# The Opportunities and Challenges of Creating a Tourism Destination: A Case Study of Future Tourism Possibilities in Saudi Arabia

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The The Opportunities and Challenges of Creating a Tourism Destination: A Case Study of Future Tourism Possibilities in Saudi Arabia

# Abstract

At the heart of Saudi Arabia's 2030 Vision Project, there are new sectors that will be established and supported in order to develop their success and to make them the cornerstones of the future economy of Saudi Arabia. One of these is tourism for which the aim is to develop new attractions of the highest standard, which will gain international reputation. The purpose of this research is to identify the opportunities and challenges that Saudi Arabia encounters in order to be a global tourism destination. In particular, it will look at what factors that may account for successfully developing Saudi Arabia into a global tourism brand and identifying the changes and strategies that are required. The Target market for this study are from Europeans, Americans and Canadians nationalities. The sample consisted of 101 adults of both genders and various ages. Results include a discussion of factors influencing destination image, factors preventing people from going to Saudi Arabia, and perceptions of Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination. The study also discusses approaches that can be used to support promoting Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination, including types of tourist activities the country can offer.

**Keywords:** Opportunities and Challenges, Tourism Destination, A Case Study, Future Tourism Possibilities.

#### Introduction

For many decades, oil has been at the core of economy in Saudi Arabia. At the heart of Saudi Arabia's 2030 Vision Project, there are new sectors that will be established and supported in order to develop their success and to make them the cornerstones of the future economy of Saudi Arabia. One of these is tourism for which the aim is to develop new attractions of the highest standard, which will gain international reputation (Saudi Vision, 2030). Currently, Saudi Arabia desires to expand its market and attract new tourists to new attractions. This will require a knowledge of what motivates these customers in

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order to determine what can be done to ensure that the relevant steps are taken to attract them to Saudi Arabia. In choosing a destination tourists may have various destinations to choose from but these tend to offer similar features, including the quality of the accommodation and a beautiful environment. Therefore, it is imperative for a destination to be able to present its unique qualities to distinguish it from the other possible destinations in the minds of the target market but at the same time it is critical to understand what stimulates that market and what triggers responses. (Qu et al., 2011)

In recent years, countries in the Middle East have started to promote themselves globally, investing not only in new infrastructure but also in planning and marketing, to change the global image of the country and to make them attractive to visitors from other continents (Henderson, 2015) Until recently countries in the Middle East have relied on the domestic visitors from neighbouring countries to boost their tourism market. This is partly due to perceptions of political unrest which affects the image of the area and consequently the decision making of tourists who live far from the area and do not fully comprehend the situation which is not the case for those living in the area, therefore the main reason why tourism has depended on visitors from neighbouring countries or domestic tourism. (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012, Henderson, 2015) This is indicative of one of the main challenges that Middle East countries face, to change perceptions of the image that exists and steps need to be taken to communicate what the region has to offer. Furthermore, if a country wants to attract new visitors it needs to understand customer expectations in order to be able to compete. With the above context in mind the purpose of this research is to identify the opportunities and challenges that Saudi Arabia encounters in order to be a global tourism destination and identifying the changes and strategies that are required. Such insights will be beneficial to those involved in the tourism sector in Saudi Arabia, as it will allow them knowledge of the requirements to make Saudi Arabia a successful attraction.



A study in Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing which examined the push and pull influences of British tourists who travel for pleasure identified that being aware of motivations cannot only determine what strategies are required to gain their custom but such knowledge may help to determine why travellers choose particular destinations. Awarenes of this information would allow those managing destinations to modify and connect the attributes of their destination to the needs of the traveller (Jang & Cai, 2002). Their Literature Review, which claimed that despite its importance it is complicated to understand the motivation of travellers. However, they identified that there were six main push factors and five key pull factors which influence the choice of British pleasure travellers. Of these, the pursuit of knowledge was the most influential push factor and cleanliness and safety was the main pull motivator.

Horner & Swarbrook (2016) identify that the understanding of behaviour patterns allows tourist organisations to know when to intervene to receive the optimum result by targeting particular individuals with particular products at the relevant time. Therfore, this study aimed to explore the factors contributing to the successful development of Saudi Arabia as a tourism brand, as well as the necessary changes and strategies. Additionally, it examined factors influencing destination image, barriers preventing people from visiting Saudi Arabia, and perceptions of Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination. The study also considered potential approaches for promoting Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination, including the types of tourist activities the country can offer.

# 2.Methodology

# - Research Design:

The study design for this research is a cross-sectional survey. The researcher collected data from a sample of participants at a specific point in time to study their perspectives and perceptions regarding Saudi Arabia as a global tourism destination. The primary method of data collection was a questionnaire administered through social media

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platforms. The findings were analyzed qualitatively to identify common themes and patterns.

# - Participants:

The sample for this study consisted of 101 adults from European, American, and Canadian nationalities. Both genders were represented, and participants varied in age.

# - Data Analysis:

Once the questionnaire responses were collected, data analysis was conducted to identify common themes, trends, and patterns. The researcher employed qualitative analysis techniques to gain insights into the participants' perspectives and perceptions. The findings were then summarized and discussed in relation to the research objectives.

# - Questionnaire design:

The questions include the participants decision making criteria in general as well as perceptions about travel to Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire is divided into two distinct parts, one which aims to identify the factors which influence destination choice as such information would allow those responsible for manging tourism in Saudi Arabia to know not only what individuals consider when making choices but the results would allow the authorities and all the stakeholders involved establishing Saudi Arabia to identify the areas where resources need to be invested. In this part of the questionnaire, there are 13 different factors which participants are asked to evaluate on a scale of 1 to 5, ranging from not important at all to very important. (Appendix 1). These are considered the main factors considered when individuals decide on holiday destination. The second part of the questionnaire aims to obtain information specific to destination image, more precisely to evaluate how individuals perceive Saudi Arabia. This part of the questionnaire contains the only open question which is: What images or characteristics come to mind when you think of Saudi Arabia? This question is followed by 11 closed questions regarding perceptions of tourism attributes within Saudi Arabia. It is considered that the responses to these questions will allow those involved in the

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tourism industry in Saudi Arabia to address specific areas which are not perceived well.

These questions provide an insight in what are considered to be the main factors in a tourist destination, specifically with regard to what is on offer and the infrastructure.

# - Ethical Considerations:

Ethical considerations were considered throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their voluntary participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and all data collected were used solely for research purposes.

# 3. Finding

# - Demographic Data:

The convenience sample consisted of 101 adults of both genders and various ages. They are Europeans, Americans and Canadians nationalities. A total of 51 females responded (50.5%) while 50 males responded (49.5%). Participants varied in age. When asked to indicate their age, respondents chose from four age groups: 18-24, 25-30, 31-40, and over 40. The single largest group of respondents were people aged 18-24, who made up almost 34% of the respondents. The next largest group was made up of people aged 31-40 who accounted for almost 28% of the respondents. People aged 25-30 accounted for 26% of respondents, the third largest group. Individuals over the age of 40 made up the smallest age group and accounted for 13% of respondents. Data regarding age groups are presented graphically in Figure 1. Figure 1. Respondent age groups.



Q4 - Q4 What is your age?



The survey also includes data on respondents' nationalities. Individuals chose from 4 categories: British, European, American, and Canadian. British respondents made up nearly 45% of the sample, followed by Europeans at almost 31%, Americans at nearly 19%, and Canadians at almost 6%. The single largest subcategory of Europeans was Italians who made up 37% of the survey participants. Germans, the French and Spanish accounted for 4, 3, and 2% respectively of survey participants. The following countries each had one respondent: Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, Poland, and Turkey. Data regarding nationality is graphically represented in Figure 2.



# Figure 2. Respondents' nationality

Q5 - Q5 What is your nationality?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	British	44.55%	45
3	European (please specify)	30.69%	31
4	American	18.81%	19
8	Canadian	5.94%	6
	Total	100%	101

This survey data is important to developing a profile of the tourists Saudi Arabia wishes to attract, particularly if the country is going to pursue certain niche markets. Survey responses offer insights into the importance of considering demographic data, particularly gender, age, and nationality, as significant determinants of consumer behaviour.

# - Factors Influencing Vacation Choices:

Respondents indicated a wide range of preferences that affect their vacation choices. They ranked these preferences according to their importance in influencing destination selection.

# - Factors in Selecting a Travel Destination:

People were asked to rate the importance of 12 factors in selecting travel destinations. Possible ratings were 1 = not important, 2 = neutral, 3 = important, and 4 = very important. Based on factors that participants chose, the most important factors were the following:

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- Having a safe environment which 96% chose as being important or very important);
- Having beautiful natural attractions which 92% chose as being important or very important);
- Having interesting cultural attractions which 88% chose as being important or very important);
- Having good quality accommodations which 88% chose as being important or very important);
- And having good quality food and friendliness of local people also rated highly with 83% choosing these factors as important or very important).

The following factors were ranked by 1% as not being important: safe environment, beautiful natural attractions, and friendly local people. A number of respondents ranked the following factors as neutral: availability of wine and alcohol (29%), good climate (27%), clean city (26%), living costs (24%), good public transport (23%), historical site (23%), friendly local people (17%), quality of food (15 percent), good quality of accommodation (11%), interesting cultural attraction (11%) beautiful natural attractions (8%), and safe environment (4%).

Of the 12 factors listed, the ones rated least important by the largest number of respondents were the availability of alcohol and wine, which 53% chose as not important, and having good public transportation which 5% chose as not important. In addition, good climate was not important to 4% of respondents, while 3% ranked historical site and clean city as not being important. Interesting cultural attraction, good quality of accommodation, and living costs each were not important to 2% of respondents. No one rated quality of food as not important, although 15% of respondents were neutral.

When asked if they had visited Saudi Arabia before, 24% of respondents answered yes while 76% answered no. History and culture were important or very important to a significant number of people with rankings of 75% and 87% respectively. Data regarding travel destination preferences are presented graphically in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Factors influencing travel destination selection



Q6 - Please rate the how important are the following factors on selecting travel destination (1= not important, 2= neutral, 3= important, 4= very important)



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#	Question	not important		neutral		important		very important		Tota
1	a. historical site	2.97%	3	22.77%	23	<b>41.58%</b>	42	32.67%	33	101
2	b. interesting cultural attraction	1.98%	2	10.89%	11	58.42%	<mark>5</mark> 9	28.71%	29	101
3	c. safe environment	0.99%	1	3.96%	4	<mark>26.73%</mark>	27	68.32%	69	101
4	d. beautiful natural attractions	<mark>0.99%</mark>	1	7.92%	8	41.58%	42	49.50%	50	101
5	e. friendly local people	0.99%	1	16.83%	17	<mark>44.</mark> 55%	<b>4</b> 5	37.62%	38	101
6	f. clean city	2.97%	3	25.74%	26	44.55%	45	26.73%	27	101
7	g. quality of food	0.00%	0	14.85%	15	49.50%	50	35.64%	36	101
8	h. good climate	<mark>3.9</mark> 6%	4	26.73%	27	42.57 <mark>%</mark>	43	26.73%	27	101
9	i. good public transport	4.95%	5	22.77%	23	45.54%	46	26.73%	27	101
10	j. good quality of accommodation	1.98%	2	10.89%	11	42.57%	43	44.55%	45	101
12	I. living costs	1.98%	2	23.76%	24	43.56%	44	30.69%	31	101
14	n. availability of alcohol & wine	52.48%	53	28.71 <mark>%</mark>	29	10.89%	11	7.92%	8	101

It should be noted that safety was the primary concern for most survey participants. As much as they may be drawn to cultural and natural attractions, tourists are less likely to visit a destination they perceive as having security concerns for themselves and their families and the research data confirmed this.

A total of 82% who rated availability of alcohol and wine as either not important or neutral. 70% of respondents ranked good climate as somewhat or very important at the same time that many listed hot weather and deserts as attributes they associate with Saudi Arabia's image.

#### - Respondents' Image of Saudi Arabia

When asked the open-ended question what images or characteristics come to mind when they think of Saudi Arabia, one of the most common responses was "desert" or climate-related attributes such as "very hot," "hot weather," "warm temperatures," "sand dunes," "dryness," "camels" "extreme weather," "dust storms" and "sun." More

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than one respondent referred to natural attributes such as "beauty," "awesome," "beautiful shaded gardens as oasis," "dramatic landscapes," "wonderful seas," "rich flora," and "wadi."

Other common responses related to cultural heritage and cultural attributes, such as "Arabian hospitality," "nice people," "kind and humorous people," "welcome place" "ancient culture," "complicated life," "secret cultural attractions," "archaeological treasures," "history," "beautiful buildings" "ancient traditions that defeated the expansion of the desert," "traditional Arabic clothing." Some responses related to socioeconomic status, such as "rich," "richness," "rich people," "luxury," and "large differences in living standards," "money." Other responses included "fast development," "expanding country," "skyscrapers," "big skyrises," "traffic jams " "oil fields," "gas," "people walking everywhere," "bad drivers," "rising of fast food restaurants," "Burj Khalifa," "Abu Dhabi" and "Dubai."

Several responses also referred to "religion" or "pilgrimage"related attributes. These responses included "prayer," "mosques," "Makkah, place of worship," "strict rules considering religion," "religious," "kabbah," "Prophet Muhammed's mosque in Madina," "Islam," "Mount Arafat," "Masjid Nabawi," "home of all Muslims," and "Masjid Quba."

Not all responses referred to positive attributes. These responses included "Closed minded nation," "strict," "not modern,". People's perceptions of a destination are shaped by their view of the destination's culture, politics, natural environment, and climate. These perceptions are in turn related to the individual's knowledge, impressions, and prejudices. The survey data consistently show the influence of these factors.

# - Perceptions of Saudi Arabia as a Travel Destination:

Respondents were asked what their perceptions were of Saudi Arabia as a travel destination. They were asked to rate their agreement with 11 items describing Saudi Arabia as a travel destination, with 1=Disagree, 2 = Don't know, and 3 = Agree. Perceptions receiving the highest ratings for agreement included "interesting historic attractions"

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(64%), "interesting cultural attractions" (62%), "quality accommodation" (52%) and "beautiful/natural attractions" (45%). Overall, 43% of respondents rated Saudi Arabia as a "Good overall travel destination." Negative perceptions receiving the lowest ratings included polluted country (17%) and disagreement that Saudi Arabia was a safe country (18%).

# - Successful Tourist Destination Support:

A key observation of the literature review concerns the complexity of the decision-making process involved in choosing a tourist destination (Cohen et al., 2014). Complexity results from needing to make multiple decisions concerning the itinerary, the possible influence of group decisions, as well as situational factors (Cohen et al., 2014). The following questions and their responses discuss people's decisions to visit Saudi Arabia.

# - Do People Want to Visit Saudi Arabia?

Respondents were asked if they wanted to come to Saudi Arabia in the near future. Possible responses were Yes, No, and Perhaps. Most of the 101 participants responded Perhaps (49%), followed by Yes (38%), then No (14%). Even though the sample population was too limited to generalize survey results to a larger population, these numbers are nonetheless positive indicators that a market exists for tourism in Saudi Arabia.

# - Types of Tourist Activities Saudi Arabia Can Offer:

When asked what kind of tourist activities Saudi Arabia can offer, respondents rated four choices. Most respondents (51%) chose "cultural experience," 27% chose "historical sightseeing" and 13% chose "adventure." Of the 10% who selected "others," two respondents indicated additional natural attractions. One participant answered "Cultural experience and historical sightseeing too. Don't forget the Red Sea attraction."As this survey data indicates, tourists may desire a range of attractions, from cultural to religious, which increases the complexity of their choices.

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# 4. Discussion

The survey investigated research questions which are: what are the factors that influence destination image and motivate individuals in their vacation choices, what would prevent these individuals from going to Saudi Arabia and what approaches are required to support Saudi Arabia to be a successful tourist destination.

The answers which survey participants provided to these questions have important implications for the Saudi tourism industry which continues to grow. Trends shaping the global tourist industry primarily result from changing consumption behaviour of tourists, which this research is designed to illuminate. Important trends include sustainable development, tourists' preference for brands, and development of active forms of tourism (Firoui & Croitoru, 2015).

Survey items investigating this research question produced a significant amount of data that can help tourism planners determine what motivates tourists to choose some vacation destinations and reject others. The number one criteria survey respondents considered was safety. Survey results showed that 96% of the 101 respondents identified a safe environment as being important or very important to them when choosing a destination. In addition, respondents ranked beautiful natural attractions as an important factor in vacation choice, with 92% considering these features as important or very important. Saudi Arabia has abundant natural attractions which can be easily emphasised in marketing materials. For example, scuba diving tourism presents the possibility of a niche market segment the country can pursue. At the same time, Saudi Arabia will need to address sustainability issues that have arisen in places such as the Caribbean and the Great Barrier Reef where scuba diving tourism has caused marine damage (Barker & Roberts, 2004). If Saudi Arabia is careful to implement strict controls to prevent environmental damage, the country can position itself as a sustainable tourism destination at a time when this is a significant industry that many tourists take into account. Branding activities like this will allow Saudi Arabia to differentiate itself from other countries.

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Another important survey response concerned people's feelings about cultural attractions, which nearly 9 in 10 respondents ranked as important. Saudi Arabia has a rich cultural heritage that includes its Islamic heritage, archeological heritage, unique architectural heritage, historical role as an ancient trade center, and the country's Bedouin traditions, folk music, dancing, and poetry. The country also has five UNESCO world heritage sites. These cultural attractions may be emphasized through appropriate marketing campaigns to expand tourism and promote the country to non-Islamic cultures. Stephenson (2014) cites the example of tourism in Dubai that has tended to be socially detached from culture and tradition, which he believes is a missed opportunity. Saudi Arabia can make the most of the opportunity to development a new market by using its cultural attractions to differentiate the country from its competitors.

Another expected result was the number of survey participants who were familiar with Saudi Arabia as a religious or pilgrimagethemed travel destination. A significant number of respondents discussed travel to Muslim holy places. Their comments highlight the ongoing challenge Saudi Arabia faces to attract more than religious tourists. If the country is to grow its tourism industry, a concerted effort will be required to promote additional tourist destinations. In other discussions of factors affecting destination selection, Saudi Arabia is also viewed as having a favorable climate. More than 70% of survey participants ranked good climate as important and 43% also considered Saudi Arabia to be a "good overall travel destination." These responses are insightful when considered together with the images that come to mind when people think of Saudi Arabia. The most frequently mentioned characteristics were the desert, hot weather, and sun. These responses taken together appear to indicate that many tourists consider Saudi weather a plus, providing a further motivation to choose to visit the country.

As might be expected, additional factors that tourists considered important were having good quality accommodations, good quality food, and the friendliness of local people. Somewhat less expected was

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the fact that the availability of alcohol and wine was considered by the majority of respondents not to be important; There are other options for tourists who prefer the availability of wine and alcohol. For example, there is growing demand for beverages like non-alcoholic beer (European Commission, 2017). Such beverages are sold in various fruit flavors and offer attractive alternatives to alcoholic drinks. The influence of social media, particularly among Saudi Arabia's young population, along with Saudi citizens' exposure to foreign lifestyles and media, account for growing interest in such beverages. Tourism marketers thus have another option which they can promote to travelers.

The fact that three-quarters of the survey participants rated living costs as important or very important reflects tourists' concern that they receive value for the money they spend on their vacations. Today's consumers are concerned about the locations they select to spend their increasingly constrained vacation time and their hardearned income (Morgan et al., 2004). To meet consumers' needs, destinations must be appealing and must possess significant conversational and celebrity value (Morgan et al., 2004). As the survey responses show, perceived value plays a significant role in tourists' vacation choices. If living costs exceed the consumer's expectations, then they will perceive a tourist destination as less desirable, which in turn affects buying and recommending behaviours. Consumers who do not perceive a tourist destination as giving them value for their tourism expenditures will be less likely to visit a country initially and will be less likely to recommend the destination to others.

Additional findings related to picking Saudi Arabia as a good overall travel destination. This data is important not only because it shows the significance of destination image in shaping the decisionmaking process, but also because it influences tourists' behaviour following the decision-making process. Consumers expect to receive good value, and if the quality of the destination exceeds their expectations, then perceived value is also higher. These survey responses offer insights into how tourists value their consumer

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experiences. Tourism managers can therefore understand perceived value as a segmentation tool, allowing them to target different customers on the basis of services value (Gallarza, 2008).

Another implication of people rating Saudi Arabia as a good travel destination is that this data is consistent with the relevant literature on this subject. Chen and Tsai (2007) maintained that the more positive the image of a particular destination, the greater the perceived trip quality and the greater the likelihood of perceived value. This research is consistent with Chen and Tsai's argument that a destination image shapes consumer behaviour intentions both directly and indirectly (2007, p. 1122). Because the destination image therefore influences consumer behaviour, it is important to understand both positive and negative reactions from potential tourist visitors. Data presented in these responses allow tourism industry planners and stakeholders to know which positive attributes to promote and which negative attributes to address to increase tourism. These responses offer indications of how to develop or enhance the image of a destination so that it promotes loyalty among visitors and increases the likelihood of engaging in buying and recommending behaviours.

Even with tourists desiring a range of attractions, tourists are confronted with a complexity of choices which in turn increases the challenge of managing the various sources that create the country's image. Successful tourist destination support is then a function of tourism brand managers positioning the Saudi brand so that it is perceived by consumers as occupying a niche in the travel marketplace that no other brand occupies. In effect, tourism managers reduce the number of substitutes available by emphasising attributes that are better aligned with the target market's needs than other brands or countries. Consequently, the destination image must be consistent with the selfimage of the targeted consumer segment (Morgan et al., 2004).

#### 5. Recommendation and Conclusion

The findings of this study confirmed that security being the primary concern of almost everyone who responded to the survey. Therefore, it is recommended that destination marketers develop

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promotional strategies that address concerns over terrorism. These strategies must achieve simultaneous goals of both creating positive perceptions and reducing negative ones.

Furthermore, in keeping with its Vision 2030 goal to become a leading logistics hub, Saudi Arabia must continue expanding its transportation system. Tourists want good public transportation, as confirmed by nearly three-quarters of survey respondents. It is recommended that this upgrade takes place between cities across the kingdom, and within cities that will become preferred tourist destinations.

Another recommendation that promotes Saudi Arabia's implementation of 2030 Vision strategies is the government's further aligning the efforts of Saudi travel aggregators to expand heritage tourism. As confirmed by survey responses for this research project, cultural attractions ranked near the top in factors that influence selecting a travel destination. Building on such preferences, the country can encourage an increase in domestic travelers and tourists by promoting heritage tour destinations.

A final recommendation is for Saudi Arabia to differentiate itself from other tourist destinations in the GCC region by positioning Red Sea coast locations as sustainable tourist destinations for scuba diving tourism. Yanbu, Jeddah, and Jizan are scuba diving destinations growing in popularity along the Red Sea's 1,932-kilometre Saudi coastline (Wagner, 2015, para. 7). However, as with all management of heritage sites, there are challenges involved in achieving an ecotourism model that is socially responsible and sustainable. Protection and conservation activities must ensure against removal of artefacts and there must be adequate funding for infrastructure and a long-term commitment to maintaining and restoring the site. A balance must be achieved between site protection and accessibility (Ayachi & Jaouadi, 2016).

Pollution has already become a problem along portions of the Jeddah coastline due to domestic waste and petrol spills (Wagner, 2015). The entire coast includes nearly 200 species of coral some of which have been damaged by pollution. Overfishing by the estimated

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8,000 to 10,000 fishing boats operating in the waters has exhausted some species, particularly sharks. The King Abdullah University of Science and Technology's Red Sea Center and Reef Ecology Lab has made substantial progress pinpointing damaged areas and implementing restoration plans (Wagner, 2015). It is recommended that Saudi Arabia promote scuba diving along the Red Sea coastline as part of a marketing campaign that highlights ecotourism and sustainability.

# Limitation:

This study and its findings are not free of limitations. The sample size can be considered a limitation in this research; because it was a relatively small sample (101 respondents), it would be more advantageous to have a much bigger and more diverse demographic for the survey to provide a truer picture of the perceptions of Saudi Arabia. Despite this limitation, it is still expected that the information obtained allow areas to be identified where key attention and changes are required.

A further difficulty in this research is gathering information on Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination. Although there is a vast amount of information available regarding tourism and destination image, there is very little information regarding Saudi Arabia, as it is only in recent years that Saudi Arabia has identified that tourism is an area that it wants and needs to develop, therefore specific information about strategies could be missing from this study.

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