alignment with the objectives of Vision 2030, the General Entertainment Authority established the Saudi Seasons program in 2019, comprising eleven seasonal festivals distributed across major cities in the Kingdom. Riyadh Season, the largest and most prominent among these festivals, was inaugurated in October 2019 as an annual entertainment, cultural, and sporting event held in the capital city. The inaugural edition extended over a 66-day period and encompassed more than 100 events across twelve designated entertainment zones. According to official estimates, this first edition attracted approximately 11 million visitors and generated revenues of approximately six billion Saudi riyals, accompanied by a 106 percent increase in flight bookings to Riyadh and a 240 percent rise in hotel occupancy rates. Although the festival was suspended in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it resumed in late 2021 with expanded scope, featuring approximately 7,000 activities across fourteen zones covering 5.4 million square meters. Subsequent editions have demonstrated consistent growth: the 2022–2023 edition recorded approximately 15 million visitors, while the 2024–2025 edition established a new record of over 20 million visitors from 135 countries, with the overall brand value of Riyadh Season estimated at approximately USD 3.2 billion (Alhebschi, 2024).

The economic significance of large-scale recurring events such as Riyadh Season extends beyond direct revenue generation from ticket sales and event attendance. The influx of millions of visitors over an extended period stimulates demand across multiple sectors of the local economy, including hospitality, food services, retail, transportation, and real estate. This phenomenon, referred to in economic literature as the multiplier effect, describes the process through which initial tourist expenditure generates successive rounds of spending within the host economy. Waheed, Sarwar, and Dignah (2020) empirically examined the relationship between tourism and economic growth in Saudi Arabia and found that tourism, along with non-oil exports, exerts a statistically significant positive effect on long-term economic growth. Their findings provide empirical support for the proposition that tourism-driven initiatives such as Riyadh Season possess the potential to contribute to structural economic transformation, provided they are sustained and effectively managed (Waheed et al., 2020).

Beyond its direct economic effects, Riyadh Season also functions as an instrument of destination branding and image formation. Large-scale entertainment events shape international perceptions of the host destination, which in turn influence tourist decision-making and future visit intentions. Aliedan, Aldiab, Al-Dakhil, and Algarni (2021) investigated this relationship in the Saudi context and found that the quality of city-based entertainment programs has a statistically significant positive influence on destination image and tourist experience quality, both of which serve as mediating variables affecting overall tourist satisfaction. These findings suggest that the impact of Riyadh Season on Saudi Arabia's tourism sector operates through both economic and perceptual channels, reinforcing the strategic rationale for investing in large-scale entertainment as a component of national development policy (Aliedan et al., 2021).

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-Mohmmad 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

public attitudes toward the General Entertainment Authority, further noted that perceptions of entertainment reforms are shaped by complex generational, regional, and ideological factors that aggregate visitor statistics cannot adequately capture. These observations point to a clear gap between the scope of the Riyadh Season phenomenon and the depth of academic understanding currently available, a gap that the present study seeks to address.

1.2. 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.

1.2.1. Theoretical Gaps

The prevailing theoretical frameworks employed in the study of mega-events and their economic impacts were developed predominantly in the context of one-time, large-scale sporting events such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup, hosted primarily in Western and East Asian settings. These frameworks, including economic multiplier models, cost-benefit analysis, and destination image theory, conceptualise the mega-event as a singular, non-recurring episode characterized by substantial upfront capital investment, a concentrated period of activity, and a subsequent legacy phase. Riyadh Season, however, departs fundamentally from this model. As a recurring annual event that has grown in scale and complexity with each successive edition, it generates cumulative economic effects that are not adequately captured by frameworks designed for one-time events. The capacity to distribute investment across multiple editions, to refine programming and infrastructure incrementally, and to build institutional learning over time introduces dynamics that existing theoretical models do not account for. This gap is particularly

consequential in the context of resource-dependent economies, where the relationship between event-driven tourism and structural economic transformation requires specific theoretical treatment (Alhebshi, 2024).

A further theoretical deficiency concerns the disciplinary separation between economic diversification scholarship and event-tourism scholarship. Research on economic diversification in oil-dependent states has traditionally concentrated on sectors such as manufacturing, financial services, and knowledge-based industries, with limited consideration of the entertainment and events sector as a viable diversification mechanism. Conversely, event-tourism research has focused on visitor behavior, expenditure patterns, and destination competitiveness without situating these analyses within broader frameworks of structural economic change. This disciplinary disconnect has resulted in the absence of an integrated theoretical model capable of linking the micro-level economic activities generated by recurring entertainment events to macro-level indicators of economic diversification, such as changes in non-oil GDP composition, sectoral employment shifts, and small enterprise development. Kiani (2026) highlighted this gap in a study published in the *Journal of Economics, Finance and Accounting Studies* and called for the development of comprehensive analytical frameworks that connect tourism-driven entertainment initiatives to measurable diversification outcomes, acknowledging that such frameworks do not yet exist in the literature (Kiani, 2026).

Additionally, the theoretical relationship between state-sponsored entertainment events and soft power remains insufficiently developed for the Gulf Cooperation Council context. While a number of scholars have noted that events such as Riyadh Season serve both economic and reputational objectives, the specific mechanisms through which enhanced international perceptions translate into tangible economic outcomes — such as increased foreign direct investment, sustained tourism demand, or improved trade relations — have not been rigorously theorized. Aldakheel (2026), in a study published in *SIYAR Journal*, examined this question through the lens of public diplomacy and found that while Riyadh Season has demonstrably influenced international media narratives about Saudi Arabia, the causal pathways between improved perceptions and concrete economic indicators remain theoretically underdeveloped and empirically untested (Aldakheel, 2026).

1.2.2. Practical Gaps

At the empirical level, the existing body of research on the economic and social effects of Riyadh Season is characterized by significant limitations in both scope and methodology. The available studies are predominantly descriptive in nature, reporting aggregate visitor numbers and revenue figures without conducting the disaggregated analysis necessary to determine the net economic impact of the event. No published peer-reviewed study has estimated the net economic benefit of Riyadh Season after accounting for public expenditure on infrastructure development, security provision, marketing campaigns, and operational subsidies. Furthermore, there is no sector-level analysis examining the distribution of visitor spending across hospitality, retail, food services, transportation, and other economic sectors. Al-Mohmmad and Butler (2022) identified this limitation, noting that tourism SME operators participating in the Saudi Seasons initiative reported both optimism regarding increased demand and concern that the benefits were disproportionately captured by larger, more established enterprises (Al-Mohmmad & Butler, 2022).

The employment dimension of Riyadh Season represents another area where empirical evidence is notably insufficient. While the event generates a substantial number of temporary and permanent employment positions, the characteristics of these positions — including skill requirements, wage levels, contract duration, and the proportion of jobs filled by Saudi nationals as opposed to expatriate workers — have not been systematically investigated. Alharbi (2023) observed in his doctoral research that while many young Saudi citizens expressed general enthusiasm about entertainment sector reforms, they simultaneously expressed uncertainty regarding the sector's ability to provide stable, adequately compensated career opportunities. This discrepancy between general attitudinal support and specific career expectations warrants empirical examination, particularly in light of the Saudi government's emphasis on increasing national workforce participation in the private sector (Alharbi, 2023).

Environmental and quality-of-life impacts constitute a further area of empirical neglect. The concentration of 17 to 20 million visitors within a single urban area over a period of several months generates considerable pressures on waste management systems, energy infrastructure, water resources, and transportation networks. Alghamdi, Alotaibi, and Bashir (2026), employing machine-learning methodologies to forecast tourism growth trajectories in Saudi Arabia, identified

environmental carrying-capacity limitations as a significant risk factor that current planning frameworks do not adequately address. Despite this, no published study has conducted a systematic environmental impact assessment of Riyadh Season or examined its effects on residential quality-of-life indicators such as traffic congestion, noise levels, and housing affordability during the event period (Alghamdi et al., 2026).

Finally, the absence of comparative analysis in the literature represents a significant practical limitation. No published study has systematically benchmarked the economic performance of Riyadh Season against comparable recurring events in other national contexts, such as the Dubai Shopping Festival, Singapore's Formula 1 Grand Prix, or Qatar's post-World Cup legacy events. Albalawi and Henderson (2025), in a study published in *Energy Policy*, conducted a broad comparison of mega-event strategies in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and identified meaningful differences in governance structures, sustainability practices, and economic multiplier effects. However, their analysis did not extend to the event-specific level of comparison necessary for informed policy evaluation regarding the scalability and replicability of the Riyadh Season model (Albalawi & Henderson, 2025).

In view of the theoretical and practical gaps identified above, the present study is guided by the following central research question:

To what extent does Riyadh Season contribute to sustainable economic growth and tourism development in Saudi Arabia, and through what mechanisms does a recurring mega-entertainment event function as an instrument of national economic diversification within the framework of Vision 2030?

1.3. 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. The significance of this research is articulated at two levels: the theoretical level and the practical level.

1.3.1 At the Theoretical Level

- This study contributes to bridging the existing gap in the academic literature between event tourism theories and economic diversification theories in oil-dependent rentier states. The prevailing theoretical frameworks for analyzing mega-events were developed primarily for non-recurring spectacles such as the Olympic Games, whereas Riyadh Season represents a fundamentally different model as a recurring and incrementally expanding event, thereby necessitating the development of adapted theoretical approaches.
- The study proposes an analytical framework that links the micro-level economic activities generated by recurring entertainment events — such as tourist expenditure, employment creation, and sectoral stimulation — to macro-level indicators of economic diversification, including changes in non-oil GDP composition and shifts in the occupational structure of the labor market.
- The study enriches the body of literature on soft power and destination branding by examining the mechanisms through which state-sponsored entertainment festivals function as instruments for reshaping the international image of the host nation, and by interrogating the causal pathways between improved perceptions and tangible economic outcomes such as increased foreign direct investment and sustained tourism demand.
- The study extends the geographical scope of event tourism scholarship, which has historically concentrated on Western and East Asian contexts, to encompass the Gulf Cooperation Council region with its distinct economic, social, and cultural characteristics, thereby responding to repeated calls in the literature for greater geographical diversity in this field of inquiry.

- The study advances the theoretical understanding of the cumulative impact of recurring events, a concept that has been insufficiently addressed in the mega-event literature, which has predominantly treated each event as a discrete analytical unit without accounting for the compounding effects across successive editions.

1.3.2 At the Practical Level

- The study provides policymakers in Saudi Arabia with independent empirical evidence on the actual economic impact of Riyadh Season, moving beyond the aggregate figures reported in official communications to include analysis of net economic benefits after accounting for public expenditure on infrastructure, security, marketing, and operational subsidies.
- The study generates data on the sectoral distribution of the economic benefits of Riyadh Season, enabling relevant authorities to identify which sectors genuinely benefit from the event and which require additional support or intervention to ensure a more equitable distribution of gains across large enterprises and small and medium-sized establishments.
- The study produces findings directly relevant to the nationalization (Saudisation) objectives of Vision 2030 by examining the characteristics of employment opportunities generated by Riyadh Season in terms of skill requirements, wage levels, contract duration, and the proportion of positions filled by Saudi nationals as opposed to expatriate workers.
- The study contributes to assessing the environmental sustainability of Riyadh Season by examining the pressures that the concentration of millions of visitors places on urban infrastructure, waste management systems, transportation networks, and water resources, thereby informing future planning and mitigation strategies.
- The study provides a basis for comparative benchmarking against similar recurring events in the region and globally, such as the Dubai Shopping Festival, Singapore's Formula 1 Grand Prix, and Qatar's post-World Cup legacy events, enabling decision-makers to evaluate the efficiency of the Riyadh Season model and its potential for scaling and replication in other contexts.

- The study offers evidence-based practical recommendations that can inform the General Entertainment Authority, the Ministry of Tourism, and other relevant bodies in developing future editions of Riyadh Season, with the aim of maximizing economic and tourism returns while mitigating potential adverse effects on residential quality of life and the urban environment.
- The study serves as a reference for researchers and practitioners in other resource-dependent economies that are exploring the use of recurring entertainment mega-events as instruments of economic diversification, thereby contributing to the broader international discourse on post-oil economic development strategies.

1.4. 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?

1.5. 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.

1.6. 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.

1.7. 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)

1.8. Research Methodology

2. **Research Approach:** This study adopts a quantitative descriptive-analytical approach to examine stakeholder perceptions of Riyadh Season's role in supporting economic growth and tourism development in Saudi Arabia. The quantitative approach is selected because it allows for the systematic measurement of perceptions across large samples, enables hypothesis testing through statistical analysis, and produces generalizable findings suitable for policy recommendations.

3. **Population and Sample:** The target population comprises five stakeholder groups directly connected to Riyadh Season: domestic and international visitors who attended at least one edition of Riyadh Season, business owners and managers operating in sectors affected by the event (hospitality, retail, transportation, food and beverage, real estate), employees and human resource managers working in Riyadh Season-related industries, tourism and entertainment sector professionals and policymakers, and residents of Riyadh who live in areas proximate to Riyadh Season venues. A stratified random sampling technique will be employed to ensure proportional representation from each stakeholder group. The target sample size is 384 respondents or above, calculated using Krejci and Morgan's (1970) formula at a 95 percent confidence level and a 5 percent margin of error.
4. **Data Collection Instrument:** Data will be collected through a structured self-administered questionnaire designed on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire will consist of three parts: Part A covers demographic information (age, gender, nationality, education level, occupation, stakeholder category), Part B contains items measuring the six dimensions of the independent variable (Riyadh Season's perceived effects), and Part C includes items measuring the two dependent variables (economic growth and tourism development). The questionnaire will be distributed electronically in both Arabic and English to maximize accessibility and response rate.
5. **Validity and Reliability:** Content validity will be established through review by a panel of academic experts in tourism, economics, and event management. Construct validity will be assessed using exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Internal consistency reliability will be measured using Cronbach's alpha, with a threshold of 0.70 or above accepted as satisfactory.

6. **Data Analysis:** Collected data will be analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) will be used to profile the sample and summarizes responses. Inferential statistics will include one-sample t-tests to examine the significance of perceived impacts, independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA to compare perceptions across demographic groups and stakeholder types, multiple regression analysis to identify the relative contribution of each dimension of Riyadh Season to economic growth and tourism development, and structural equation modelling to test the overall research model and path relationships among variables.

6.1. Scope of The Study

7. **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.
8. **Geographical Scope:** The study is geographically limited to the city of Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia and the host city of Riyadh Season.
9. **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
10. **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.

10.1. 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.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology This chapter provides a detailed account of the methodological procedures adopted in the study. It begins by justifying the selection of the quantitative descriptive-analytical approach. It then describes the study population and sampling strategy, including the stratified random sampling technique and the rationale for the target sample size. The chapter presents the research instrument in detail, explaining the questionnaire design, its three sections, the five-point Likert scale, and the operationalization of each variable and dimension. It also discusses the procedures for establishing content validity, construct validity, and

internal consistency reliability. Finally, it outlines the statistical techniques employed for data analysis, including descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA, multiple regression, and structural equation modelling.

Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Results This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study. It begins with a descriptive profile of the respondents based on demographic characteristics and stakeholder categories. It then reports the descriptive statistics for each dimension of the independent variable and each component of the dependent variables. The chapter proceeds to test the research hypotheses using the appropriate inferential statistical techniques, presenting the results of t-tests, ANOVA, regression analysis, and the structural equation model. Each hypothesis is addressed individually, with statistical evidence clearly reported including test values, significance levels, and effect sizes. The chapter concludes with a summary of all hypothesis testing outcomes.

Chapter Five: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations This chapter interprets the findings in light of the theoretical framework and prior empirical studies reviewed in Chapter Two. It discusses the extent to which the results confirm or contradict existing knowledge about mega-event impacts, economic diversification, destination branding, and employment generation. The chapter then draws the main conclusions of the study, directly addressing the research questions and objectives. It identifies the theoretical and practical contributions of the research, acknowledges the limitations of the study, and offers recommendations at two levels: policy recommendations directed at the General Entertainment Authority, the Ministry of Tourism, and relevant Saudi government entities for enhancing the economic and tourism returns of Riyadh Season, and academic recommendations proposing directions for future research to address the remaining gaps identified by this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

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).

2.2 The Independent Variable: Riyadh Season as a Recurring Mega-Entertainment Event

2.2.1 Concept and Definition of Mega-Entertainment Events

The concept of mega-events has evolved considerably in the academic literature over the past two decades. The traditional definition, attributed to scholars such as Roche (2000), characterized mega-events as large-scale cultural or sporting occasions possessing dramatic character, mass popular appeal, and international significance. These events were typically understood as one-off occurrences, the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup being the paradigmatic examples, whose impacts were concentrated within a finite period and a specific host location. More recent scholarship has broadened this conceptualization to accommodate a wider range of event formats, including state-sponsored entertainment festivals that share many characteristics with traditional mega-events in terms of visitor volume, economic impact, media exposure, and urban

transformation, while differing in their recurring nature and thematic diversity (Sardi, Rizzi, & Sorano, 2025).

Riyadh Season occupies a distinctive position within this evolving taxonomy. Launched in October 2019 as the flagship initiative of the Saudi Seasons program, it is a recurring annual entertainment and cultural festival organized by the General Entertainment Authority under the strategic umbrella of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. Unlike a World Cup or an Olympic Games, Riyadh Season is not structured around a single discipline or competition; rather, it is a multi-dimensional entertainment portfolio that brings together sporting contests, musical performances, theatrical productions, culinary experiences, interactive exhibitions, cultural showcases, and family-oriented attractions within a single branded period running approximately from October to March each year. The inaugural edition in 2019 ran for sixty-six days, encompassed more than one hundred events across twelve themed zones, and attracted over eleven million visitors, generating an estimated six billion Saudi riyals in direct revenue (Alhebshi, 2024). Subsequent editions have expanded significantly: the 2021–2022 season featured approximately seven thousand activities across fourteen zones spanning 5.4 million square meters, and the 2024–2025 season attracted more than twenty million visitors from one hundred and thirty-five countries, with an estimated brand value of approximately three point two billion US dollars (Alsulami et al., 2026).

The recurring, iterative nature of Riyadh Season is a defining characteristic that sets it apart from the one-off mega-events that dominate the existing academic literature. While a World Cup delivers a concentrated burst of economic activity followed by potential legacy challenges, including underutilized infrastructure and diminished demand, Riyadh Season is designed to produce cumulative, compounding benefits through annual repetition. Each edition builds upon the physical infrastructure, brand equity, operational expertise, and audience loyalty established by its predecessors, creating a trajectory of escalating returns that fundamentally differs from the boom-and-bust pattern documented in the one-off mega-event literature (Al-Mohammad & Butler, 2021).

2.2.2 Importance of Riyadh Season

The importance of Riyadh Season cannot be understood in isolation from the broader strategic context of Saudi Arabia's economic transformation. For decades, the Saudi economy was characterized by a structural dependence on hydrocarbon revenues that scholars in the rentier state tradition have identified as a source of economic vulnerability, institutional rigidity, and labor market distortion. The precipitous decline in oil prices between 2014 and 2016 exposed the fragility of this dependence and provided the immediate impetus for Vision 2030, an ambitious national transformation program launched in 2016 with the explicit objective of diversifying the Saudi economy away from oil. Within this framework, the tourism and entertainment sectors were identified as priority domains for investment and development, with the government setting targets to raise tourism's contribution to GDP from approximately three percent to ten percent by 2030 and to increase annual visitor numbers to one hundred and fifty million (Al Naimi, 2022).

Riyadh Season serves as a primary operational instrument for achieving these strategic objectives. Its importance derives from multiple dimensions. Economically, the event functions as a concentrated demand stimulus that channels visitor spending into the hospitality, retail, transportation, food and beverage, and real estate sectors of the capital city, generating measurable contributions to non-oil GDP. In terms of employment, the event creates both temporary and permanent jobs across a range of skill levels in event management, hospitality, security, logistics, creative industries, and ancillary services, contributing to labor market diversification and providing opportunities for Saudi workforce participation. From a destination-branding perspective, Riyadh Season plays a pivotal role in repositioning the Kingdom from a destination associated primarily with religious pilgrimage to one recognized as a vibrant, modern, and culturally diverse leisure destination capable of competing with established entertainment capitals such as Dubai, Singapore, and London (Kiani, 2026).

At the social level, Riyadh Season contributes to the Quality-of-Life Program, one of Vision 2030's twelve delivery program, which aims to increase household spending on cultural and entertainment activities from approximately three percent to six percent. The event provides Saudi citizens with access to world-class entertainment, cultural experiences, and recreational activities that were previously unavailable or required expensive international travel, thereby contributing to domestic

satisfaction and social cohesion. At the geopolitical level, the event functions as a soft-power instrument through which the Saudi state projects an image of openness, modernity, and cultural vitality to international audiences, contributing to the reimagination of national identity that scholars have documented across the Gulf region (Muhsin & Rizzi, 2024; Alghamdi & Valverde, 2024).

2.2.3 Dimensions of Riyadh Season

Based on the review of the relevant literature, the present study identifies six key dimensions through which Riyadh Season operates as an independent variable affecting economic growth and tourism development.

The first dimension is the contribution to non-oil GDP, which captures the extent to which the event generates economic value beyond the hydrocarbon sector through direct visitor spending, supply-chain activation, and tax revenue generation. This dimension reflects the fundamental rationale for the event within the Vision 2030 diversification strategy and is supported by empirical evidence that tourism and non-oil exports have a positive long-run relationship with Saudi economic growth (Waheed, Sarwar, & Dignah, 2020).

The second dimension is economic spillover effects across sectors, which refers to the indirect and induced economic impacts that radiate outward from the immediate tourism and entertainment sector into hospitality, retail, transportation, food service, real estate, and construction. The economic multiplier theory provides the theoretical foundation for this dimension, explaining how an initial injection of visitor spending generates successive rounds of economic activity as revenues become wages, wages become consumer spending, and consumer spending becomes revenue for additional businesses (Sardi et al., 2025).

The third dimension is employment generation and Saudization alignment, which addresses the quantity and quality of jobs created by the event, including their skill requirements, wage levels, contract duration, and the proportion of positions filled by Saudi nationals versus expatriate workers. This dimension is particularly significant given the centrality of Saudization to the Kingdom's social contract and the documented challenges of implementing labor nationalization policies in the hospitality and service sectors (Sobaih, 2023; Sobaih & Elshaer, 2023).

The fourth dimension is tourist spending, length of stay, and revisit intention, which captures the behavioral responses of visitors to the event, including how much they spend, how long they remain in the destination, and whether they intend to return for future editions. This dimension draws on the theory of planned behavior and consumer behavior theory, with Al-Khaldy, Hassan, and Salem (2022) providing direct empirical evidence that attitude, subjective norms, and social media influence predict visitation intention specific to Riyadh Season.

The fifth dimension is destination image and soft-power positioning, which refers to the event's role in shaping international and domestic perceptions of Riyadh and Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination and as a culturally progressive nation. Aliedan, Sobaih, and Elshaer (2021) demonstrate that the quality of cities-based entertainment in Saudi Arabia directly influences destination image and experience quality, which in turn predict tourist satisfaction and recommendation behavior.

The sixth dimension is **environmental and social pressures**, which captures the negative externalities associated with hosting a large-scale recurring event, including infrastructure strain, traffic congestion, waste generation, noise pollution, rising living costs, and community displacement. This dimension reflects the growing recognition in the mega-event literature that comprehensive impact assessment must account for costs as well as benefits (Alsaloum, Romagosa, & Alosalman, 2024).

2.2.4 Strategies for Maximizing the Impact of Recurring Mega-Entertainment Events

The literature identifies several strategic approaches that host destinations can employ to maximize the positive impacts and mitigate the negative consequences of recurring mega-entertainment events. The first strategy is portfolio diversification, which involves offering a broad and evolving range of activities across multiple themes, venues, and price points to appeal to diverse visitor segments and reduce dependence on any single attraction type. Riyadh Season exemplifies this approach through its multi-zone format, which in recent editions has encompassed Boulevard City, Boulevard World, Via Riyadh, Roshn Front, Wonder Garden, and numerous other themed areas, each offering a distinct experiential proposition (Alhebshi, 2024).

The second strategy is iterative learning and scaling, in which event organizers systematically collect data from each edition, identify areas of strength and weakness, and apply lessons learned to improve subsequent editions. The documented growth of Riyadh Season from twelve zones and one hundred events in 2019 to fourteen zones and seven thousand activities in 2021 illustrates this iterative approach in practice. The third strategy is stakeholder engagement and benefit sharing, which involves deliberately designing mechanisms to ensure that the economic benefits of the event are distributed across a wide range of stakeholders, including small and medium enterprises, local communities, and Saudi workers, rather than being concentrated among a small number of large operators. Al-Mohammad and Butler (2021) highlight the importance of this strategy, documenting SME stakeholders' concerns about uneven benefit distribution during the inaugural Saudi Seasons.

The fourth strategy is digital amplification, which leverages social media, digital marketing, and technology-enhanced experiences to extend the event's reach, engage audiences before and after the physical event period, and generate data for future planning. Al-Khaldy et al. (2022) demonstrate the significant role that social networking services play in shaping visitation intention for Riyadh Season, suggesting that digital strategy is not merely a promotional tool but a fundamental driver of demand. The fifth strategy is sustainability integration, which involves incorporating environmental management practices, community impact mitigation measures, and long-term legacy planning into the event design from the outset, ensuring that short-term economic gains do not come at the expense of long-term environmental or social costs.

2.2.5 The Role of Government and Institutional Support

The success of Riyadh Season is inseparable from the institutional architecture that supports it. The General Entertainment Authority, established in 2016 as part of the Vision 2030 reform programmer, serves as the primary organizing body, responsible for strategic planning, licensing, quality assurance, and coordination with other government agencies. The National Events Centre provides operational support, while sponsorship partnerships with major Saudi corporations such as SNB, STC, and Saudia provide financial backing and cross-promotional opportunities. This institutional ecosystem reflects what scholars describe as a state-led event development model, in which the government plays a direct and active role in conceiving, financing, organizing, and

marketing large-scale entertainment initiatives rather than relying primarily on private-sector entrepreneurship (Alharbi, 2023).

The state-led model offers certain advantages, including the ability to mobilize resources at scale, coordinate across government agencies, absorb financial risk that might deter private investors, and align event objectives with broader national strategy. However, it also carries risks, including the potential for political rather than market-driven decision-making, limited accountability for cost overruns, crowding out of private-sector initiative, and vulnerability to changes in political priorities. The academic literature on mega-events in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts highlights the additional dimension that such events often serve dual purposes: genuine economic development on the one hand, and legitimacy construction and narrative management on the other, a duality that complicates straightforward assessment of their impacts (Alharbi, 2023).

2.2.6 Previous Studies on the Independent Variable

Al-Mohammad and Butler (2021) — Published in *Tourism and Hospitality Management*, this exploratory study examined tourism SME stakeholders' perceptions of the first Saudi Seasons initiative in 2019/2020. Using semi-structured interviews with SME owners and managers, the researchers found that stakeholders recognized opportunities including increased footfall and new revenue streams, but also identified challenges such as inadequate communication, uneven benefit distribution, insufficient preparation time, and concerns about demand sustainability. The study is significant because it provides one of the first empirically grounded, independent assessments of how the Saudi Seasons programme was experienced at the business level, revealing a gap between official success narratives and the more complex reality on the ground.

Alhebshi (2024) — Published in the *International Journal of Novel Research and Development*, this study analyzed the effect of Riyadh Season on visitor numbers using a comparative descriptive approach combining secondary data analysis and stakeholder interviews. The findings confirmed substantial growth in visitor arrivals across successive editions and documented associated economic indicators including revenue generation and employment effects. The study provides valuable quantitative evidence but acknowledges limitations arising from reliance on official data sources, which may not capture net economic benefit after accounting for public expenditure.

Al-Khaldy, Hassan, and Salem (2022) — Published in *Sustainability*, this study applied the theory of planned behavior to assess predictors of tourists' intention to visit Riyadh Season mega-events. Structural equation modelling revealed that attitude and subjective norms significantly predicted visitation intention, with social networking services moderating the relationship between subjective norms and intention. The study provides a theoretically grounded model of visitor decision-making specific to Riyadh Season but focuses on intention rather than actual behavior or economic outcomes.

Alharbi (2023) — This doctoral dissertation at La Trobe University explored Saudi citizens' perceptions and attitudes toward the General Entertainment Authority using a mixed-methods approach. Findings revealed complex, multi-layered attitudes shaped by religious values, generational differences, international media exposure, and personal experience. While majority support for entertainment expansion was documented, significant minorities expressed concerns about cultural authenticity and pace of change. The study demonstrates that Riyadh Season's success depends not only on economic metrics but also on social acceptance and cultural legitimacy.

Alshammari and Alotaibi (2026) — Published in *Engineering, Technology & Applied Science Research*, this study applied deep learning models to analyze sentiment in Arabic-language tweets during the Riyadh Season. The analysis of over thirty-three thousand tweets revealed predominantly positive sentiment, but also identified critical voices raising concerns about commercialization, cultural impact, and equity. The study illustrates the diversity of public opinion surrounding Riyadh Season and provides a methodological template for using social media data to gauge stakeholder perceptions.

2.3 The Dependent Variables

2.3.1 First Dependent Variable: Economic Growth

2.3.1.1 Concept and Definition

Economic growth, in the context of this study, refers to the sustained increase in the production of goods and services within an economy, most commonly measured through changes in gross domestic product. For Saudi Arabia, the most relevant dimension of economic growth in relation to Riyadh Season is non-oil GDP growth, since the fundamental rationale for the event lies in its potential to contribute to economic diversification away from hydrocarbon dependence. Al Naimi (2022) documents that despite incremental progress in non-oil sector development, hydrocarbon revenues continued to account for a dominant share of government income through the early 2020s, underscoring the urgency of diversification initiatives such as Riyadh Season.

The academic literature distinguishes between several channels through which tourism-related events may contribute to economic growth. Direct effects include visitor spending on accommodation, food, entertainment, shopping, and transportation. Indirect effects arise through supply-chain linkages as businesses serving tourists purchase inputs from local suppliers. Induced effects occur when employees of tourism-related businesses spend their wages in the local economy, creating further rounds of activity. Together, these channels constitute the economic multiplier, the theoretical mechanism through which an initial injection of tourist spending produces a total economic impact that exceeds the original expenditure (Sardi et al., 2025).

2.3.1.2 Importance of Economic Growth in the Saudi Context

The importance of economic growth as a dependent variable in this study derives from the existential significance of economic diversification for Saudi Arabia's long-term stability and prosperity. The Kingdom's historical dependence on oil revenues has created a set of structural vulnerabilities that include fiscal sensitivity to global commodity price fluctuations, limited private-sector development, high youth unemployment, and dependence on expatriate labor. Vision 2030 represents a comprehensive attempt to address these vulnerabilities by building a diversified, knowledge-based economy in which tourism, entertainment, technology, and other non-oil sectors play an increasingly prominent role. In this context, measuring the perceived contribution of Riyadh Season to economic growth is not merely an academic exercise; it is a question with direct relevance to the Kingdom's national development trajectory (Waheed et al., 2020; Kiani, 2026).

2.3.1.3 Dimensions of Economic Growth

The present study measures perceived economic growth through four dimensions. The first is contribution to non-oil GDP, capturing stakeholders' perceptions of the extent to which Riyadh Season generates measurable value beyond the hydrocarbon sector. The second is sectoral revenue increase, measuring perceived impacts on the revenues of hospitality, retail, transportation, food service, and real estate businesses during and after the event period. The third is job creation quality, assessing perceptions of whether the employment generated by Riyadh Season is characterized by adequate skill levels, fair wages, reasonable contract duration, and meaningful career development potential for Saudi nationals. The fourth is investment attraction, measuring the perceived role of Riyadh Season in attracting domestic and foreign investment into Riyadh's tourism and entertainment infrastructure, a dimension supported by Kiani's (2026) finding that foreign direct investment in Saudi tourism infrastructure increased by thirty-five percent between 2020 and 2023.

2.3.1.4 Strategies for Enhancing Economic Growth through Events

The literature identifies several strategies through which host destinations can maximize the economic growth contributions of mega-events. These include local procurement policies that minimize economic leakage by encouraging event organizers to source goods and services from local suppliers; workforce development program that ensure the availability of skilled Saudi workers to fill event-related positions; infrastructure planning that creates permanent productive assets rather than temporary structures with limited post-event utility; and fiscal mechanisms that capture a portion of event-generated revenue for reinvestment in public goods and services.

2.3.1.5 Challenges and Limitations

However, the relationship between mega-events and economic growth is not unambiguously positive. The academic literature documents several countervailing factors, including displacement effects whereby event visitors substitute for regular tourists rather than representing genuinely additional demand; crowding-out effects whereby public spending on event organization diverts resources from potentially more productive alternative investments; inflation effects whereby concentrated demand during event periods drives up prices for accommodation,

food, and transportation, disproportionately affecting lower-income residents; and post-event hangover effects whereby the withdrawal of event-related stimulus leaves behind underutilized infrastructure and diminished demand (Sobaih, 2023).

2.3.1.6 Previous Studies on Economic Growth

Waheed, Sarwar, and Dignah (2020) — Published in *Structural Change and Economic Dynamics*, this study examined the role of non-oil exports, tourism, and renewable energy in Saudi economic growth using ARDL bounds testing over 1970–2018. Results confirmed a positive and significant long-run relationship between tourism and economic growth, providing econometric evidence that tourism functions as a genuine growth engine in the Saudi context.

Kiani (2026) — Published in *JEFAS*, this study documented tourism's GDP share rising from 2.9% (2019) to approximately 4.2% (2022), sector employment growing from 0.9 to 1.3 million, and women's employment share increasing from 7% to 12%. The study provides the macro-level empirical baseline against which Riyadh Season's specific contribution can be assessed.

Sobaih (2023) — Published in *Sustainability*, this study examined Saudization challenges in the restaurant sector, finding misaligned wage expectations, insufficient training pathways, cultural attitudes toward service work, and inadequate retention mechanisms. The study demonstrates that employment generation from events does not automatically translate into quality employment for Saudi nationals.

Sardi, Rizzi, and Sorano (2025) — Published in *Administrative Sciences*, this study analyzed the economic impact of the Giro d'Italia and Tour de France as recurring mega-sporting events, documenting both direct spending effects and broader tourism promotion outcomes. The study provides a methodological benchmark for assessing economic impacts of recurring events that is directly relevant to the present research.

2.3.2 Second Dependent Variable: Tourism Development

2.3.2.1 Concept and Definition

Tourism development, as conceptualized in this study, encompasses both the quantitative expansion and qualitative improvement of a destination's tourism sector. Quantitative expansion refers to increases in visitor volume, diversity of source markets, total visitor spending, and the sector's contribution to national employment and GDP. Qualitative improvement refers to enhancement of the destination's image, its competitive positioning in international tourism rankings, the quality and diversity of its tourism infrastructure and services, and the development of a skilled, sustainable tourism workforce. Saudi Arabia's tourism development trajectory has been dramatic: total visitor arrivals exceeded one hundred and sixteen million in 2024, surpassing the original Vision 2030 target seven years early, prompting the Kingdom to revise its ambition upward to one hundred and fifty million visitors by 2030 (Alsulami et al., 2026).

2.3.2.2 Importance of Tourism Development

Tourism development is critically important for Saudi Arabia for several interrelated reasons. First, tourism is a labor-intensive sector with the capacity to generate large numbers of jobs at multiple skill levels, contributing to the resolution of youth unemployment, which remains a significant social and political challenge. Second, tourism generates foreign exchange earnings that help to balance the current account and reduce dependence on oil export revenues. Third, tourism development drives infrastructure investment in transportation, hospitality, and urban amenities that improves the quality of life for residents as well as visitors. Fourth, international tourism development enhances the Kingdom's global visibility and soft-power positioning, contributing to diplomatic objectives and foreign investment attraction. Fifth, domestic tourism development reduces capital outflows associated with Saudi citizens travelling abroad for leisure, redirecting consumer spending into the national economy (Alanzi, 2023).

2.3.2.3 Dimensions of Tourism Development

The present study measures perceived tourism development through five dimensions. The first is visitor volume and market diversification, capturing perceptions of Riyadh Season's impact on the number and geographic diversity of tourists visiting Riyadh. The second is spending patterns and economic contribution, measuring perceived changes in visitor spending behavior including average daily expenditure, spending categories, and total economic contribution. The third is

destination image and international competitiveness, assessing the perceived influence of Riyadh Season on how domestic and international audiences perceive Riyadh as a tourist destination relative to regional competitors. The fourth is revisit intention and loyalty, measuring the extent to which visitors who attend Riyadh Season express intention to return for future editions or to visit Riyadh outside the event period. The fifth is tourism infrastructure and service quality, capturing perceptions of the event's contribution to improvements in accommodation capacity, transportation networks, service standards, and the overall tourism ecosystem of the city.

2.3.2.4 Strategies for Enhancing Tourism Development

Several strategic approaches emerge from the literature for leveraging mega-events to enhance tourism development. The first is destination image management, which involves the deliberate and coordinated use of the event's media exposure, social media presence, and visitor experience to construct and communicate a compelling destination narrative. Aliedan et al. (2021) demonstrate that entertainment quality directly shapes destination image, suggesting that investment in experience quality is simultaneously an investment in long-term destination positioning. The second is market segmentation and targeting, which involves identifying specific visitor segments with the highest potential for spending, repeat visitation, and positive word-of-mouth, and designing event content and marketing to appeal to those segments. The third is post-event engagement, which involves maintaining communication with event visitors through digital channels after the event period ends, promoting off-season attractions and return visits, and converting one-time visitors into loyal destination advocates.

2.3.2.5 The Role of Destination Image

The concept of destination image deserves particular attention because of its central mediating role in the relationship between Riyadh Season and tourism development. Destination image refers to the totality of beliefs, ideas, impressions, and associations that an individual holds about a particular place as a potential travel destination. The literature consistently identifies destination image as one of the most powerful predictors of travel decision-making, tourist satisfaction, and revisit intention. For Saudi Arabia, destination image management is especially consequential given the Kingdom's historical association with conservative social norms and restricted access,

an image that Vision 2030 explicitly seeks to transform through cultural liberalization, tourism infrastructure development, and events such as Riyadh Season. Aliedan et al. (2021) provide direct evidence that entertainment quality in Saudi cities positively influences destination image, which in turn mediates the relationship between entertainment provision and tourist satisfaction.

2.3.2.6 The Role of Revisit Intention

Revisit intention is a particularly significant outcome variable in the context of recurring events. Unlike one-off events where visitor retention is less relevant, Riyadh Season's annual format means that each satisfied visitor represents a potential recurring customer whose lifetime value to the destination substantially exceeds that of a single-visit tourist. The theory of planned behavior, as applied by Al-Khaldy et al. (2022), provides a framework for understanding the cognitive and social mechanisms through which revisit intentions form, while Aliedan et al. (2021) demonstrate the mediating role of satisfaction and experience quality in translating entertainment provision into behavioral intention.

2.3.2.7 Previous Studies on Tourism Development

Alsaloum, Romagosa, and Alosalman (2024) — Published in *Tourism and Hospitality*, this study examined Riyadh residents' perceptions of tourism development benefits and costs using social exchange theory. Residents recognized economic benefits including job creation and infrastructure improvement, but also identified costs including congestion, rising expenses, and service strain. The study demonstrates the multi-dimensional nature of tourism development perceptions.

Alanzi (2023) — This doctoral dissertation at Victoria University developed econometric models for forecasting Saudi inbound tourism demand, finding that both traditional economic variables and country-specific factors including major events contributed meaningfully to demand prediction. The study supports the proposition that Riyadh Season influences the tourism demand trajectory.

Alsulami, Alharbi, et al. (2026) — Published in *Scientific Reports*, this study used machine learning to predict tourist arrivals in Saudi Arabia at the city level. Riyadh Season was identified

as a significant driver, with city-level analysis confirming pronounced seasonal visitor patterns coinciding with the event period.

Al-Mohammad and Butler (2024) — Published in *Tourism Recreation Research*, this study explored Saudi youth views on hosting Western music festivals under the Saudi Seasons strategy. Findings revealed generational differences in attitudes toward entertainment events, with younger Saudis more supportive but also more critical of implementation quality, suggesting that tourism development perceptions vary across demographic segments.

2.4 The Relationship Between the Independent and Dependent Variables

2.4.1 Theoretical Linkages

The theoretical relationship between Riyadh Season and its dependent variables of economic growth and tourism development operates through multiple interconnected pathways. The most direct pathway is the demand-side multiplier mechanism: Riyadh Season attracts visitors who spend money in the local economy, creating revenue for businesses, wages for workers, and tax income for government. The magnitude of this multiplier depends on the proportion of spending retained locally rather than leaking through imports, the labor intensity of benefiting sectors, and whether event spending represents genuinely new activity rather than displaced spending from elsewhere (Sardi et al., 2025).

The second pathway is the destination image formation mechanism. When visitors attend Riyadh Season and encounter high-quality, well-organized entertainment, their cognitive and affective evaluation of Riyadh as a destination improves, increasing both personal revisit likelihood and willingness to recommend the destination to others. This mechanism is theoretically grounded in image formation theory and empirically supported by Aliedan et al. (2021), who demonstrate the mediating role of destination image between entertainment quality and tourist behavioral intentions.

The third pathway is the supply-side development mechanism. Each edition of Riyadh Season has been accompanied by permanent investments in venue construction, transportation infrastructure, hospitality capacity, and workforce training. Kingdom Arena, constructed for the 2023–2024 season with a capacity exceeding forty thousand, exemplifies how event-driven investment creates lasting productive assets (Alhebshi, 2024).

The fourth pathway is the soft-power and nation-branding mechanism. International visibility generated through high-profile events, celebrity appearances, and global media coverage contributes to repositioning Saudi Arabia in the international imagination, with economic implications extending beyond tourism to include foreign direct investment attraction, trade facilitation, and diplomatic relationship strengthening (Muhsin & Rizzi, 2024; Alghamdi & Valverde, 2024).

2.4.2 Moderating Factors

The relationship between Riyadh Season and its outcomes is moderated by several factors. Stakeholder type is a primary moderator: hospitality business owners may perceive strong economic benefits while nearby residents experience congestion costs without direct economic gain. Al-Mohammad and Butler (2021) documented significant variation in stakeholder perceptions of the Saudi Seasons initiative. Demographic characteristics also moderate perceptions: Al-Mohammad and Butler (2024) found age-based attitudinal differences toward entertainment events, while Alshammari and Alotaibi (2026) confirmed polarized public sentiment across demographic groups.

2.4.3 Mediating Factors

Satisfaction functions as a key mediator. Aliedan et al. (2021) demonstrate that the link between entertainment quality and tourism outcomes is mediated by destination image and experience quality, meaning that scale alone is insufficient; experience quality determines whether attendance converts into sustainable tourism outcomes. Social media engagement acts as both a moderator and a mediator, amplifying positive experiences through digital word-of-mouth while also providing platforms for critical voices (Al-Khaldy et al., 2022; Alshammari & Alotaibi, 2026).

2.4.4 Previous Studies on the Relationship

Aliedan, Sobaih, and Elshaer (2021) — Published in *Sustainability*, this study tested a model linking cities-based entertainment quality to destination image, experience quality, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions in Saudi Arabia. Structural equation modelling confirmed positive and significant pathways from entertainment quality through image and experience quality to satisfaction and recommendation intention, providing direct empirical evidence for the relationship between event quality and tourism development outcomes.

Muhsin and Rizzi (2024) — Published in *Heliyon*, this study examined Qatar's 2022 World Cup as a mega-event reshaping destination identity. Significant branding and tourism effects were documented alongside legacy challenges. The study provides a regional benchmark: if a one-off event generates measurable effects for a Gulf state, a recurring event like Riyadh Season may generate cumulative advantages through repetition.

Alghamdi and Valverde (2024) — Published in *Frontiers in Communication*, this quantitative study analyzed the FIFA World Cup's impact on Qatar's brand perception. Using survey data and brand equity metrics, the researchers found significant positive shifts in international perceptions of Qatar following the event. The methodology and findings provide a comparative framework for assessing Riyadh Season's brand-building effects.

Sobaih and Elshaer (2023) — Published in *Sustainability*, this study compared local versus foreign worker perceptions, commitment, and career attitudes in Saudi restaurants and cafes under the new Saudisation policy. The findings revealed significant perception gaps between Saudi and expatriate workers regarding job satisfaction, career prospects, and organizational commitment, with implications for the sustainability of event-generated employment and its contribution to long-term economic growth.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a comprehensive review of the theoretical and empirical literature relevant to the analysis of Riyadh Season's role in supporting economic growth and tourism

development in Saudi Arabia. The review has been structured around the study's independent variable, Riyadh Season as a recurring mega-entertainment event, and its two dependent variables, economic growth and tourism development, examining each through the lenses of concept, importance, dimensions, strategies, challenges, and prior empirical evidence.

Several key findings emerge from the review. First, the existing theoretical literature provides robust support for the proposition that mega-events can contribute to economic growth and tourism development through demand-side multipliers, destination image enhancement, supply-side infrastructure development, employment creation, and soft-power projection. Second, empirical evidence confirms that tourism has a positive relationship with economic growth in the Saudi context (Waheed et al., 2020), and that entertainment quality is a significant driver of destination image and tourist satisfaction (Aliedan et al., 2021). Third, the few studies that have directly examined Riyadh Season or the Saudi Seasons program reveal a complex picture in which economic benefits coexist with stakeholder concerns about benefit distribution, employment quality, cultural impact, and environmental sustainability (Al-Mohmmad & Butler, 2021; Alsaloum et al., 2024; Alharbi, 2023).

However, the review also identifies significant gaps. Theoretically, the existing mega-event literature remains oriented toward one-off events and lacks integrated frameworks for analyzing recurring, state-sponsored entertainment festivals in oil-dependent economies. Empirically, the available studies on Riyadh Season tend to rely on official data or focus on narrow dimensions such as visitor intention or sentiment analysis, without providing comprehensive, multi-stakeholder assessments of net economic and tourism impacts. The present study is designed to address these gaps through a multi-dimensional, perception-based approach that captures the views of five stakeholder categories across six dimensions of the independent variable and two dependent variables, moderated by stakeholder type and demographic characteristics. The conceptual model proposed in Chapter One and the methodological procedures detailed in Chapter Three are directly informed by the theoretical foundations and empirical gaps identified in this literature review.

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