

From Vision to Experience: Marketing Communication Innovation in Saudi Tourism من الرؤية إلى التجربة: الابتكار في الاتصال التسويقي في السياحة السعودية

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Abstract:

Objectives: Its primary aims are to investigate the innovative marketing communication strategies used in Saudi Arabia's tourism sector and explore gaps in current approaches to propose improvements that enhance audience reach, engagement, and international positioning.

Methods: It employs a qualitative approach, conducting semi-structured interviews with a sample of 20 tourists (10 from Saudi Arabia and 10 from Spain), to provide in-depth insights into current perceptions of tourism communication strategies and potential communication gaps.

Results: The findings reveal that tourists' interest is captured through social media, word of mouth, and transportation advertisements. They also reveal that Saudi Arabia's unique culture, social media influencers' emotional storytelling, and the cost of travel were the main motivations for travelling to Saudi Arabia, as well as apps offering tour packages.

Conclusions: This study adapted the AIDA model to innovative marketing strategies in the tourism sector. It contributes to the literature on tourism promotion in emerging markets by offering actionable recommendations for refining Saudi Arabia's marketing communication strategies to better align with national and international tourist expectations.

Keywords: Innovative Marketing Communication Strategies; Tourism; Cross-Cultural Study; Qualitative Study; AIDA Model.

المخلص:

الأهداف: الهدف الرئيسي للبحث هو دراسة استراتيجيات الاتصال التسويقي المبتكرة المستخدمة في قطاع السياحة في السعودية، واكتشاف الثغرات في الأساليب المستخدمة حالياً لاقتراح تحسينات تدعم الوصول إلى الجمهور وتحسن من تفاعله لتعزيز قطاع السياحة بالمملكة.

المنهجية: تم استخدام المنهج النوعي عبر المقابلات شبه منظمة مع عينة مكونة من 20 سائحاً (10 منهم من المملكة العربية السعودية و10 سياح من إسبانيا، مما قدم رؤى متعمقة حول التصورات الحالية لحملات السياحة التسويقية والفجوات المحتملة في الاتصال.

النتائج: وجدت النتائج فجوات في الاتصال بشكل عام مما يشير إلى أنه يتم جذب اهتمام السياح بشكل فعال من خلال وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، والكلام المنقول، وإعلانات وسائل النقل. كما وضحت النتائج أن الثقافة الفريدة في المملكة العربية السعودية، وسرد القصص العاطفية من قبل المؤثرين في مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي، والتكلفة كانت من أهم الدوافع لاتخاذ قرار السفر إلى المملكة. بالإضافة إلى التواصل مع المستهلكين من خلال التطبيقات التي تقدم حزم السفر.

الخلاصة: أشارت الدراسة إلى ضرورة تكييف نموذج AIDA مع استراتيجيات التسويق المبتكرة في قطاع السياحة. كما ساهمت هذه الدراسة في الأدبيات الخاصة بترويج السياحة في الأسواق الناشئة، وقدمت توصيات عملية لتحسين استراتيجيات الاتصال التسويقي في المملكة العربية السعودية بما يتماشى بشكل أفضل مع توقعات السياح المحليين والدوليين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: استراتيجيات التسويق المبتكرة في الاتصال الترويجي؛ السياحة؛ دراسة لثقافات مختلفة؛ دراسة نوعية؛ نموذج AIDA.

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1 Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has recently expanded tourism investment as part of its national economic diversification strategies (Jabali et al., 2023; Mir & Kulibi, 2023). The country exceeded its initial 2030 target of 100 million tourists, recording 116 million in 2024, a dramatic increase from just 16 million in 2019 (Ata, 2025). This growth has been driven by several factors, including unprecedented infrastructure investment, efficient visa policies, and high-impact marketing campaigns that have repositioned Saudi Arabia as an appealing destination offering culture, adventure, and luxury tourism experiences (Golan, 2025; Torossian, 2024).

Despite this success, and given Vision 2030's main objective of attracting upwards of 150 million annual visitors, including 70 million international tourists (Corder, 2024; Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016), several questions have emerged regarding whether current marketing communication strategies are effectively reaching diverse tourist segments. Saudi Arabia's sophisticated approach is exemplified by recent campaigns featuring a traveller exploring United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (1919) World Heritage sites in the country, including Al-Ahsa Oasis, ad-Diriyah, historic Jeddah, the Gate of Makkah, Hail Region, and the Al-Hijr archaeological site in AlUla, as well as several luxury resorts and natural locations (Comms8, 2024; Corder, 2024). However, while marketing campaigns have increased online searches for Saudi tourism by 38% (Arous et al., 2024; Comms8, 2024), their actual impact on tourists' decision-making remains understudied (Almutarie, 2024; Karolak & Michael, 2025; Madkhali et al., 2023).

This study addresses several critical gaps in understanding Saudi tourism marketing strategies and effectiveness. Firstly, while megaprojects in Saudi Arabia, such as NEOM and the Red Sea Project (which includes 50 luxury hotels across 22 islands), have attracted substantial investment (Golan, 2025), their marketing may not adequately communicate their unique value to different tourist segments worldwide. Secondly, despite growing tourist numbers, 79 million were domestic tourists in 2023, and approximately half of international tourists engaged in religious tourism (Khan, 2020; WARC, 2024), suggesting that leisure tourism marketing needs improvement and should be tailored to different tourist segments. Finally, as Saudi tourism undergoes a rapid digital transformation, the effectiveness of these platforms in the customer journey must be evaluated.

This study's significance lies in the evolution of the tourism marketing communication strategy, grounded in empirical evidence about what works and why, which is essential for achieving Vision 2030 targets and for ensuring greater exposure for the country's megaprojects (Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024; WARC, 2024). Moreover, understanding how tourism campaigns are received across cultures is essential in global destination marketing. Therefore, this study adopts a cross-cultural design, comparing Saudi and European tourists to identify preferences and differences in perceptions and motivations regarding tourism communications (Reisinger & Turner, 2003). The findings will benefit marketers, hospitality businesses, and policymakers seeking to position Saudi Arabia as 'a destination for tourists from all over the world' (Corder, 2024).

Therefore, this study employs the Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action (AIDA) model as its theoretical framework, as it provides a structured guide for assessing marketing communication strategies across four stages (Lewis, 1898). In the Saudi tourism context, *Attention* is captured through media channels and creative content, *Interest* is generated by highlighting unique selling points, *Desire* is created through emotional appeals and perceived value, and *Action* is prompted through clear calls to action and booking facilitation (Comms8, 2024; Corder, 2024). The AIDA model is particularly appropriate in the Saudi context, as campaigns explicitly aim to draw attention to lesser-known destinations, build interest through storytelling, create desire via aspirational imagery, and finally facilitate action through digital booking tools (Comms8, 2024; Yehia, 2024).

1.1 Research Questions

This study aims to address critical gaps in understanding the effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's tourism marketing communications by exploring five central questions:

- The extent to which current tourism marketing strategies reach and engage target audiences?
- What are the primary channels used for tourism marketing and their perceived effectiveness?
- How do domestic and international tourists perceive and respond to tourism marketing campaigns?
- What are the key factors shaping tourism marketing effectiveness within the Saudi context?
- What improvements can enhance the alignment of tourism marketing with tourist expectations?

1.2 Research Objectives

To address these questions, this study was designed with the following objectives:

- To critically evaluate the alignment of current tourism marketing communications with the preferences of targeted tourist segments.
- To identify the primary communication channels and message framing strategies employed within the Vision 2030 framework.
- To assess the tourism marketing strategies' effectiveness in generating awareness, interest, and intention to visit Saudi Arabia using the AIDA model.
- To explore tourists' perceptions and responses to cultural, emotional, and informational cues.
- To develop evidence-based recommendations for optimising tourism marketing communications in alignment with national tourism goals.

To achieve these objectives, this study will collect qualitative data through in-depth interviews with domestic and international tourists, providing actionable insights for marketers, Saudi tourism authorities, and hospitality businesses.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The AIDA Model in Tourism Marketing

Created by Elias St. Elmo Lewis (1898), the AIDA model remains one of the most influential frameworks for understanding consumer engagement with marketing communications (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Strong, 1925). The AIDA model is a list of stages involved in the interactions between sellers and buyers. Specifically, it concerns the process by which products or services may be successfully marketed to potential buyers. Although the AIDA model depicts decision-making as a linear process, tourism decisions are often dynamic and iterative, with tourists often revisiting different stages before making a final travel decision.

This study uses the AIDA model to explain how potential travellers progress from initial awareness of a destination to their final decision to visit (Comms8, 2024; Corder, 2024). The first stage, *Attention*, involves media selection and creative implementation, both of which are vital to ensuring campaigns stand out in crowded travel markets. Saudi Arabia's approach has involved high-profile celebrity endorsements, with individuals such as Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo paid huge sums to promote destinations within the country (Corder, 2024). Advertising campaigns in notable international locations, such as Times Square in New York, have highlighted various landscapes, including the pristine Red Sea corals, the ancient tombs of Al Ula, and the amazing highlands of Aseer (Comms8, 2024).

The second stage, *Interest*, requires providing compelling information that differentiates the destination. Saudi tourism campaigns emphasise unique selling points, such as AlUla (Golan, 2025), luxury hotels on the Red Sea, and Diriyah's cultural significance as the birthplace of the Saudi state (Comms8, 2024; Torossian, 2024).

The third stage, *Desire*, taps into emotional motivations, with Saudi Arabia positioning itself as offering 'once in a lifetime' experiences (WARC, 2024) through luxury resorts, adventure, and cultural immersion (Golan, 2025). However, the AIDA model does not capture continuous engagement, where tourists interact with brands multiple times before making decisions.

The fourth and final stage, *Action*, has been facilitated by digital innovations such as instant e-visas (90-day stays) and the Nusuk platform, which is designed to support seamless pilgrimage planning (Soul of Saudi, 2025).

Recent applications of the AIDA model in tourism demonstrate both its continued relevance and adaptability to digital environments. For instance, the AIDA model now accounts for micro-moments in customer journeys across devices and the role of social media in accelerating progression through stages (Comms8, 2024; Corder, 2024; Sallaku et al., 2025). Saudi Arabia's use of social media influencer marketing, with some posts achieving 30 million likes (Corder, 2024), and artificial intelligence (AI)-powered personalisation through the virtual guide 'Sara' (Soul of Saudi, 2025), represents cutting-edge applications of the AIDA model in the digital age.

2.2 Saudi Arabia's Tourism Marketing Evolution

Saudi Arabia's tourism marketing has undergone a radical transformation (Golan, 2025; Torossian, 2024). The 'Visit Saudi' campaign marked the initial effort to showcase Saudi Arabia's cultural and natural attractions and was followed by more targeted campaigns like 'This Land is Calling' in 2024 (Corder, 2024). This evolution reflects Vision 2030's strategic shift from oil dependence to a diversified economy in which tourism plays a central role (Torossian, 2024). Current marketing in Saudi Arabia emphasises several key destinations – The Red Sea projects, AlUla, Riyadh, Jeddah, and Aseer (Corder, 2024) – each serving a different tourist segment.

Resorts on Sindalah Island (NEOM) will appeal to luxury travellers (Golan, 2025), Asir's mountain activities will appeal to adventure seekers, and Al Ula's history will appeal to cultural tourists (Comms8, 2024; Golan, 2025). This segmented approach aligns with global trends regarding experiential travel, with 63% of tourists seeking unique destinations (WARC, 2024). Digital marketing has become central to the Saudi strategy, leveraging AI and big data for personalisation, as seen in the Visit Saudi app, and using social media influencer partnerships to reach billions of potential tourists (Corder, 2024). Saudi tourism has also adopted immersive technologies, such as augmented reality at heritage sites and virtual reality previews (Soul of Saudi, 2025), as well as Metaverse experiences that allow virtual exploration. These digital tools aim to overcome geographical and perceptual barriers by bringing Saudi experiences to global audiences before they travel (Soul of Saudi, 2025).

2.3 Perceptual Challenges and Image Transformation

Saudi Arabia employs a unique communications strategy to challenge long-standing international perceptions. Internally, marketers must maintain a delicate balance driven by Vision 2030's progressive reforms (Torossian, 2024). Marketing campaigns must appeal to a wide range of potential visitors, including international tourists seeking luxury and adventure but unaware of Saudi Arabia's natural wonders. The strategic transformation into a primary brand message is underway. The contrast between modern megaprojects such as NEOM and ancient heritage sites such as AlUla and Al Diriyah is not only a way to showcase additional assets but also to show Saudi Arabia as 'a land of discovery' that truly mixes 'time-honoured traditions and cutting-edge modernity' (Comms8, 2024). The main marketing challenge is finding a balance between tradition and modernisation, which becomes the main story for the country's brand change.

2.4 Cross-cultural Perspectives in Tourism Communication

In recent years, cross-cultural research in tourism has gained significant attention, particularly as destinations seek to attract visitors from diverse cultural backgrounds. Cultural aspects, communications, and travel motivations can differ significantly between regional and international tourists, influencing how they perceive marketing communications and make travel decisions (Reisinger & Turner, 2003). For example, tourists from collectivist cultures such as Saudi Arabia may respond strongly to family-oriented messaging, whereas those from individualist cultures such as Spain may be more influenced by personal exploration (Hofstede, 2001). Thus, tourism communication must consider these cultural dimensions to be effective. Previous research has shown that tailoring content to the target markets' cultural expectations and communication preferences increases engagement (Litvin et al., 2008). However, marketing messages are interpreted differently across cultures due to differences in values, expectations, and communication styles. Thus, cross-cultural studies identifying differences in how tourism campaigns are interpreted and acted upon are crucial. By comparing the perceptions of Saudi and Spanish interviewees, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how culture shapes consumer behaviour in the tourism sector.

2.5 Knowledge Gaps

While several studies have documented Saudi Arabia's tourism ambitions and campaign launches (Comms8, 2024; Golan, 2025; Torossian, 2024), few have empirically examined how communications strategies reach and engage target audiences and how they influence tourists both internally and globally. Therefore, this study conducts a qualitative, cross-cultural application of the AIDA model, providing critical insights into how current tourism marketing communications are perceived differently across diverse cultural contexts. The key knowledge gaps in the literature are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Knowledge gaps in the literature

Gap Category	Specific Area	Description	References
Tourists Segmentation	Demographics and Purpose	There is a lack of empirical data on how marketing effectiveness varies across different tourist segments by nationality, age, gender, or travel purpose.	Ahmed and Akbaba (2020), Boon Liat et al. (2021), Hall et al. (2022), Mohamed (2018), and Nusair et al. (2022)
Channel Effectiveness	Comparative Performance	Insufficient research has compared the relative impact of different marketing channels, such as social media and	Alkandi (2023), Arous et al. (2024), and Fatima et al. (2024)

			traditional media, and social media influencer partnerships in the Saudi context.	
Digital Impact	Tool	User Experience	Understanding of how specific digital tools, such as the Nusuk platform and Visit Saudi app, influence tourist decision-making and conversion rates is limited.	Al-Hazmi (2022), Alnaim and Albarq (2023), and Pappu et al. (2025)
Long-Term Impact		Brand Perception	No research has tracked the long-term evolution of Saudi Arabia's brand perception as a tourist destination.	Boon Liat et al. (2021), Fatima et al. (2024), and Fauzi and Battour (2025)

Table 1 demonstrates that despite extensive investment in tourism as part of Vision 2030, several critical gaps in understanding the effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's tourism marketing strategies are evident in the existing literature. One key gap is the lack of empirical research on audience segmentation, particularly how marketing communications perform across different tourist profiles, such as nationalities, ages, genders, and travel purposes (Ahmed & Akbaba, 2020; Boon Liat et al., 2021; Hall et al., 2022; Mohamed, 2018; Nusair et al., 2022). This segmentation is vital given Saudi Arabia's goal of attracting a broad range of tourists, including domestic family travellers, European adventure seekers, and religious pilgrims. Without such data, there is a risk that marketing strategies will become overly generalised and fail to resonate with key tourist segments.

Another overlooked area is channel effectiveness, as few studies have compared the relative performance of social media and traditional media, as well as social media influencer partnerships, within the Saudi context (Alkandi, 2023; Arous et al., 2024; Fatima et al., 2024). This gap limits tourism stakeholders' ability to allocate budgets efficiently or to identify which forms of media are most effective at converting interest into visits. While digital transformation has accelerated, the impact of specific digital tools on actual tourist conversion and user experience remains underexplored (Al-Hazmi, 2022; Alnaim & Albarq, 2023; Pappu et al., 2025).

Lastly, there is a lack of longitudinal studies examining the long-term impact of marketing efforts on Saudi Arabia's brand equity as a tourist destination. Most existing studies have focused on short-term outcomes, leaving a gap in understanding how marketing campaigns shape global perceptions of Saudi Arabia over time (Boon Liat et al., 2021; Fatima et al., 2024; Fauzi & Battour, 2025). This gap poses challenges for strategy refinement and brand positioning in a highly competitive global tourism market.

3 Methodology

3.1 Study Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to gain in-depth insights into the perceived effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's tourism marketing communications. Qualitative methods are the most appropriate for this study's exploratory nature and the need to understand tourists' perceptions, interpretations, and responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design is also appropriate for exploring how tourism communication strategies shape tourists' perceptions and intentions across diverse cultures. By focusing on interviewees from Saudi Arabia and Spain, this study aims to compare domestic and international responses to Saudi tourism marketing communications by highlighting similarities and differences in their media engagement, motivations, and expectations.

As marketers employ engaging strategies to attract consumers, this study is theoretically grounded in the AIDA model, a widely accepted marketing framework. The AIDA model facilitates a structured analytical evaluation of how tourism marketing messages influence potential visitors at each phase of the decision-making journey and has been used extensively in communication research to assess the effectiveness of marketing campaigns (Barry & Howard, 1990). In the context of tourism marketing, the AIDA model has been successfully utilised in several studies exploring how social media campaigns shape tourists' attitudes and behaviours (Barry & Howard, 1990; Hudson et al, 2016; Sarfraz et al, 2025). Using the AIDA model enables this study to identify the gaps in Saudi Arabia's tourism promotion efforts by mapping the progress of tourism marketing messages through each phase of consumer influence.

3.2 Study Sample

The study sample comprised 20 potential and actual tourists: 10 from Saudi Arabia, representing domestic regions and cultural familiarity with the destinations, and 10 from Spain, representing an international European audience targeted by Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 strategy. All interviewees had either recently visited Saudi Arabia or were considering it as a future travel destination. This strategy aligns with the goals of

exploratory qualitative research, which prioritises diversity of perspectives and depth over generalisability (Tracy, 2020).

Interviewees were recruited through purposive sampling, ensuring that they had knowledge and experience relevant to Saudi Arabia's tourism offerings and marketing communications. This non-probability sampling approach is used in qualitative research to deliberately select individuals who can provide rich, contextual insights aligned with the study's objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015; Ritchie et al., 2013). The interviewees had engaged with or been exposed to Saudi tourism promotions, such as advertisements on social media, television, or digital platforms, and were selected based on their relevance to the research objectives and their diversity in age, gender, and travel experience. Spain was chosen as a reference country due to its strong outbound tourism market and cultural contrast with Saudi Arabia, making it ideal for cross-cultural comparison. The interviewees were also chosen to reflect key demographic segments targeted in current Saudi tourism campaigns, including European adventure seekers, luxury travellers, and domestic family tourists. These categories align with the strategic market segmentation adopted by the Saudi Tourism Authority as part of Vision 2030, ensuring that the sample reflects both actual and potential tourist perspectives across culturally and geographically diverse groups (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2022).

3.3 Data Collection

This study collected data through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, a method well-suited to exploring consumers' experiences, attitudes, and decision-making processes in marketing and tourism contexts (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Ritchie et al., 2013). They allow for flexible discussions and enable interviewees to elaborate on their personal views and provide insights into the effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's tourism marketing strategies, which may not be possible with quantitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were conducted with 20 individuals, consistent with the recommendations for achieving data saturation (Guest et al., 2006). This approach balances the need for depth and diversity in responses while ensuring methodological rigour in qualitative inquiry.

The interview questions focused on perceptions of Saudi Arabia's tourism brand, recall of specific campaigns, motivational triggers, and the extent to which tourism marketing communications influenced their travel-related intentions and decisions. The interviews, which lasted 30–60 minutes depending on the interviewee's engagement, were conducted either face-to-face or via video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or FaceTime, depending on the interviewee's location, availability, and preference. This method ensured accessibility for international interviewees and facilitated natural conversation, allowing interviewees to elaborate on their personal perceptions and on their digital media use related to Saudi tourism, while maintaining the structure necessary for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.4 Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data were coded both inductively and deductively, with the identification of emerging themes guided by the AIDA model to determine how tourism marketing campaigns are performing at each stage:

- *Attention*: visibility, media channels, and first impressions;
- *Interest*: relevance, message framing, and emotional engagement;
- *Desire*: aspiration and cultural resonance;
- *Action*: behavioural intention, booking behaviour, and word of mouth.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval prior to data collection, and all interviewees were provided with information sheets outlining the study's purpose, their rights as interviewees, and how their data would be handled. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, ensuring autonomy and voluntary participation (Wiles et al., 2008). Informed consent was obtained in writing before each interview in accordance with established ethical research practices (Orb et al., 2001).

To maintain confidentiality, all identifying information was removed, and pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reporting. In compliance with institutional data protection policies and broader data ethics guidelines, such as the European Union's (2018) General Data Protection Regulation, the interview recordings and transcripts were stored on password-protected devices and servers (BPS Ethics Committee, 2021). Only the

researchers had access to the raw data. These procedures align with ethical standards in qualitative research, thereby ensuring the protection of the rights of all interviewees.

4 Results and Discussion

The data was analysed thematically in accordance with the AIDA model. The findings reveal insights regarding the effectiveness and limitations of current tourism marketing strategies in Saudi Arabia, as perceived by domestic and international tourists.

4.1 Attention: Capturing the Audience's Awareness

Most of the Saudi interviewees acknowledged that Saudi Arabia's recent tourism marketing campaigns have succeeded in generating visibility through social media, particularly through videos on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, as well as television advertisements, especially during global sports events. For example, one stated, *'Yes, I've noticed promotions on social media highlighting AlUla's heritage sites, the Red Sea resorts, and also campaigns for Riyadh Season events'* (Interviewee 20, Saudi). Some Saudi and Spanish interviewees agreed that social media influencers play a role in providing information about Saudi tourist attractions. For example, one stated, *'I relied on social media, mainly influencers'* (Interviewee 4, Spain). Evidence from previous research suggests that the development of the social media influencer industry offers the tourism sector unprecedented opportunities to engage and communicate with tourists, as influencers' content facilitates dynamic holiday planning through their perceived trustworthiness and expertise (Manthiou et al., 2024).

Several interviewees also highlighted that they have had limited exposure to these tourism marketing campaigns outside the Saudi region. For example, the Spanish interviewees relied on family members who had spent time in Saudi Arabia or advertisements on the aeroplane to learn about the country's tourist attractions. For instance, one stated, *'Through a family member already living in the country, a promotional video of the main destinations in Saudi Arabia, on the plane, when I visited it and only on social media when I searched about it'* (Interviewee 3, Spain). This observation aligns with research by Arous et al. (2024), which demonstrates that, despite the significant influence of e-marketing efforts on tourism preferences in Saudi Arabia, these impacts appear largely confined to those already interacting with online platforms within the country. It also indicates that the positive influence of social media content, bloggers, and social networking sites on visitor destination choices appears limited to audiences already tuned into domestic society. Thus, Saudi Arabia's international tourism marketing reach may require further development.

Both the Saudi and European interviewees agreed that Saudi Arabia is an excellent destination to visit, especially for its unique cultural aspects and traditions, generating a clear desire to learn more about it. For instance, one stated:

Saudi Arabia has unique heritage sites and modern attractions that are different from other countries. Saudi Arabia stands out because it blends unique cultural heritage with luxury resorts and entertainment options that aren't commonly combined elsewhere. I really want to see more about it on social media. (Interviewee 17, Saudi)

Similarly, another Saudi interviewee stated that *'Saudi Arabia feels unique because it combines rich history with modern development, unlike many destinations that offer only one of them, but we did not see much about it on social media'* (Interviewee 6, Saudi).

The Spanish interviewees confirmed that they were impressed by Saudi Arabia's culture. For example, one gave the following response when asked to compare Saudi Arabia with other countries: *'The different lifestyles and culture are really good and interesting, but no ads have reached me, so they would need to reach me through social media'* (Interviewee 1, Spain). Another suggested that *'It is necessary to take the tourists' perspective into account, as it seems to be approached only from a Saudi point of view; perhaps better market analysis would help'* (Interviewee 8, Spain).

The interviewees often described Saudi tourism messaging as broad or lacking personalisation, revealing a gap between Saudi and European tourists in access to information and in the availability of audience-specific content, which limits understanding of Saudi Arabia and potentially the desire to visit it. Therefore, more personalised tourism communications could be beneficial. This conclusion aligns with the findings of Weng et al. (2021), which emphasised that successful tourism promotion requires adaptive messaging strategies that consider cultural values and personalised content to enhance engagement, especially within the Saudi context.

4.2 Interest: Generating Engagement and Curiosity

The Saudi interviewees expressed that the tourism marketing campaigns had increased their intention to visit Saudi Arabia's tourist attractions. For example, one stated, *'The stunning visuals and cultural experiences really caught my attention; the creative visuals, cultural festivals, and the way they showcase Saudi's mix of tradition and modernism'* (Interviewee 18, Saudi). Another confirmed that *'Unique experiences such as visiting AlUla, the Red Sea, and attending cultural festivals have motivated me'* (Interviewee 8, Saudi). Most confirmed that they were already interested in visiting these tourist attractions because of campaigns they had previously seen. For example, one stated, *'I noticed campaigns highlighting AlUla and NEOM projects. I saw them mainly on Instagram and YouTube ads, and then I was really interested in visiting those places'* (Interviewee 13, Saudi). Moreover, they stated that social media influences their travel intentions. For example, one stated, *'Instagram and YouTube work best in my opinion. I believe Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are the most impactful because they are very visual and can capture attention quickly'* (Interviewee 19, Saudi). However, the Spanish interviewees suggested that greater exposure is needed to generate interest, with one stating:

I only saw ads about the most popular tourist destinations when I travelled there on the plane. I hope that others can see it too—the way of life and customs, it is curious and interesting to see and worth visiting. (Interviewee 7, Spain)

These findings suggest that, in addition to social media communications, transportation advertisements are effective in reaching both Saudi and European audiences and encouraging them to visit Saudi Arabia. For example, one interviewee stated, *'Not just online; I saw a Saudi tourism ad on a plane screen during an international flight, which gave it more credibility. But I also see them a lot on TikTok, where travellers post authentic experiences'* (Interviewee 5, Saudi). Thus, social media communications, transportation advertisements, and travellers' vlogs can potentially influence travel decisions among Saudi audiences. The Spanish interviewees also confirmed this influence, with one stating, *'I found some information when I came to Saudi Arabia; I had to search on Google, social media, but I really like the ad used on Saudi aeroplanes'* (Interviewee 10, Spain). This finding suggests that attention is strong regionally but inconsistent globally, highlighting a gap in media targeted to different consumer segments.

4.3 Desire: Building Motivation to Visit Saudi Arabia

When the interviewees were asked to describe what would make them seriously consider visiting Saudi Arabia, some expressed genuine curiosity about the country as a 'new' destination, driven by its unique culture and activities. For example, one stated:

I want to go, but I still don't know what to expect; can I explore freely? What are the rules? Are there guides? Saudi Arabia is a place with a very distinctive identity, different from classic destinations; I would like to see this on social media by adding the super-friendly nature of the people to the interest in its history and geography. I would also like to see more information about activities at sea. (Interviewee 6, Spain)

Another Saudi interviewee highlighted that activities such as hiking, fishing, sailing, and water sports could motivate further exploration, stating that *'we really liked the concerts, Jeddah Season, but I really want to see more family oriented trips and group activities, especially in our amazing Red Sea, such as trips and diving for me with the little ones'* (Interviewee 5, Saudi). Overall, desire was stronger among Saudi interviewees familiar with Saudi culture but weaker among Spanish interviewees.

The interviewees also acknowledged that emotional storytelling and content generated by previous tourists were particularly influential. For example, one stated, *'We need more stories, influencer travel vlogs. That's how you turn curiosity into "I want to do it"; for example, there is a fishing season in Al-Qaseem, and I really want to see it more on social media'* (Interviewee 1, Saudi). The Spanish interviewees confirmed this view, with one stating that *'I would like to see more information about its museums and monuments on social media and YouTube'* (Interviewee 10, Spain). Such findings are consistent with the existing literature, which shows that cultural aspects enhance tourists' desire, whereas a lack of cultural knowledge can reduce interest in international tourism markets (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019).

Moreover, when the Spanish interviewees were asked about apps to book their trips and organise their activities, they were unaware of popular apps such as Webook and Visit Saudi, indicating a gap in connecting these apps with international consumers. For example, one stated, *'I think digital platforms are perfect for deciding to travel to Saudi Arabia, but I don't know the one mentioned'* (Interviewee 1, Spain). However, the Saudi interviewees were more familiar with tourist attractions through these apps, as well as YouTube videos and social media. For example, one stated:

The combination of cultural and historical experiences would definitely make me consider it. I'd be motivated by the chance to explore historic landmarks, experience authentic traditions, and enjoy the new tourist developments like beaches and events. I believe Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are the most impactful because they are very visual and can capture attention quickly. (Interviewee 5, Saudi)

Thus, although social media advertisements and tourism apps are well known in Saudi Arabia, they have failed to reach global tourists. Therefore, market research is required to understand international target segments and to customise innovative marketing strategies based on their wants and needs, focusing on the most widely used social media platforms and the social media influencers with the most followers.

This conclusion aligns with previous research emphasising the importance of targeted digital marketing strategies and market segmentation to enhance international tourism promotion. For example, Xiang and Gretzel (2010) highlighted that while social media is a powerful tool for tourism marketing, its effectiveness depends on understanding the cultural and behavioural differences across global markets. Similarly, Alghamdi et al. (2012) highlighted the need for in-depth market research in Saudi Arabia's tourism sector to expand international engagement through digital channels.

These findings indicate that although some cities, such as AlUla, have successful advertisement and communication strategies, smaller regions, such as Jeddah, Jizan, Al-Qaseem, and Al Baha, have not been promoted to the same extent among both Saudi and international audiences. Indeed, one interviewee noted that more communication would be valuable, as they had not seen any information about these regions on social media:

I would like to visit AlUla, Jizan, and Al Baha, but I have visited only one location. Al-Qaseem is a phenomenal place with a date season; I also visited a farm with a local homemade breakfast cooked in front of us, and went to many farms with the kids, where they could feed the animals and interact with them. I wish that we could see trips like this on tourist applications and social media. (Interviewee 1, Saudi)

The findings also suggest that such promotions could attract both Saudi and international tourists, as they would highlight beautiful local places and cities that offer diverse food and shopping experiences. They are consistent with the previous literature on destination marketing, which emphasises the importance of inclusive promotion to ensure sustainable tourism development across multiple locations (García-Hernández et al., 2017).

It is also evident that an all-in-one government app or an official website promoting the full range of tourism cities, including activities, cultural activities, and transportation, with appropriate filters, could be particularly valuable. For example, one interviewee expressed:

I wish that I could develop a full package that can be customised according to age group, gender, and price. Adding the locations and places near the hotels could be very attractive to tourists. Like, if I want to travel to Riyadh, I want to book the hotel, car, safari, shopping malls, and activities in the desert in one application and being able to do it myself could be quite helpful. (Interviewee 1, Saudi)

This finding indicates that customised innovative communications strategies, such as all-in-one apps, could encourage consumers to visit new places. Further suggestions from the interviewees included the ability to determine whether a place is affordable, luxurious, or traditional. For example, one stated, 'Fancy and luxury tourism places are really interesting to me, but it is always nice to also see the beautiful nature and cultural aspects like AlUla as well' (Interviewee 10, Spain). Another added, 'It could be helpful to see posts or advertisements about services such as public transportation, restaurants, gyms, beaches and local places, and activities on social media' (Interviewee 12, Spain). Other, more customised services, such as pet or gym services, were also highlighted. One interviewee noted, 'When visiting places with my pet, it would be great if ads show whether we can take our pets or not' (Interviewee 1, Spain).

Thus, focusing on customised services in tourism communications is crucial for influencing consumer intentions. This insight aligns with previous research highlighting the role of personalised marketing in destination branding and influencing consumer behaviour. For example, it argues that personalisation through digital technologies, particularly via tourism apps and social media, significantly increases engagement and intention to travel. Similarly, Al-Ansi and Han (2019) found that culturally tailored communication improves satisfaction and revisit intentions, particularly within Saudi Arabia's tourism sector.

The findings also suggest that green tourism should be communicated creatively to encourage tourism from Europe. For example, one Spanish interviewee stated that 'I could think about visiting Saudi if I saw on social media more sustainable projects, socially responsible projects, or advertisements focusing on recycling, helping the sea, nature, and people in need; this would be very encouraging for me' (Interviewee 8, Spain). Saudi Arabia is known to be making massive efforts in sustainable projects, such as the Red Sea projects and NEOM, as part of Vision 2030. Further projects include 'THE LINE', a futuristic city designed to run on 100% clean energy, and

'TROJENA', a new project that relies on sustainable and clean energy. However, most of these projects need to be communicated to the global tourism market in a more focused, customised way, as it is sometimes the way the idea is sold rather than the product itself that convinces people.

According to these findings, creative marketing strategies are essential in effectively influencing environmentally conscious tourists. Tourism communication efforts must go beyond traditional messaging by emphasising authentic sustainability practices and incorporating immersive media and eco-initiatives through storytelling. This conclusion aligns with research by Font and McCabe (2017), who argued that simply claiming sustainability is insufficient because consumers must see and feel it through customised, emotionally engaging content.

4.4 Action: Driving Tourist Behaviours

Almost every Spanish interviewee reported booking trips through direct exposure via family or friends rather than campaigns. For example, one noted, *'The ad made me interested, but what really made me book was my friend who lived in Saudi'* (Interviewee 10, Spain). In contrast, Saudi interviewees were directly exposed to tourism marketing and events through social media.

The findings suggest that cost, ease, and quality of services are the main drivers for individuals to act and visit tourist locations in Saudi Arabia. For example, one Saudi interviewee stated, *'The main things I'd look at are overall costs, the quality of accommodation, transportation options, and how safe and convenient the trip would be'* (Interviewee 8, Saudi). Both Saudi and Spanish interviewees agreed that although they would like to visit tourist attractions such as AlUla and the Red Sea projects, one of the main barriers is cost. Importantly, they suggested that promoting deals and packages typical of other countries could be helpful, as consumers are likely to share them on social media. For example, one noted, *'I will look at the ad and share it if the places are more affordable'* (Interviewee 2, Spain). A Saudi interviewee provided a similar suggestion:

If you want to travel, you always look at travel packages with good prices for families. Here in Saudi, we have amazing places we really want to visit; I mean, look at the Saudi cruise, we saw a lot of offers and decided on the full board package for the family, and we had a great time. (Interviewee 1, Saudi)

Thus, focusing on advertisements for family or friends packages could lead to success. However, it is important to connect consumers through apps, tour packages, and family offers. This approach aligns with existing research indicating that social motivations and reference groups significantly influence travel behaviour. Therefore, promotional campaigns that target family units or friend groups can enhance perceived value, especially when combined with bundling strategies or exclusive group discounts. Moreover, Correia et al. (2008) noted that social interactions are key motivators for leisure travel, particularly in the context of emerging destinations.

These findings suggest that communications could encourage tourists to act and visit Saudi attractions. In particular, short videos on social media can significantly influence potential tourists. For example, one interviewee noted, *'TikTok and YouTube shorts are good because they allow people to "travel" in 30 seconds. People today want instant impressions. If I see a stunning 15-second drone shot of AlUla, I immediately think "I need to go there".'* (Interviewee 6, Saudi). However, a gap remains in tourism marketing communications aimed at European tourists. One Spanish interviewee noted that *'I think digital platforms are perfect for deciding to travel to Saudi Arabia, but I don't know any now'* (Interviewee 9, Spain).

These findings align with recent research that emphasises the growing influence of visuals in tourism marketing, particularly short-form content. It suggests that social media posts involving short videos enhance destination awareness, increase emotional engagement, and significantly impact travel intentions. Moreover, Xu and Pratt (2018) argued that rich media formats stimulate imagination, increasing the likelihood that viewers will be converted from passive consumers into active tourists.

4.5 Differences Between Saudi and Spanish Tourists

Overall, this analysis reveals distinct patterns in how tourism marketing strategies resonate with different audiences, specifically Saudi and Spanish tourists, across the four states of the AIDA model. The key differences are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Differences between Saudi and Spanish interviewees' perceptions of Saudi tourism marketing.

AIDA Model Stage	Aspect	Saudi Interviewees	Spanish Interviewees
Attention	Primary Source of Awareness	There is high exposure through domestic social media campaigns (e.g. YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok) and TV adverts during events.	Limited exposure, with greater reliance on word-of-mouth from family and friends already in Saudi Arabia or on in-flight advertisements during travel.
	Perceived Reach of Campaigns	Campaigns are visible and effective within the region.	International marketing reach is underdeveloped, as campaigns have not reached this population in their home country.
Interest	Content that Generates Engagement	Visuals of destinations (e.g. AlUla and the Red Sea) and cultural festivals are particularly successful.	Visuals are also of interest to this population, but more initial exposure is needed to build initial awareness.
	Most Impactful Channels	Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are preferred due to their visual, quick-attention nature.	In-flight advertisements are viewed as a credible source, along with active searching on Google and social media platforms.
Desire	Level of Initial Desire	There is a stronger desire due to familiarity with the culture, proximity, and existing awareness of attractions and apps.	Although there is genuine curiosity, desire is weaker as Saudi Arabia is an unfamiliar destination with cultural knowledge gaps.
	Key Motivators	This population is motivated by Saudi Arabia's unique cultural heritage blended with modern luxury and family-oriented activities (e.g. Red Sea trips and concerts).	Saudi Arabia's unique culture and history are clear motivating factors to visit, but clear information on practicalities (e.g. rules, guides, and freedom to explore) is needed.
	Awareness of Booking Tools	Local platforms such as 'Webook' and 'Visit Saudi' are widely understood.	There is a lack of awareness regarding key Saudi tourism apps and booking platforms.
	Requested Customisations	An all-in-one app for customisable travel packages (e.g. hotel, car, and activities) would be preferable.	There is a need for services (e.g. pet-friendly options), public transport information, and an emphasis on sustainable/eco-friendly projects.
Action	Primary Booking Trigger	Direct exposure to social media advertisements and campaigns could lead to action.	Trips are primarily booked based on recommendations from family or friends living in Saudi Arabia, rather than tourism marketing campaigns.
	Main Barriers to Action	Cost, accommodation quality, and ease of travel are the primary barriers.	Cost is a significant barrier, as is the lack of awareness and of accessible information during the initial planning stages.
	Effective Tactics for Conversion	Short-form video content (e.g. TikTok and YouTube Shorts) is particularly useful for delivering instant, impactful visuals.	The focus should be on promotional deals, family/group packages, and clear communication of value to overcome cost barriers.

4.6 Recommendations

Drawing on the thematic analysis of stakeholder interviews and guided by the AIDA framework, this section proposes several actionable recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's tourism marketing communications.

4.7 Expansion of Global Communications

While current campaigns are effective in regional or domestic markets, they need a broader international reach, which could be achieved through data-driven global media planning, focusing on personalisation via high-traffic travel platforms, YouTube, and social media channels such as TikTok and Instagram in key markets. Broader geographic targeting will enhance visibility and better support Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 objectives, which include positioning the country as a world-class tourism destination (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016).

Other research also highlights the importance of international market segmentation in tourism (Klingmann, 2022).

4.8 Diversification of Content Strategy

Generic national content on communications and social media platforms limits engagement. Tourism marketing campaigns should reflect the diverse interests of global tourist segments. Therefore, it would be beneficial to develop segment-specific messaging for different traveller personas (e.g. adventure tourists, cultural seekers, and family vacationers) using personalised digital content on social media and tourism apps. Customised content fosters greater interest by speaking directly to the needs and desires of distinct tourist profiles; therefore, communications should be tailored to audience demographics, needs, wants, and cultural backgrounds. Previous research has demonstrated that personalisation increases the relevance of tourism promotions and helps overcome perceived cultural distance (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019). Moreover, this study highlights the importance of personalised messages, such as family or group packages, in improving conversion rates.

4.9 Strengthening Emotional Storytelling and Cultural Aspects

Tourists' desire is weakened by uncertainty and a lack of immersive, relatable sources. Therefore, Saudi Arabia's tourism institutions should incorporate content, travel stories, and emotionally resonant stories from tourists and social media influencers into official campaigns to create deeper resonance. It is also important to provide transparent, engaging information about cultural norms, traditions, local food and experiences, local customs, travel logistics, and safety to reduce friction in the decision-making process. Stories build emotional desire to try new destinations, encouraging tourists to take action and book a trip. Research has shown that short, immersive videos significantly increase travel intention by making destinations feel more accessible and emotionally appealing (Xu & Pratt, 2018).

4.10 Prioritisation of Action Communications and Booking Applications

Many tourism marketing campaigns fall short at the 'action' stage by not providing clear next steps or booking apps for their audiences. Therefore, it is important to include action elements, such as Plan Your Trip, Book Now, and Create Your Package, within all social media communications, thus ensuring this content is integrated with booking engines and interactive apps. Mobile-friendly platforms and embedded booking links within short-form videos, social media ads, and tourist websites can significantly increase booking intentions, especially among international tourists accustomed to fast, on-the-go decision-making. This recommendation is supported by Buhalis and Sinarta (2019), who argued that smart tourism ecosystems that integrate mobile interfaces, personalised recommendations, and booking capabilities lead to increased tourist satisfaction and higher conversion rates.

4.11 Study Limitations

Although this study offers valuable insights into the effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's tourism marketing communications, it has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, it only interviewed Saudi and Spanish tourists. Therefore, future research would benefit from including tourists with diverse nationalities. Secondly, it employed a qualitative design and purposive sampling, meaning that its findings are not statistically generalisable to the broader tourist population. Thirdly, although its findings offer an in-depth contextual understanding based on a limited number of participants, they may not reflect tourists from all segments or cultural backgrounds. Fourthly, its reliance on interviews to collect data may introduce recall or social desirability bias, particularly when interviewees were asked to reflect on their perceptions of past tourism marketing campaigns or their motivations for travelling. Fifthly, despite efforts to ensure anonymity and encourage openness, interviewees may have unintentionally altered their responses to align with perceived expectations. Sixthly, it focused on tourists who had either visited or considered visiting Saudi Arabia, overlooking insights from those who have actively chosen not to visit, who may offer critical feedback to improve tourism marketing efforts. Finally, due to logistical constraints, some interviews were conducted via video conferencing platforms rather than face-to-face. While this approach ensured broader geographic participation, it may have affected rapport-building and the identification of non-verbal communication cues that often enrich qualitative data. Nonetheless, this study provides a strong foundation for understanding how tourism marketing messages are perceived and processed, and it offers direction for future research using larger and more diverse samples or mixed-methods approaches.

4.12 Future Research Directions

This study's insights and limitations highlight several potential avenues for future research. Firstly, quantitative survey data would enable the validation of themes uncovered in the qualitative interviews and enhance generalisability across a larger sample of domestic and international tourists. Secondly, further research could focus on specific tourist segments, such as eco-tourists, heritage and cultural travellers, tourists with pets, and adventure seekers, to examine how different marketing messages resonate with niche audiences; such segmentation could inform more targeted and effective tourism campaigns. Thirdly, expanding the scope to include non-visitors who have deliberately chosen not to visit Saudi Arabia could yield valuable insights into negative perceptions, travel barriers, and potential ways to encourage them to visit. Finally, as the use of AI-driven marketing tools and virtual experiences grows in the tourism sector, future studies should investigate how emerging technologies such as AI tools influence tourist engagement, behaviours, and destination image.

5 Conclusions

This study has examined the effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's tourism marketing communications through the lens of the AIDA model, focusing on alignment with audience expectations and the broader Vision 2030 objectives. The findings highlight strong performance in the attention/awareness stage, driven by visually compelling campaigns and high-profile social media placements for Saudi audiences. However, gaps remain in maintaining interest, generating desire, and driving action, particularly among international audiences unfamiliar with Saudi Arabia's cultural context or tourism offerings.

The findings also highlight the need for more audience-segmented messaging, emotionally engaging storytelling, and integrated call-to-action mechanisms to convert awareness into visiting actions. They also emphasise the importance of data-driven decision-making and the use of real-time feedback to refine campaign performance. By addressing these gaps, Saudi Arabia can further enhance the strategic impact of its tourism marketing strategies for both domestic and international tourists, thereby supporting the country's aims of ensuring tourism becomes a key driver of sustainable economic diversification. By identifying differences in how Saudi and Spanish interviewees interpreted and acted upon tourism campaigns, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how culture shapes consumer behaviour in the tourism sector.

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