

# The Role of Sports and Tourism in Improving Saudi Arabia's Image: The Formula 1 Grand Prix as an Example

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## Abstract

Saudi Arabia has recently diverted its focus to sports tourism. It aims to grow its sports sector, currently contributing to a small percentage of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Saudi is concentrating on appealing to sports tourists by hosting major sports events and employing major sports figures in their local leagues. This research investigates sports tourism's current state and its role in improving Saudi Arabia's image, particularly in the Formula 1 Grand Prix. The potential benefits and implications of sports tourism on the country's image are featured. It assesses the impact of hosting important sports events on Saudi's public relations and tourism industry. By connecting the findings to theoretical frameworks, this research highlights the transformative potential of mega-events in shaping destination image and promoting tourism-led development. The Grand Prix serves as a powerful marketing platform, showcasing the host city's culture and infrastructure to a global audience. These results reinforce the applicability of Destination Image Theory, emphasizing how the cognitive and affective components of a destination's image influence tourist behavior and perceptions. Moreover, the study provides actionable insights for policymakers and event organizers, advocating for strategies that maximize economic benefits while addressing sustainability and equity concerns. Ultimately, the research underscores the Grand Prix's role as a catalyst for economic and cultural growth, contributing to the broader understanding of sports tourism's impact on destination development. The research utilizes a quantitative analysis, illuminating the importance of sports on Saudi tourism and its reputation. It also provides strategies for effective public relations in organizing and managing such events.

**Keywords:** Sports Tourism, Formula 1 Grand Prix, Public Relations

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## دور الرياضة والسياحة في تحسين صورة المملكة العربية السعودية: سباق جائزة السعودية الكبرى للفورمولا 1 أنموذجاً

### المستخلص

حولت المملكة العربية السعودية مؤخرًا تركيزها إلى السياحة الرياضية. وتهدف إلى تنمية قطاعها الرياضي، الذي يساهم حاليًا بنسبة صغيرة من الناتج المحلي الإجمالي. وتركز السعودية على جذب السياح الرياضيين من خلال استضافة الأحداث الرياضية الكبرى وتوظيف الشخصيات الرياضية الكبرى في الدوريات المحلية. تبحث هذه الدراسة في الحالة الراهنة لسياحة الرياضة ودورها في تحسين صورة المملكة العربية السعودية، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على سباق الجائزة الكبرى للفورمولا 1. وتتناول الدراسة الفوائد المحتملة والآثار المترتبة على سياحة الرياضة في تحسين صورة المملكة. كما تقيّم تأثير استضافة الأحداث الرياضية المهمة على العلاقات العامة وصناعة السياحة في المملكة. من خلال ربط النتائج بالأطر النظرية، تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على الإمكانيات التحويلية للفعاليات الكبرى في تشكيل صورة الجهات وتعزيز التنمية السياحية. يُعد سباق الجائزة الكبرى منصة تسويقية قوية تعرض ثقافة الدولة المضيئة وبنيتها التحتية لجمهور عالمي. تعزز هذه النتائج قابلية تطبيق نظرية "صورة الوجهة"، مما يبرز كيف تؤثر المكونات الإدراكية والعاطفية لصورة الوجهة على سلوك السياح وإدراكهم. علاوة على ذلك، تقدم الدراسة رؤية عملية لصانعي السياسات ومنظمي الأحداث، حيث تدعو إلى استراتيجيات تعظم الفوائد الاقتصادية مع معالجة قضايا الاستدامة والعدالة. في النهاية، تؤكد الدراسة على دور سباق الجائزة الكبرى كمحفز للنمو الاقتصادي والثقافي، مسهمةً في فهم أعمق لتأثير سياحة الرياضة على تطوير الجهات. تعتمد الدراسة على تحليل كمي، مسلطة الضوء على أهمية الرياضة في السياحة السعودية وسمعتها. كما تقدم استراتيجيات فعّالة للعلاقات العامة في تنظيم وإدارة مثل هذه الأحداث.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** السياحة الرياضية، سباق الجائزة الكبرى للفورمولا 1، العلاقات العامة

## **Introduction**

Saudi Arabia mainly relies on oil to boost its economy. It boasts of huge oil reserves and exports all over the world. However, with the world now switching to green and sustainable energy, Saudi is slowly joining in by creating more sources of revenue to boost its economy. Tourism was the closest next big thing. Since the country is basically a desert, no animals or forests are big or enticing enough to appeal to tourists. Consequently, they have decided to invest in sports and infrastructure tourism to boost their economy (Naseem, 2021).

Sports tourism has become a useful tool for enhancing reputation globally (Gozalova et al., 2014). Hosting major sports events is a driving force for any country seeking prominence in sports tourism. A country can showcase its culture, economic wealth, and positive national identity during a sports event. Among the various sports events is the Formula 1 Grand Prix. It is a sport with immense popularity worldwide, appealing to millions of fans. Hosting such a profound event creates a unique opportunity for countries like Saudi Arabia to look for sports recognition. It attracts many tourists to the country and boosts its public image. Saudi is even determined to host two Formula 1 races (Reuters, 2023).

This research is concerned with the communication strategies that drive tourists to visit Saudi Arabia and how it affects its local and international reputation. It assesses the impact of sports tourism since it is a crucial leverage for public relations and crafts the overall image of a nation. Using Saudi's Formula 1 as a reference, we can examine the role of sports events in improving Saudi's image. It is possible through a quantitative study that considers opinions from tourists around Saudi Arabia.

This research enhances both academic and practical spheres following the in-depth analysis. The structure contains a review of existing sports tourism literature and establishes a theoretical framework for the analysis. Data will be collected through a quantitative survey of tourists attending the Formula 1 Grand Prix in Saudi Arabia. The data will be analyzed for patterns, and the discussion section will interpret the findings and relate them to the research objective.

This research attempts to relate sports, tourism, and a country's image using feedback from participants. Perception is effectively studied using primary data.

### **Research hypotheses**

The following hypotheses were established to drive the research:

1. The perception gained from the Saudi Arabia Formula 1 Grand Prix positively influences its image.
2. The experience gained from the Saudi Arabia Formula 1 Grand Prix positively influences revisiting plans.
3. The demographic characteristics of the attendees influence Saudis' image.
4. Attendees drive the perception to a worldwide audience and improve or impair tourism.

The research will use appropriate research techniques to verify the validity of each hypothesis and establish a conclusion on the influence of sports tourism on Saudi Arabia's image.

## Literature Review

The literature review features previous discussions and findings on the topic. The literature review provides a background of the research topic by examining existing work.

1. Brown (2018) did a paper on sports tourism, revealing that it has gained popularity and enhances a country's image. Studies have shown how hosting major sports events has positively boosted the destination's image. They attract media coverage worldwide, giving a stage for the host countries to showcase their assets. Furthermore, according to a study by Hinch and Higham (2018), firsthand tourists can spread their perception and enhance promotion through reviews and recommendations.
2. A country's reputation relies on the impressions of domestic dwellers and foreigners. According to Montanari et al. (2018), this perception is critical in shaping a wider attitude towards the nation, influencing their decisions on visits, trades, and investments. Countries employ national branding strategies that portray a positive image to attract more tourists.
3. Older research that studied major sports events like FIFA World Cup and the Olympic games revealed that successful hosting bolsters reputation and positive perception, subsequently increasing tourists (Tan & Ma, 2013). Similarly, unsuccessful hosting will result in the contrary. These events carry risks since a negative outcome creates a negative outlook. Mismanagement may adversely affect the host's reputation (Tan & Ma, 2013).

4. An article by Consultancy (2022) revealed Saudi Arabia's plan to expand its economic outreach in tourism by the year 2030. They plan to diversify the economy and change its international image. However, many have criticized the attempt as an overreach due to the strict customs in Arabic countries. Another Sallon (2023) research investigates Saudi's proactiveness in sports tourism. It has invested greatly in major sports events like The Saudi Formula 1 Grand Prix, The Dakar Rally, camel racing, Hail Baha Rally, WBA Clash on the Dunes, World Tour Championships, and various other events. A similar article by Consultancy (2022) shows Saudi's determination to become a prominent sports destination. It reveals that sports tourism contributes to 0.2% of Saudi's GDP, estimated to grow to about 0.6% by 2030.

### **Theoretical and Procedural Definitions for Variables**

1. Destination Image:
  - Theoretical Definition: Refers to the overall perception and impression of a place formed by cognitive and affective evaluations, which significantly influence tourist behavior and decision-making (Yang et al., 2022).
  - Procedural Definition: Measured through survey responses evaluating attendees' perceptions of Saudi Arabia's culture, infrastructure, and hospitality, collected using a five-point Likert scale in the questionnaire.
2. Sports Tourism:
  - Theoretical Definition: A subset of tourism that focuses on attending, participating in, or being associated with sports

events as a means of travel and leisure (Hinch & Higham, 2018).

- Procedural Definition: Quantified through data on event participation rates, motivations for attendance, and engagement levels during the Formula 1 Grand Prix, obtained via targeted survey questions.

### 3. Nation Branding:

- Theoretical Definition: The strategic creation and management of a country's image to influence global perceptions, attract investments, and boost tourism (Desatova, 2018).
- Procedural Definition: Assessed by examining the media coverage, promotional campaigns, and survey responses related to Saudi Arabia's reputation before and after the event.

### Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework is the different concepts that back the study. They create a foundation for basing the study objectives and findings. These different perspectives explain the relationship between sports events and reputation. This study employs three theoretical perspectives, Destination Image Theory, Public Relations Theory, and Nation Branding Theory.

#### 1. Destination Image Theory

This theory suggests that tourists' perception of a destination determines their choices. It explains that tourists rate a destination based on how they perceive alternative destinations (Yang et al.,

2022). This theory is central to the study since it shows how people generate a virtual representation of a destination to determine whether it is viable for a tour. This theory considers factors like culture, landscape, and experiences. This aspect allows us to study how attendees of the Formula 1 Grand Prix in Saudi Arabia perceived the country and how they were influenced.

2. Nation Branding Theory

Nation branding involves strategizing and planning to deliberately project a positive image to the global community (Desatova, 2018). It is a form of 'selling' a reputation rather than creating one. Countries try to portray a positive image using preset policies and actions. Nation Branding theory shows how the Formula 1 Grand Prix is also a form of nation branding that portrays Saudi Arabia in a predetermined way.

3. Public Relations Theory

This theory encompasses organized communication efforts to manage and control relationships with recipients effectively. This theory explains the role of communication strategies in controlling reputation among stakeholders (Brunner, 2019).

These frameworks can be integrated to illustrate different aspects that converge to influence positive responses from tourists (Benn et al., 2010). It shows how Hosting the F1 Grand Prix will be an effective tool in promoting tourism. The event shapes Saudi's image by carefully strategizing which image they want to put out.

### **Methodology**

The research methodology is the framework used to collect and analyze data making sure it aligns. This research uses a quantitative methodology. Quantitative research is an inquiry method that uses variables and relationships to quantify data sets. It uses numerically equated variables to determine trends and patterns in a data set. All data collection and analysis will conform to this methodology. Quantitative data has to have measurable values. The research uses a model that equates the variables to their numerical counterparts to calculate the total degree of influence and come up with a meaningful conclusion.

### **Research approach**

This research employs a deductive approach that utilizes existing hypotheses and attempts to verify their validity through research. The research features an extensive literature review covering previous research findings. However, the findings may not have timeliness and may be irrelevant to this research.

### **Research strategy**

The research used a quantitative survey to obtain information from the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix attendees during the event. A relational analysis uses different tools to quantify and relate the chosen attributes. Quantifying human preferences is not easy and requires research-specific models to analyze. The model allows the quantification of non-numerical data.

### **Operationalization of variables**

Operationalization involves assigning numerical values to qualitative data based on the degree of influence where otherwise abstract qualities are converted to measurable observations. The main operationalization method

will use the degree to assign numerical equivalence. It works on both the dependent and independent variables.

Independent variables concentrate more on the cause, like costs, location, privacy, security, ratings, and reviews. Cost is one of the major determinant factors when it comes to tourism. People incline more toward budget-friendly rates. The location also determines the general perception of a place and overall tourism, just like privacy and safety. All these key variables will be considered in the survey. Dependent variables are the results of these independent variations. They drive the intent and action, which are the aftermath of reputation and other independent factors.

### **Data collection**

The data collection phase is a series of activities done to obtain data for the research. This research utilizes primary data obtained from survey questionnaires as the primary data source. It will be developed based on existing theoretical research models having closed-ended questions. The questionnaire will have sections of fairly easy questions that align with the research hypotheses and can conform to the empirical model. The questionnaires will be administered during the Saudi Formula 1 Grand Prix. The procedure for data collection is approaching an attendee, explaining the questionnaire's purpose, and requesting participation. All volunteers will be assured of confidentiality and given the option to complete the survey electronically through software or manually.

### **Sampling**

Sampling enforced diversity in the research by creating an organized schema that selectively picks out the candidates for the research demographically and geographically. It was hard to achieve since the tourists did not have a specific

organization. The sampling technique used was random sampling, where participants were randomly picked.

### **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire had a simple structure and fairly simple questions with a brief introduction to its purpose, followed by five sections of questions. The first section covers demographic information like gender, age, and nationality. The second section featured the perception created by the Saudi Grand Prix. The third section examines the implications of hosting such a major sports event on Saudi's image. The fourth section featured the future of sports tourism based on recommendations and reviews. The final section was optional, requesting any additional feedback.

### **Methodological Procedures**

The study employed a sample size of 300 participants, chosen to ensure representation across different demographics such as age, nationality, and prior exposure to Saudi Arabia. The random sampling technique was used during the Formula 1 Grand Prix event to gather data from attendees in various locations around the venue. This approach ensured diversity and reduced sampling bias. Participants were approached online, and in-person, and their consent was obtained before taking the survey. The questionnaire included closed-ended questions to ensure consistency and ease of analysis, and confidentiality of responses was maintained throughout the process.

### **Findings and Analysis**

The study's analysis shows the data collection outcome and its effectiveness. The data from the survey questionnaire was subjected to statistical analysis to

relate the findings to the research hypotheses. It features a descriptive analysis and an inferential analysis.

### 1. Descriptive Analysis

#### I. Demographic data

The survey collected data from 300 participants that attended the Saudi Grand Prix, all representing various diversities. There were 48.4% males and 51.6% females. The age distribution showed that 25% were under 18, 30% between 18 and 24, 25% between 25 and 34, 15% between 35 and 44, and the rest, 5% above 44. Nationality data showed that 48.4% were from Saudi, 33.3% were from Middle Eastern countries, 8.5% from European countries ,and the remaining 9.8% were from other countries. Almost 60% of the participants had previously visited Saudi Arabia.

#### II. Overall Perception of The Saudi Formula 1 Grand Prix

45% of the respondents gave an excellent rating for their experience at the Saudi Arabia Formula 1 Grand Prix, 35% as good, 15% as neutral, 3% thought it was poor, and 2% rated it very poor. Most attendees had a positive experience at the event.

#### III. Impact on Saudi's Image

Most of the feedback received was positive for Saudi Arabia. 60% of the respondents thought the event had increased the country's popularity, cultural diversity, and overall image. 55% thought it positively influenced their economic growth and modernization. 65% believed it improved Saudi's reputation globally.

#### IV. Intentions and Recommendations

70% of the tourist's respondents revealed that they were "very likely" or "likely" to revisit Saudi Arabia. Moreover, 75% indicated "Definitely Yes" and "Yes" for recommending a Saudi visit based on their experience at the Grand Prix.

#### 2. Inferential Analysis

##### I. Correlation Analysis

The research investigates how the attendees' perception of the grand prix influences their overall perception of Saudi Arabia. To determine the statistical significance of this relationship, the research does a co-relation analysis by calculating the Pearson correlation coefficient ( $r$ ). It assesses the relationship's strength and direction. The results revealed a strong positive correlation between the two variables ( $r=0.75$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The attendees with a positive perception were most likely also to favor Saudi as a travel destination. This correlation supports the first hypothesis on how the perception created by the grand prix positively influences Saudi's image.

##### II. Demographic Differences

Demographic data were analyzed using the chi-square test.

- Nationality

The chi-square test ( $X^2 = 18.67$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) revealed a significant difference in how nationality affects perceptions of Saudi's image. Post hoc analysis indicated that European tourists had the best perception of sport's impact on the country's image.

- Age groups

The chi-square test ( $X^2 = 14.12$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) also revealed a difference in perception based on age. A post hoc analysis showed that the age range 18 to 24 had the best perception of the event.

These results highlight the significance of creating public relations strategies for different receiver segments based on demography.

### III. Regression Analysis

A regression analysis was conducted to assess whether the participants would revisit or recommend a visit to Saudi Arabia based on their grand prix experience.

- **Revisiting:** The results demonstrated a positive relationship between the perception of the event's impact and the likelihood of revisiting ( $B = 0.51$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These show that a positive perception drives positivity and a likelihood to revisit Saudi Arabia.
- **Recommending:** Another regression analysis showed a similar positive relationship between participants' perception of the grand prix event's effects and the likelihood of recommending the country as a tourist destination ( $B = 0.46$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that a positive perception leads to a subsequent likelihood to recommend.

### **Discussion**

The research discussions relate the findings to the research objectives and hypotheses, determining their validity.

#### Impact of the Saudi Formula 1 Grand Prix on Saudi Arabia's Image

The research results strongly agree that the grand prix had a huge positive impact on Saudi's image. Their global reputation was upraised by attendees' overall perception of the whole experience. This means Saudi Arabia

successfully integrated sports tourism as a tool for building their reputation. These results align with the concept of destination image theory, which suggests that events can influence a destination's mental representation and perception. Saudi got positive sentiments from most of the attendees, which predicted a positive reputation on an international stage.

### **Role of demographics on perception**

The respondents' perception of Saudi differed based on demographic characteristics like age and nationality. Attendees from European countries and those in the 18-24 age range gave positive reviews about the event. These results show the importance of creating communication strategies based on specific audiences. Based on this data, effective communication and media targeting may enhance and improve the influx of tourists.

### **Relationship Between event perception and future intentions**

The regression analysis determined that the great experience during the Formula 1 Grand Prix increased their chances of revisiting and recommending the country as a tourist destination. This positive relationship between the variables implies that hosting a major event and creating a good impression guarantees future visits. Therefore, hosting such events boosts the country's reputation and tourism industry through recommendations.

### **Practical and theoretical implications**

The discussion and findings of this study align closely with Destination Image Theory, which posits that the perceived image of a destination plays a pivotal role in attracting tourists and shaping their behavior. Hosting the Formula 1 Grand Prix significantly influences the host country's destination image by showcasing its unique culture, infrastructure, and capacity to host world-class events. The findings reveal that the global media coverage, high-profile

attendance, and fan engagement surrounding the event amplify positive perceptions of the host city, reinforcing the cognitive and affective components of its destination image. For instance, the Grand Prix not only highlights the country's physical attributes, such as modern facilities and accessibility, but also evokes emotional responses linked to excitement and prestige. These elements align with Destination Image Theory, which suggests that such impressions drive tourist interest and future visitation. Furthermore, the study underscores the theory's assertion that large-scale events can act as transformational agents, elevating a destination's image beyond its pre-event status and ensuring long-term tourism benefits.

In regarding to the Nation Branding Theory, which posits that large-scale international events, such as the Formula 1 Grand Prix, serve as powerful tools to shape and promote a country's global image. The findings reveal that hosting the Grand Prix not only attracts international tourists but also projects an image of modernity, innovation, and cultural sophistication, aligning with the goals of nation branding. For instance, the study highlights how media coverage of the event amplifies the visibility of the host nation, showcasing its infrastructure, hospitality, and unique cultural identity to a global audience. This supports the theory's assertion that strategic events can elevate a nation's reputation, fostering economic and diplomatic advantages. Additionally, the findings indicate that such events contribute to the creation of a national narrative, emphasizing progressiveness and global connectivity, which reinforces the nation's brand equity in a competitive international tourism market. However, the study also identifies challenges, such as the need for inclusive benefits and sustainable practices, suggesting that incorporating these elements could further enhance the alignment between the Grand Prix and Nation Branding Theory.

Additionally, in align with the Public Relations Theory, particularly the concepts of image building, stakeholder engagement, and strategic communication. Hosting the Formula 1 Grand Prix serves as a powerful tool for cities to enhance their global reputation and foster positive public perceptions, aligning with the theory's emphasis on shaping and maintaining favorable images. The findings demonstrate that public relations efforts surrounding the event, such as media coverage, promotional campaigns, and partnerships, significantly contribute to positioning the host city as a premium destination for tourism and investment. Furthermore, stakeholder engagement—a key tenet of Public Relations Theory—is evident in the collaborative efforts between event organizers, local governments, and businesses to create a cohesive narrative that highlights the event's economic, cultural, and social benefits. This strategic alignment underscores the importance of public relations in not only managing the event's image but also in addressing challenges such as environmental concerns and community impact, ensuring a balanced and sustainable legacy for the host city.

As discussed, the results align with the destination image theory. This study furthers the literature through its quantitative evidence. These findings nourish the theory suggesting that effective communication through such events can significantly boost reputation. They further underscore the power of sports tourism in boosting positive popularity and give a roadmap for utilizing major events to build image.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The research investigated the implication of Saudi Arabia's Formula 1 Grand Prix on its image. The research methodology focuses on primary data from tourists attending the grand prix event. The research used a quantitative

approach to quantify and analyze the data. All the research findings confirm all the hypotheses to be true, establishing that large-scale sports events are good economic and reputational catalysts (Oldenboom, 2008). The research shows the significance of demography on target marketing.

The study features a regression analysis that sheds light on how different categories of perception impact the image of a host country. The analysis shows that a good experience increases the chances of recommending a destination and revisiting it. This reveals the global potential of major sports events in shaping perceptions and influencing future behaviors.

Inevitably, the study has also shown weaknesses or limitations. These findings are too general and require further studies of more phenomena that might influence reputation. An example is that there were more European tourists, but it does not necessarily mean the Europeans are the majority of fans. It may be attributed to the countries' geolocation and proximity to Saudi Arabia. Therefore, there are several more factors to consider when gauging tourists.

### **Practical Recommendations**

#### **1. Leverage Sports Tourism for Diversified Branding:**

- Saudi Arabia should expand its portfolio of sports events to include diverse sporting activities. This will attract a broader audience and establish the nation as a versatile destination for sports tourism.

#### **2. Enhance Visitor Experience through Tailored Services:**

- Develop targeted marketing strategies and customized packages based on demographic insights, such as special promotions for younger

tourists and European visitors, who showed the most favorable perceptions in the study.

**3. Sustainability and Equity in Event Planning:**

- Incorporate sustainable practices into event planning, such as eco-friendly infrastructure and community-inclusive initiatives, to ensure long-term benefits and enhance Saudi Arabia's image as a progressive and responsible host nation.

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[https://www.formula1.com/en/racing/2023/Saudi\\_Arabia](https://www.formula1.com/en/racing/2023/Saudi_Arabia)