

# Tourism, Identity, And Vision 2030: A Neo-Nationalist Analysis Of Red Sea Global's Impact On Saudi Arabia's Future

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## Abstract

*This article investigates the Red Sea Global project's role in shaping Saudi Arabia's tourism industry, national identity, and the objectives of Vision 2030. Vision 2030 is an ambitious reform agenda designed to diversify the Saudi economy and elevate the country's global presence, with tourism as a key pillar. <sup>1</sup>The Red Sea Global initiative, a major component of this vision, seeks to transform the Red Sea coastline into a premier luxury tourism destination, focusing on sustainable development and the preservation of cultural heritage. Through thematic analysis, this study examines how Red Sea Global impacts national identity and economic growth. The thematic approach explores how the project functions as a catalyst for modernizing Saudi Arabia's image while reinforcing traditional values. It highlights how the initiative supports national goals and enhances Saudi Arabia's international stature by integrating contemporary global trends with local cultural elements. The analysis provides insights into the complex interactions between tourism development and national identity, revealing the broader implications for Saudi Arabia's socio-economic and cultural landscape. By elucidating these dynamics, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how large-scale tourism projects like Red Sea Global advance Vision 2030 and influence the country's evolving narrative on the world stage.*

**Keywords:** *Tourism, Identity, Neo-nationalism, Vision 2030, Red Sea Global, Saudia Arabia.*

## 1. Introduction

Tourism has become a critical tool for reshaping national identities, especially in nations experiencing rapid socio-economic change (Smith & Robinson, 2005). Saudi Arabia, under the ambitious Vision 2030 initiative, seeks to diversify its economy, reduce its dependence on oil, and transform the Kingdom into a leading global tourism destination (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Central to this vision is Red Sea Global (RSG), a series of mega-projects designed to revolutionize the tourism landscape along the Red Sea coastline. These projects are not merely economic ventures but are integral to Saudi Arabia's broader strategy of rebranding itself on the global stage and fostering a neo-nationalist identity that merges cultural heritage with modernity and global relevance (Saudi Press Agency, 2020). In 2016, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman introduced Vision 2030, a strategic framework to pivot Saudi Arabia's economy away from its heavy reliance on oil (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). The framework aims to diversify the economy and develop key sectors such as health, education, infrastructure, and tourism (Albassam, 2015; Aldhilan,

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Rafiq & Afzal, 2024). One of Vision 2030's primary goals is to increase the tourism sector's contribution to the national GDP from 3% to 10% by 2030 (Saudi Press Agency, 2020). To achieve this, the Kingdom has embarked on several high-profile projects, with Red Sea Global being one of the most significant undertakings (Saudi Press Agency, 2020).

Vision 2030 is more than just an economic roadmap; it represents a reimagining of Saudi Arabia's identity and its place in the world (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016).

Traditionally viewed as a conservative, oil-rich nation with a rigid adherence to religious principles, Saudi Arabia is now striving to present itself as a progressive, diversified economy that remains deeply connected to its cultural and religious roots (Albassam, 2015). This dual identity lies at the heart of the neo-nationalist narrative that Vision 2030 seeks to advance—a narrative that balances tradition with modernity to appeal to both domestic and international audiences (Khadim et al., 2024). Red Sea Global is a flagship initiative within Vision 2030, embodying Saudi Arabia's ambitions for modernization and economic diversification (Saudi Press Agency, 2020). The initiative covers a vast area along the Red Sea coast and includes multiple mega-projects, such as The Red Sea Project, Amaala, and NEOM's Sindalah Island (The Red Sea Development Company, 2021). These projects collectively aim to create a luxury tourism destination that offers a blend of adventure, wellness, and cultural experiences, all while prioritizing environmental sustainability (The Red Sea Development Company, 2021).

The Red Sea Project is perhaps the most well-known of these mega-projects. Encompassing over 90 islands, it is designed to be one of the most sustainable tourist destinations in the world, with plans to operate entirely on renewable energy and impose strict environmental protections (The Red Sea Development Company, 2021). The project is expected to attract one million tourists annually by 2030, generating over 70,000 jobs and contributing significantly to the national GDP (Saudi Press Agency, 2020).

Amaala focuses on wellness tourism, offering a range of luxury experiences that combine health, fitness, and cultural immersion (Amaala, 2021). Situated in a pristine environment, Amaala is also committed to sustainability, with plans for zero waste-to-landfill, zero carbon emissions, and a ban on single-use plastics (Amaala, 2021). Sindalah Island, part of the larger NEOM project, is set to become an exclusive luxury island destination. NEOM itself is a futuristic city being developed in the northwestern part of Saudi Arabia, and Sindalah will serve as its gateway to the Red Sea (Saudi Press Agency, 2020). The island will feature a marina, luxury hotels, and a host of recreational activities designed to attract high-net-worth individuals from around the globe (The Red Sea Development Company, 2021).

These projects are not only about economic diversification but also play a critical role in shaping Saudi Arabia's national identity (Khadim et al., 2024). Red Sea Global represents a break from the traditional image of Saudi Arabia as an insular, oil-dependent nation (Albassam, 2015). Through these mega-projects, the Kingdom is showcasing its natural beauty, cultural heritage, and commitment to sustainability, aligning with global trends in responsible tourism and environmental conservation (The Red Sea Development Company, 2021). This alignment with global values is essential as Saudi Arabia seeks to rebrand itself on the international stage (Maqbool et al., 2024). Neo-nationalism, characterized by a renewed emphasis on national identity, sovereignty, and cultural heritage, has gained prominence in various global contexts, particularly as a response to the challenges of globalization (Neumann, 1999). In Saudi Arabia, neo-nationalism is reflected in Vision 2030's focus on preserving cultural and religious values while embracing economic modernization and global engagement (Smith & Robinson, 2005).

Red Sea Global is central to this neo-nationalist narrative. By highlighting Saudi Arabia's natural and cultural assets, these projects aim to foster a sense of national pride and unity among Saudis (Neumann, 1999). This is especially important in a nation where over 70% of the population is under 35 years old (Albassam, 2015). For this young demographic, the Red Sea Global projects offer a vision of a future that is both prosperous and culturally authentic—a future where Saudi Arabia leads not only in economic terms but also in cultural and environmental stewardship (The Red Sea Development Company, 2021).



**PIC-1.1:** Here is a detailed map of Saudi Arabia's Red Sea coastline, highlighting the key Red Sea Global projects: The Red Sea Project, Amaala, and NEOM's Sindalah Island. The map visually represents the geographical layout and the thematic elements of luxury tourism, environmental sustainability, and cultural heritage that align with Vision 2030.

Ferstanding between Saudi Arabia and the world. The projects are designed to provide tourism furthermore, Red Sea Global aligns with Vision 2030's broader goals of promoting cultural exchange and undrists with immersive experiences that showcase Saudi culture, history, and natural beauty, thereby enhancing international appreciation of the Kingdom's heritage (Smith & Robinson, 2005). This cultural exchange is a critical component of Saudi Arabia's strategy to rebrand itself as a modern, open, and globally engaged nation (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016).

One of the most distinctive features of the Red Sea Global projects is their commitment to environmental sustainability. These projects are being developed with the goal of having a minimal environmental impact, featuring initiatives like operating entirely on renewable energy and implementing strict measures to protect the region's unique marine and terrestrial ecosystems (Al-Hamdan, 2020; Faraj, 2021). This focus on sustainability is not just a response to global environmental concerns but also a reflection of Saudi Arabia's neo-nationalist identity. By prioritizing sustainability, the Kingdom is positioning itself as a responsible and forward-thinking nation that is capable of balancing economic growth with environmental stewardship (Al-Rasheed, 2020). This approach is particularly significant given Saudi Arabia's historical reliance on oil and the associated environmental challenges (Alshuwaikhat & Mohammed, 2017).

Moreover, the commitment to sustainability in Red Sea Global aligns with global trends towards responsible tourism, which emphasizes the need for tourism development to be environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable (Smith, 2021; Rafiq, Afzal & Kamran, 2022). By leading in this area, Saudi Arabia is enhancing its international image and contributing to the global discourse on sustainable development (Banya, 2019). This contribution is a vital aspect of the Kingdom's neo-nationalist identity, which seeks to balance national interests with global responsibilities (Al-Rasheed, 2020).

While the Red Sea Global projects offer ambitious goals and potential benefits, they are accompanied by significant challenges and criticisms. A major concern is the potential impact of large-scale tourism on the region's fragile ecosystems. Despite developers'

emphasis on sustainability, the scale of these projects raises fears of environmental degradation (Faraj, 2021).

Another challenge lies in the broader political and social context of Saudi Arabia. Vision 2030, though representing a bold shift towards modernization and economic diversification, is being implemented within a tightly controlled political environment (Hertog, 2017).

This context raises doubts about the feasibility of achieving cultural exchange and international engagement, especially when political and social freedoms are limited (Al-Rasheed, 2020). Furthermore, the promotion of a neo-nationalist narrative that emphasizes cultural heritage and national pride may be seen as an effort to reinforce state control and suppress dissent (Menoret, 2014).

Social and economic inequalities are also a significant concern. While the projects are expected to create jobs and drive economic growth, the benefits may not be evenly distributed, particularly given the focus on luxury tourism (Banya, 2019). This could result in the displacement of local communities and the marginalization of lower-income groups (Al-Fahad, 2022).

Finally, the projects' commitment to environmental sustainability is a distinctive feature, reflecting Saudi Arabia's neo-nationalist identity and its desire to be seen as a forward-thinking, responsible nation (Al-Rasheed, 2020).

**Title: Key Themes in Red Sea Global Project – Tourism, Identity, and Vision 2030**

Theme	Key Points	Challenges
Environmental Sustainability	- Focus on renewable energy (solar, wind)	- Potential environmental degradation due to large-scale tourism
	- Protection of marine and terrestrial ecosystems	- Balancing economic growth with sustainability
Global Trends & Neo-nationalism	- Aligns with global trends in responsible tourism	- Political and social limitations impacting cultural exchange and international engagement
	- Enhances Saudi Arabia's global image	- Risk of reinforcing state control under the guise of cultural heritage promotion
Economic & Social Impact	- Aims for job creation and economic growth through luxury tourism	- Uneven distribution of benefits; potential displacement of local communities
	- Part of Vision 2030's diversification strategy	- Marginalization of lower-income groups due to focus on luxury sectors

However, balancing economic growth with environmental stewardship and social equity remains a formidable challenge as the Kingdom advances these transformative initiatives (Faraj, 2021).

## Literature Review

### 1. Vision 2030 and National Identity

Vision 2030, launched in 2016 by Saudi Arabia, represents a comprehensive plan aimed at diversifying the nation's economy and reducing its dependence on oil. As Kinninmont (2017) explains, Vision 2030 is not merely an economic blueprint; it is a transformative agenda that seeks to reshape Saudi society, governance, and culture. The plan identifies three main pillars: a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation. Within these, the emphasis on national identity is crucial, as the vision seeks to align Saudi cultural heritage with global modernization efforts.

The construction of national identity in Saudi Arabia has historically been closely intertwined with religion, particularly Islam, and the kingdom's role as the custodian of the two holy mosques (Al-Rasheed, 2017). However, Vision 2030 introduces a broader interpretation of national identity that includes cultural and historical dimensions. This shift reflects an effort to create a more inclusive identity that resonates with the diverse experiences and aspirations of the Saudi population.

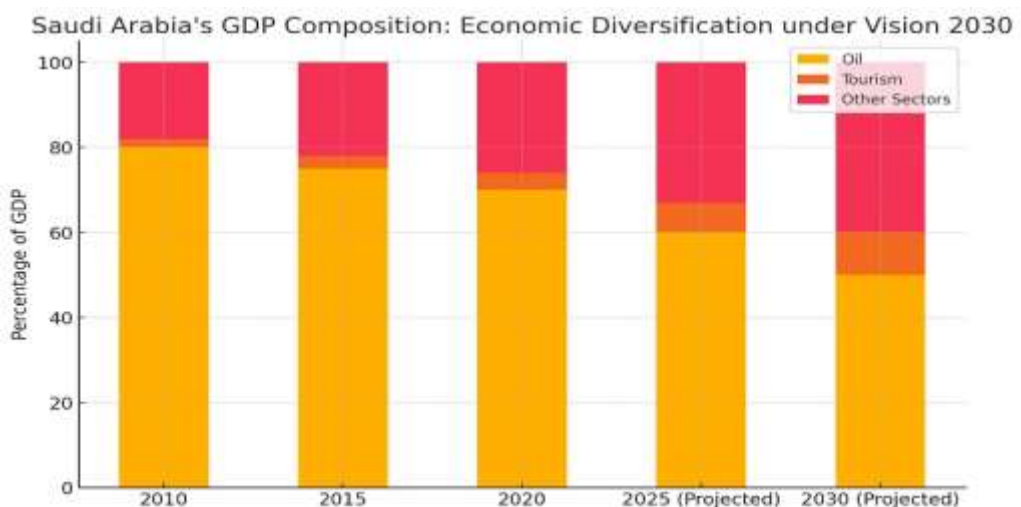
The intersection of culture, heritage, and modernization plays a pivotal role in shaping Saudi national identity under Vision 2030. The government's investments in cultural projects, such as the restoration of historical sites and the promotion of traditional arts, are designed to foster national pride while showcasing Saudi Arabia's cultural richness to the world (Al-Rasheed, 2020). This approach aligns with Anderson's (2006) concept of "imagined communities," where national identity is continuously constructed and reconstructed through shared cultural narratives and symbols.

Tourism has long been recognized as a powerful tool for shaping and promoting national identity. Tourism can serve as a platform for showcasing a nation's cultural and natural assets, thereby reinforcing a sense of national pride (Smith, 2021). In the Saudi context, Vision 2030 leverages tourism as a means of promoting a modern yet culturally grounded Saudi identity. However, there are concerns about the potential commodification of culture, where cultural heritage may be packaged and sold in ways that dilute its authenticity (Banya, 2019).

## 2. National Identity and Neo-nationalism in Saudi Arabia

Neonationalism is a contemporary form of nationalism that has emerged in response to the perceived challenges of globalization, including the erosion of national sovereignty, cultural identity, and traditional values (Rafiq et al., 2024). Unlike traditional nationalism, which often focuses on ethnic or linguistic homogeneity, neonationalism emphasizes cultural pride, economic independence, and the protection of national interests in a globalized world. Al-Rasheed (2020) defines neonationalism as a movement that seeks to reassert traditional values while embracing selective aspects of modernity, thereby creating a hybrid identity that is both rooted in the past and adaptable to the present.

In Saudi Arabia, the rise of neonationalism can be traced back to the kingdom's historical reliance on oil wealth and religious legitimacy to maintain social cohesion and political stability. As Hertog (2017) notes, the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, have traditionally used oil revenues and their role as custodians of Islam's holy sites to legitimize their rule and foster a sense of national identity. However, as economic challenges and social changes have intensified, there has been a growing emphasis on national identity as a source of legitimacy and cohesion.



This shift towards neonationalism in Saudi Arabia has been catalyzed by the kingdom's ambitious Vision 2030 plan, which aims to diversify the economy, reduce dependence on oil, and promote a more inclusive and modern national identity.

Vision 2030 represents a conscious effort to reframe Saudi national identity in a way that balances tradition with modernity, thereby appealing to a broader and more diverse population. The neonationalist rhetoric embedded in Vision 2030 reflects this balancing act, as it seeks to promote cultural heritage and national pride while positioning Saudi Arabia as a global leader in various sectors, including tourism.

The neonationalist rhetoric in Vision 2030 is evident in the document's frequent references to Saudi Arabia's rich cultural history and its pivotal role in the Islamic world. Al-Rasheed (2020) argues that this rhetoric serves to reinforce a sense of national pride and cultural sovereignty, which are key components of neonationalism. Vision 2030's economic goals, particularly the emphasis on achieving independence from oil and reducing reliance on foreign labor, also align with the neonationalist emphasis on economic self-reliance and national sovereignty.

The cultural and heritage initiatives outlined in Vision 2030, such as the restoration of historical sites and the promotion of traditional arts, further illustrate the neonationalist agenda. These initiatives are designed to foster a sense of national pride and to position Saudi Arabia as a leader in cultural preservation and promotion. By integrating these cultural elements into its economic and social development plans, Vision 2030 seeks to create a modern Saudi identity that is both globally competitive and deeply rooted in tradition.

The neonationalist elements of Vision 2030 have had a profound impact on Saudi Arabia's domestic and international image. Domestically, the emphasis on cultural heritage and national pride has resonated with many Saudis, fostering a sense of unity and purpose in the face of economic and social reforms. This renewed focus on national identity has helped to legitimize the government's modernization efforts and to build public support for Vision 2030's ambitious goals (Al-Rasheed, 2020).

Internationally, however, the neonationalist rhetoric has been met with mixed reactions. While some observers view it as a positive assertion of cultural pride and sovereignty, others perceive it as insular or defensive, particularly in the context of Saudi Arabia's efforts to position itself as a global leader. The kingdom's emphasis on cultural and religious identity, combined with its ambitious development projects, has contributed to a more complex and nuanced global image, one that blends tradition with modernity in unique ways (Smith, 2021; Rafiq, Kamran & Afzal, 2024).

### **3. Tourism in Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030**

Red Sea Global is one of the most ambitious projects under Vision 2030 and serves as a prime example of how neonationalism is being integrated into Saudi Arabia's tourism strategy. The project, which spans over 90 islands along the Red Sea coast, aims to create a world-class luxury tourism destination that emphasizes sustainability and environmental conservation (Red Sea Global, 2022). This focus on sustainability and luxury reflects the neonationalist agenda by promoting Saudi Arabia as a modern, progressive nation that is also deeply connected to its natural and cultural heritage.

According to Al-Fahad (2022), Red Sea Global is expected to generate thousands of jobs, attract millions of visitors, and contribute significantly to Saudi Arabia's GDP by 2030. The project also aims to position Saudi Arabia as a leader in sustainable tourism, with a commitment to preserving the region's unique ecosystems. This aligns with the neonationalist emphasis on economic independence and environmental stewardship, which are key components of Saudi Arabia's redefined national identity.

Luxury tourism, as exemplified by Red Sea Global, plays a crucial role in shaping global perceptions of Saudi Arabia. Projects like Red Sea Global are designed to attract affluent international tourists and to showcase Saudi Arabia as a modern, sophisticated, and welcoming destination. Smith (2021) argues that luxury tourism offers an opportunity to

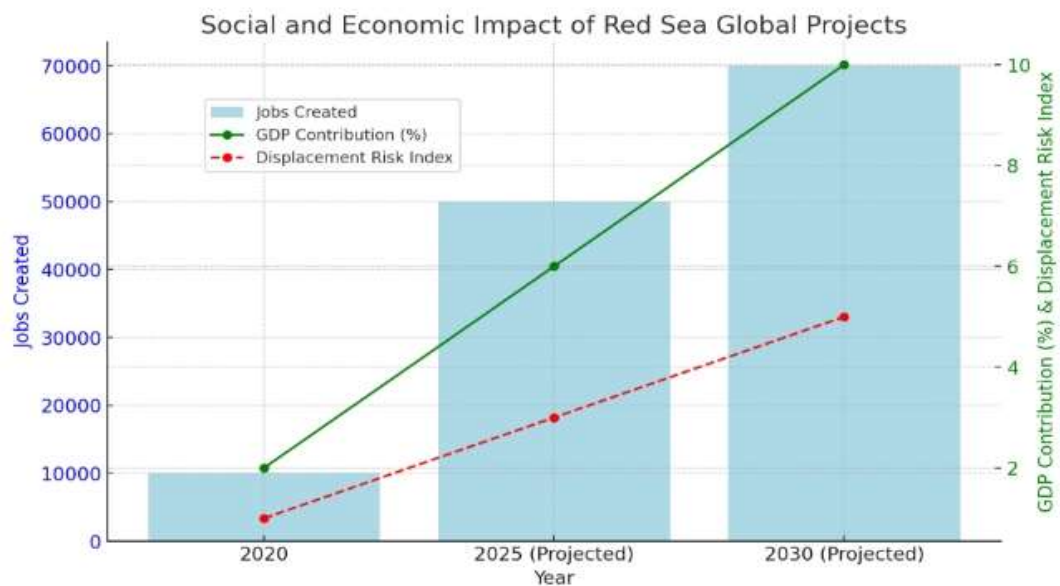
present a different side of Saudi Arabia to the world, one that emphasizes cultural sophistication, environmental stewardship, and high-quality experiences.

This strategy aligns with the neonationalist narrative by promoting a version of Saudi identity that is both traditional and modern, rooted in cultural heritage but also open to global influences. By positioning itself as a leader in luxury and sustainable tourism, Saudi Arabia seeks to challenge stereotypes and to project a more nuanced and positive image on the global stage.

While the prospects for tourism in Saudi Arabia are promising, the sector faces several challenges. Environmental sustainability is a significant concern, particularly given the scale of projects like Red Sea Global (Faraj, 2021). Additionally, there are cultural sensitivities related to the rapid expansion of leisure tourism in a conservative society. However, Banya (2019) suggests that with careful planning and engagement with local communities, these challenges can be mitigated, allowing Saudi Arabia to realize the full potential of its tourism sector.

#### 4. Red Sea Global as a Mega-Project: Impacts on Regional Development

Red Sea Global is a cornerstone of Vision 2030's tourism strategy and a key example of how neonationalism is being operationalized in Saudi Arabia's development plans. The project is designed to create a luxury tourism destination that is both environmentally sustainable and culturally enriching. Al-Fahad (2022) describes Red Sea Global as a project that aligns perfectly with Vision 2030's goals of economic diversification, job creation, and the promotion of Saudi cultural heritage. The project's focus on sustainability also reflects Vision 2030's broader commitment to environmental stewardship, which is a key aspect of the kingdom's neonationalist agenda. Environmental sustainability is a key focus of Red Sea Global, with the project aiming to be one of the most sustainable tourism developments in the world. Faraj (2021) notes that the project includes measures to protect coral reefs, mangroves, and endangered species, as well as efforts to minimize carbon emissions and waste. These initiatives are designed to ensure that Red Sea Global not only preserves the natural beauty of the region but also sets a new standard for sustainable tourism development. This emphasis on sustainability is closely linked to the neonationalist goal of positioning Saudi Arabia as a responsible and forward-thinking nation on the global stage. The socioeconomic impact of Red Sea Global is expected to be substantial. The project is projected to create thousands of jobs, both directly and indirectly, and to contribute significantly to the diversification of Saudi Arabia's economy (Al-Hamdan, 2020).



Moreover, the project aims to engage local communities by providing employment opportunities and supporting local businesses. This focus on community engagement is

critical to ensuring that the benefits of the project are shared widely and that it contributes to social cohesion and national unity. The project's emphasis on economic diversification and local engagement is a reflection of the neonationalist desire to build a self-reliant and cohesive society.

Cultural and heritage preservation is a central component of Red Sea Global. The project includes plans for the development of museums, cultural centers, and heritage sites, which are intended to showcase Saudi culture to the world and to reinforce a sense of national pride among Saudis (Red Sea Global, 2022). By integrating cultural heritage into the tourism experience, Red Sea Global aims to create a destination that is not only luxurious but also deeply rooted in Saudi history and traditions. This focus on cultural preservation aligns with the neonationalist agenda of promoting a national identity that is both modern and respectful of its cultural heritage.

While Red Sea Global has been widely praised for its ambitious goals, it has also faced criticism, particularly regarding its environmental impact and the potential displacement of local communities (Smith, 2021). There are also concerns about the project's long-term sustainability and its ability to deliver on its promises (Faraj, 2021). These critiques highlight the need for careful management and continuous monitoring to ensure that Red Sea Global achieves its objectives without compromising environmental integrity.

### **5. Sustainability and Environmental Impacts**

One of the core elements of Vision 2030 and Red Sea Global is sustainability. The Saudi government has emphasized that Red Sea Global will be one of the world's most sustainable tourism destinations, using renewable energy, advanced waste management systems, and minimal water consumption (Al-Sulami, 2023). In the context of neo-nationalism, this focus on sustainability is not only an economic and environmental consideration but also a political one, showcasing Saudi Arabia's capacity to lead in global environmental initiatives.

Existing research on sustainable tourism highlights the importance of integrating environmental protection with economic growth. Studies such as those by Gössling and Hall (2020) have demonstrated that well-designed tourism projects can contribute to conservation efforts, provided they are planned with a long-term vision. The Red Sea Global project's commitment to environmental sustainability aligns with these principles. However, the success of these efforts will depend on rigorous oversight and the enforcement of environmental regulations.

### **6. Global Perception and Soft Power**

Tourism is increasingly seen as a tool of soft power, helping countries to enhance their global standing through cultural diplomacy. Vision 2030's focus on tourism as a soft power tool is evident in the international marketing of projects like Red Sea Global. By developing high-profile, eco-friendly, and luxury tourism destinations, Saudi Arabia is aiming to reshape its global image, moving away from the traditional association with conservative politics and oil wealth to become a leader in sustainable development.

As Nye (2004) points out, soft power relies on attraction rather than coercion, and tourism plays a crucial role in this process. Through the Red Sea Project, Saudi Arabia is attempting to craft a narrative of modernization and openness, while maintaining a distinct cultural identity. El-Katiri (2021) argues that such efforts are part of a broader strategy of rebranding the Kingdom in the eyes of the world. While this is an ambitious goal, it is not without challenges, as Saudi Arabia's historical reputation may take time to shift despite these tourism efforts.

### **Methodology**

This research employs a qualitative methodology, focusing on thematic analysis to explore neo-nationalist narratives within Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, particularly through the lens of Red Sea Global's impact on national identity and the country's global image. The study is designed around a qualitative framework that integrates secondary data analysis and thematic analysis, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the socio-political and cultural



dynamics at play. This method allows for flexibility in the research process and enables the researcher to explore new directions as additional information and knowledge is revealed (Bengtsson & Fynbo, 2018).

Data collection is conducted through a comprehensive review of secondary sources, including official government documents, academic literature, media reports, and organizational publications related to Vision 2030, Red Sea Global, and neo-nationalism in Saudi Arabia. These sources provide a robust foundation for understanding how Saudi Arabia's neo-nationalist identity is being shaped and promoted through tourism and cultural heritage initiatives.

### **Data Analysis**

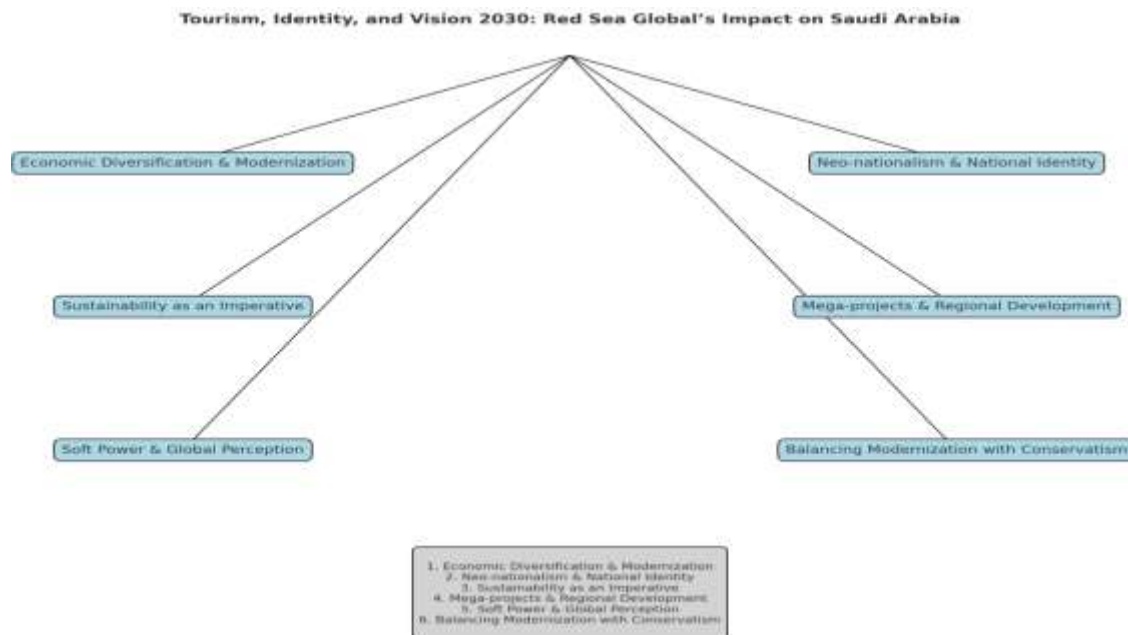
The data analysis process is guided by thematic analysis, which involves several key steps. First, the researcher immerses in the data through multiple reviews to gain a thorough understanding. Next, relevant data is coded to identify recurring ideas and motifs related to the study's core themes. These codes are then organized into broader themes that capture the essence of the research, such as "Reimagining National Identity" and "Tourism as a Tool for Neo-nationalism." The identified themes are carefully reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflect the data and align with the research objectives. Finally, the themes are interpreted in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework, providing insights into how neo-nationalist narratives are articulated within Vision 2030 and Red Sea Global.

The thematic analysis process begins with an initial examination of all collected data to identify preliminary patterns. This is followed by open coding, where data is segmented and labeled with codes representing key concepts like "cultural preservation" and "national pride." These codes are then grouped into categories through axial coding, leading to the formation of overarching themes. Selective coding is used to analyze the relationships between these themes and connect them back to the research questions, ensuring a coherent narrative is developed. The themes are refined and any discrepancies resolved to maintain clarity and consistency.

The final step involves constructing a narrative that explains how Red Sea Global and Vision 2030 contribute to reimagining Saudi Arabia's national identity within a neo-nationalist framework. This analysis is expected to reveal the strategic role of tourism in balancing tradition with modernity and the embedding of neo-nationalist narratives in the promotion of cultural heritage, sustainability, and economic independence. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of neo-nationalism in the context of Saudi Arabia's ongoing transformation under Vision 2030.

### **Thematic Analysis:**

Tourism, Identity, and Vision 2030: A Neo-nationalist Analysis of Red Sea Global's Impact on Saudi Arabia's Future. The thematic analysis of the literature review explores the intersecting themes of tourism, national identity, neo-nationalism, sustainability, and soft power in the context of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Red Sea Global. The analysis is structured around key themes that emerge from the review.



## Theme 1

### **Tourism as Economic Diversification and Modernization**

One of the central themes in the literature is the role of tourism as a tool for economic diversification and modernization within Saudi Arabia. Vision 2030 positions tourism as a cornerstone for transitioning from an oil-dependent economy to one that capitalizes on global trends in eco-tourism and luxury travel. This theme emphasizes tourism's economic benefits, including job creation, infrastructure development, and increased foreign investment. Projects like Red Sea Global are seen as pivotal for achieving these goals. In this context, the literature presents tourism not merely as a revenue generator but as a pathway to modernizing Saudi Arabia's economy in alignment with international standards. This theme highlights that tourism development is also being used to transform underdeveloped regions like the Red Sea coast, fostering regional development through luxury resorts and eco-tourism initiatives.

## Theme 2

### **Neo-nationalism and the Construction of National Identity**

The theme of national identity is intricately connected with neo-nationalist discourse in Saudi Arabia. Vision 2030 and the development of mega-projects such as Red Sea Global reflect a neo-nationalist agenda that seeks to reshape the Kingdom's identity while adhering to its cultural and religious roots. Neo-nationalism in this context is defined by a push towards modernization that does not abandon Saudi Arabia's traditional values. The literature indicates that tourism development, particularly through Red Sea Global, is being used as a means of projecting a new, modern identity for Saudi Arabia both domestically and internationally. This theme suggests that the Saudi state is attempting to balance the liberalizing forces of global tourism with the need to maintain a distinctly Saudi national identity. The tension between modernity and tradition is a recurring theme, with the state employing tourism to reframe national identity in a way that appeals to both domestic and international audiences.

## Theme 3

### **Sustainability as a Political and Environmental Imperative**

Sustainability emerges as a significant theme within the discussion of Red Sea Global. Vision 2030's emphasis on sustainability aligns with global environmental concerns, and Red Sea Global is positioned as one of the world's most sustainable tourism destinations. This theme highlights how environmental stewardship is central to Saudi Arabia's tourism strategy, particularly in areas like the Red Sea, which are ecologically sensitive.

The literature reflects that sustainability is not only an environmental imperative but also a political tool for Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom aims to showcase itself as a leader in sustainable development, using Red Sea Global to enhance its global standing. However, this theme also surfaces concerns about the ecological impacts of large-scale development projects, raising questions about the long-term viability of sustainability claims amidst rapid expansion.

#### **Theme 4**

##### **Mega-projects and Regional Development**

The theme of regional development is closely tied to Saudi Arabia's broader economic and social goals. Mega-projects like Red Sea Global are seen as catalysts for transforming previously underdeveloped regions, creating employment opportunities, and improving local infrastructure. This theme underscores the idea that tourism in Saudi Arabia is not just about attracting foreign visitors but also about fostering domestic growth and development. The literature consistently notes the economic potential of such projects, but there is also a cautionary note about the risks they pose, particularly in terms of environmental degradation and the displacement of local communities. The success of Red Sea Global as a mega-project will depend on its ability to manage these challenges while delivering on its promises of sustainable regional development.

#### **Theme 5**

##### **Tourism as a Tool for Soft Power and Global Perception**

Tourism as a tool for soft power is another critical theme that emerges from the literature. Red Sea Global and other mega-tourism projects are part of Saudi Arabia's broader strategy to reshape its global image, moving away from its reputation as a conservative, oil-rich state to that of a modern, progressive, and eco-friendly nation. This theme underscores tourism's role in international relations and cultural diplomacy, highlighting how Saudi Arabia is using its tourism industry to improve global perceptions and assert its influence on the world stage.

The literature also reflects the challenges Saudi Arabia faces in shifting global perceptions. While mega-projects like Red Sea Global are designed to attract international tourists and present a modern face of the Kingdom, the deep-rooted image of Saudi Arabia as a conservative society may slow the realization of these ambitions. Nevertheless, the theme of soft power illustrates the dual role of tourism in both economic development and the projection of a new national narrative.

#### **Theme 6**

##### **Balancing Modernization with Cultural Conservatism**

An important theme that weaves through the analysis is the balancing act between modernization and cultural conservatism. As Saudi Arabia opens its doors to global tourism, it must navigate the complex terrain of integrating modern, globalized values with its deeply entrenched cultural and religious norms. This theme highlights the internal tensions within the Kingdom as it seeks to modernize without compromising its cultural identity.

The literature suggests that this balancing act will be one of the most critical challenges for Red Sea Global and Vision 2030. The Kingdom's leadership must manage the expectations of its conservative base while appealing to a global audience that expects a more liberal, open environment. This theme illustrates that tourism is not only a tool for economic

growth but also a lens through which Saudi Arabia's internal socio-political dynamics are playing out.

The thematic analysis of the literature review on "Tourism, Identity, and Vision 2030" reveals a complex interplay between tourism, national identity, neo-nationalism, sustainability, and soft power. Red Sea Global is positioned as a key player in Saudi Arabia's transformation under Vision 2030, with the potential to significantly impact the country's economic, social, and political landscape. However, the success of these efforts will depend on Saudi Arabia's ability to balance modernization with its cultural and environmental responsibilities while managing both domestic expectations and global perceptions. The neo-nationalist framework within which these developments are taking place will continue to shape the country's future, with tourism as a central tool for economic diversification, identity formation, and global influence.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The comparative analysis of findings related to "Tourism, Identity, and Vision 2030: A Neo-nationalist Analysis of Red Sea Global's Impact on Saudi Arabia's Future" reveals commonalities across global case studies of large-scale tourism projects and national identity reconstruction efforts. This discussion synthesizes the themes identified in the literature and compares Saudi Arabia's approach with similar global initiatives while highlighting unique elements related to Vision 2030.

The role of tourism in economic diversification is a common strategy employed by several nations seeking to reduce dependence on a singular revenue source, such as oil or manufacturing. Comparative case studies, particularly from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, offer valuable insights into how tourism can become a primary economic pillar. In both Qatar's National Vision 2030 and the UAE's Vision 2021, tourism has been leveraged to diversify the economy away from oil and attract foreign investment, much like Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.

However, Saudi Arabia's approach differs in its explicit focus on sustainable tourism and regional development. Unlike the rapid urbanization of Dubai, Red Sea Global is heavily marketed as an eco-tourism project, aligning with global trends in environmental consciousness. Findings from studies on eco-tourism, such as those conducted in Costa Rica and Bhutan, suggest that positioning tourism within a sustainability framework can yield long-term benefits, both economically and environmentally. Saudi Arabia's commitment to carbon neutrality in Red Sea Global aligns with similar eco-tourism models, reinforcing global trends.

The findings in this study echo those of nations like Turkey and China, where tourism is used as a tool for national identity construction within a neo-nationalist framework. In Turkey, President Erdoğan's emphasis on a "Neo-Ottoman" identity has been projected globally through cultural tourism initiatives, blending modern tourism infrastructure with historical and cultural narratives. Similarly, China has utilized its tourism sector to showcase its historical and political narratives, particularly through its "Belt and Road Initiative," which emphasizes Chinese influence on global history and culture.

In Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030 seeks to present a modern, global-facing identity while retaining its religious and cultural roots, a strategy akin to those of Turkey and China. Both countries, like Saudi Arabia, navigate the tension between global modernization and traditional values. Findings from the literature suggest that such a dual approach can enhance national pride and global prestige, but risks alienating certain conservative domestic populations. However, Saudi Arabia's unique religious significance as the custodian of Islam's holiest sites positions it in a distinct category, where balancing tradition and modernity has added complexity.

Saudi Arabia's focus on sustainability within the Red Sea Global project is part of a broader international trend towards environmentally conscious development. Similar efforts can be observed in global projects such as Australia's Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and the Maldives' eco-resorts, where sustainability is integrated into tourism strategies. The findings in these cases suggest that sustainable tourism is not only a marketing tool but also

an essential component of long-term environmental and economic resilience (Rafiq, Qaisar & Butt, 2022).

However, while these global case studies emphasize environmental protection, Saudi Arabia's approach is also politically motivated. Vision 2030 uses sustainability as a soft power tool, aiming to project the Kingdom as a responsible global leader in environmental efforts (Rafiq, Iqbal & Afzal, 2024). This is similar to the sustainability strategies adopted by countries like Norway and Costa Rica, which utilize eco-tourism to boost their global reputations and align with international environmental standards. Saudi Arabia's adoption of these principles marks a significant shift in its global image, contrasting with its historical identity as an oil-dependent nation.

The development of mega-tourism projects as drivers of regional growth is a strategy that mirrors the experiences of other nations, particularly in the Gulf. For example, Qatar's Lusail City and the UAE's Expo 2020 site both demonstrate how mega-projects can transform previously underdeveloped areas into thriving economic and cultural hubs. The findings in these cases suggest that such projects can generate substantial employment opportunities and foster economic development in adjacent regions, similar to the aspirations of Red Sea Global in Saudi Arabia.

However, what sets Saudi Arabia's project apart is the emphasis on sustainability and cultural preservation. While the UAE's approach, for instance, focused heavily on urbanization and luxury tourism, Red Sea Global aims to protect natural habitats while promoting tourism. This strategic focus aligns more closely with global sustainable development goals (SDGs) than some other Gulf states' approaches, suggesting that Saudi Arabia is positioning itself as a leader in eco-friendly regional development.

Tourism as a tool for soft power is a recurring theme in the findings of nations utilizing tourism to reshape global perceptions. Both China and the UAE have been highly successful in leveraging their tourism sectors to enhance their international image, attracting global investment and improving diplomatic relations through cultural diplomacy. The UAE's transformation into a global tourism hub, with projects like the Burj Khalifa and Palm Jumeirah, has significantly enhanced its soft power and global influence.

Similarly, Red Sea Global is positioned to play a critical role in reshaping Saudi Arabia's global image. The findings suggest that like the UAE, Saudi Arabia is using tourism to shift away from being perceived solely as an oil-rich, conservative state to being recognized as a modern, innovative, and sustainable nation. However, Saudi Arabia's challenge will be managing global perceptions, particularly in terms of human rights and social freedoms, which have historically been areas of criticism. Thus, while Red Sea Global will enhance Saudi soft power, it must contend with broader geopolitical narratives that could limit its effectiveness.

The tension between modernization and cultural conservatism is a theme common to many nations seeking to liberalize economically while retaining traditional values. Saudi Arabia's challenge in balancing these forces is perhaps more pronounced due to the country's unique position as the home of Islam's holiest sites. Comparative findings from nations such as China and Singapore show that rapid economic modernization can be achieved without a full embrace of Western social values, offering a potential pathway for Saudi Arabia.

However, Saudi Arabia's strategy differs in that Vision 2030 seeks to gradually introduce social reforms, such as the opening of cinemas and the allowance of mixed-gender events, while maintaining strict religious observances. This careful balancing act reflects the broader neo-nationalist framework identified in the findings, where the state seeks to project a modern image without alienating its conservative population.

Saudi Arabia's unique positioning—both as a leading Islamic nation and as an emerging leader in sustainable tourism—sets it apart in significant ways. The success of Red Sea Global and Vision 2030 will depend on the Kingdom's ability to manage the complex balance between modernization and tradition, sustainability, and economic growth, as well as global perception and domestic identity. While challenges remain, the Kingdom's strategic use of tourism to reshape its future holds promise for transforming both its economy and its place in the global community.

## Conclusion

The intersection of neonationalism and tourism development in Saudi Arabia, as exemplified by the Red Sea Global project, reflects the kingdom's broader ambitions under Vision 2030. Neonationalism in Saudi Arabia is characterized by a reassertion of cultural pride, economic self-reliance, and national sovereignty in response to the challenges of globalization. This form of nationalism is not only about preserving traditional values but also about embracing modernization in a way that enhances national identity and strengthens the kingdom's position on the global stage.

Red Sea Global, as a key component of Vision 2030, embodies these principles by promoting sustainable development, luxury tourism, and cultural preservation. The project aims to showcase Saudi Arabia's natural beauty and cultural heritage to the world, while also contributing to the kingdom's economic diversification and job creation goals. However, the project also faces challenges, including environmental concerns, potential displacement of local communities, and the need for long-term sustainability. The development of Red Sea Global within the framework of neonationalism presents both opportunities and challenges for Saudi Arabia. If successful, the project could redefine global perceptions of the kingdom, positioning it as a leader in sustainable and culturally rich tourism. However, achieving this vision will require careful management, continuous innovation, and a commitment to balancing economic development with environmental and social responsibilities. The success of Red Sea Global will ultimately be a litmus test for the broader Vision 2030 initiative and Saudi Arabia's ability to navigate the complexities of modernity while staying true to its cultural roots.

In conclusion, Red Sea Global's impact on Saudi Arabia's future is likely to be significant, but its success will depend on how well it navigates the complex intersections of tourism, identity, sustainability, and global perceptions.

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