

FROM OIL TO CULTURE: SAUDI ARABIA'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY THROUGH THE RIYADH SEASON

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Abstract: Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 positions tourism and cultural industries as strategic sectors for reducing oil dependence and strengthening the Kingdom's global competitiveness. This article examines Riyadh Season as a public diplomacy instrument through Cowan and Arsenault's (2008) three-layer framework—monologue, dialogue, and collaboration. Using qualitative content analysis of (1) Riyadh Season's logos and slogans across editions (2019–2023), (2) official and promotional digital content (including the promotional video released on 28 September 2025), and (3) documentation of international partnership initiatives (e.g., Beast Land), the study identifies a layered strategy. In the monologue layer, annual revisions in visual and linguistic identity (including the move toward an English-only framing such as "Big Time!") communicate a controlled narrative of modernity and global openness. In the dialogue layer, the use of global creators (MrBeast, KSI, and IShowSpeed) enables audience interaction and user-generated responses on social platforms, positioning publics as active interpreters rather than passive recipients. In the collaboration layer, co-created projects such as Beast Land demonstrate network-building with non-state actors and shared cultural production. Overall, Riyadh Season illustrates an evolution from symbolic messaging toward more interactive and collaborative public diplomacy aligned with Saudi Arabia's transformation agenda.

Keywords: Public Diplomacy, Saudi Arabia, Riyadh Season.

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INTRODUCTION

Oil-dependent economies face structural exposure to price volatility and fiscal uncertainty when national revenue is concentrated in a single commodity. As price cycles shift rapidly due to demand shocks and geopolitical dynamics, countries with limited diversification become vulnerable in employment, investment, and public spending capacity¹. This vulnerability is intensified by the global transition toward decarbonization. International commitments and sustainability agendas—such as the Paris Agreement (2015) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—encourage states to shift toward innovation-driven and resilient development models, making diversification not only a defensive response to price volatility but also a strategic adaptation to changing global economic structures².

Several oil-producing states have pursued diversification with varying institutional pathways. The UAE—particularly Dubai—reduced oil dependence by expanding trade, tourism, finance, and logistics through investment reforms, free zones, and business-environment restructuring³. Norway offers a different model: channeling oil revenues into a sovereign wealth fund to convert finite resources into long-term financial assets and intergenerational investment. Together, these cases demonstrate that oil

¹ Nashat Ali Almasria, Hassan Hamad Aldboush, Omar Al Kasasbeh, et al., “Oil Price Volatility and Economic Growth: Evidence from the Middle East,” *International Journal of Energy Economics and Policy* 14, no. 3 (2024): 417–21, <https://doi.org/10.32479/ijep.15484>.

² Nadia Khutheir Ganawi and Sundus Jasim Shaaibith, “The Impact of Renewable Energy Policies on Sustainable Economic Growth,” *Jurnal Ekonomi dan Pembangunan Indonesia* 3, no. 3 (2025): 288–307, <https://doi.org/10.61132/jepi.v3i3.1554>.

³ Yacine Benzidane, Abdelkader Chaa, and Abdellah Benahammou, “Economic Diversification Through Tourism in Dubai: Strategies and Competition Policy (2016–2019),” *Revue Études en Économie et Commerce et Finance* 10, no. 1 (2021): 543–64, <https://asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/173229>.

wealth can be leveraged into sustainable competitiveness when states build non-oil sectors and durable governance mechanisms⁴.

Thus, this global paradigm shift marks a significant transition from an economy based on natural resource exploitation to one oriented toward innovation, sustainability, and long-term resilience. Countries that are able to adapt to this change have the potential to strengthen their competitiveness in an increasingly integrated and dynamic global economic landscape. This development model demonstrates that economic diversification is not merely a mitigating strategy against declining oil prices, but also an adaptive measure in the face of changing global economic structures.

Besides the UAE and Norway, Saudi Arabia is also a country with significant oil revenues, supported by abundant oil reserves. Until recent years, oil contributed up to 40 percent of Saudi Arabia's real GDP⁵. When Saudi Arabia's oil revenues increase, in the short term, this can boost public spending, income levels, and employment. Conversely, a decline in oil prices can pose challenges to the economy in terms of public income, earnings, and job losses⁶. Between 2011 and 2018, government spending on education, health, housing, and public services was generally not very sensitive to changes in oil prices. Sectors that were quite sensitive to changes in oil prices were social security, services, and welfare. However,

⁴ Kristin Asdal and Bård Lahn, "Governing as Valuing: Assetization and the Making of the Norwegian Oil Fund," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 56, no. 8 (2024): 2089–104, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X241260588>.

⁵ International Monetary Fund, "Saudi Arabia: 2022 Article IV Consultation-Press Release; and Staff Report," *International Monetary Fund*, August 17, 2022.

⁶ Tarek Tawfik Yousef Alkhateeb, Zafar Ahmad Sultan, and Haider Mahmood, "Oil Revenue, Public Spending, Gross Domestic Product and Employment in Saudi Arabia," *International Journal of Energy Economics and Policy* 7, no. 6 (2017): 27–31.

in the long term, there is a negative trend between oil prices and public spending⁷.

Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil has placed the country's fiscal policy highly sensitive to fluctuations in global oil prices. The impact of this oil price volatility is not only macroeconomic but also affects social and political stability. Based on this trend, the Saudi Arabian government must take the initiative to invest oil revenues in other economic sectors to support employment in non-oil sectors. Diversifying revenue sources to address the low oil price crisis is essential for Saudi Arabia.

In the context of these challenges, Vision 2030 emerged as a strategic response and a game-changer, signaling Saudi Arabia's commitment to economic diversification and comprehensive social transformation. Vision 2030 was launched in 2016 under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as a long-term development plan oriented towards sustainability, innovation, and global competitiveness. This vision is based on three main pillars: A Vibrant Society, A Thriving Economy, and An Ambitious Nation⁸.

The first pillar, A Thriving Society, emphasizes the importance of social and cultural development that improves the quality of life for citizens. This effort includes promoting the values of moderation, strengthening the tourism sector, and increasing public participation in cultural and recreational activities. The second pillar, A Thriving Economy, focuses on diversifying national revenue sources by developing non-oil and gas sectors, such as technology, tourism, renewable energy, and logistics services. Through investment reforms and increasing the role of the private sector, Saudi Arabia seeks to create new jobs and strengthen its global

⁷ Anis Ali, "Volatility of Oil Prices and Public Spending in Saudi Arabia: Sensitivity and Trend Analysis," *International Journal of Energy Economics and Policy* 11, no. 1 (2020): 165–72, <https://doi.org/10.32479/ijep.10601>.

⁸ Saudi Press Agency, "Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030," April 25, 2016, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/en/c791e730f1>.

competitiveness. Meanwhile, the third pillar, Ambitious Nation, emphasizes the importance of efficient, transparent, and accountable governance. This pillar also reflects the nation's commitment to strengthening national identity and building human capacity as the foundation for sustainable development⁹.

As an integral part of the economic diversification efforts under Vision 2030, the tourism and entertainment sector has been identified as a key pillar in creating sustainable non-oil and gas revenue sources. Through the establishment of the Saudi Tourism Authority and the launch of large-scale projects such as NEOM, the Red Sea Project, and Al-Ula Development, the kingdom strives to position itself as an attractive global destination for both international and domestic tourists¹⁰. Meanwhile, the entertainment sector is being developed to enrich the social and cultural life of the community while strengthening the national creative economy. Saudi Arabia brought many European football players to the Saudi Pro League, including Cristiano Ronaldo, which is done to help promote Saudi Arabia in general, as well as several tourism projects that Saudi Arabia is currently undertaking as part of Vision 2030¹¹.

Although projected as a new source of income, the Saudi tourism industry still faces quite a number of challenges. Saudi Arabia is known as one of the countries with the highest levels of conservatism in the world. Its social and cultural characteristics, based on a strict interpretation of Islamic values, often lead to the perception of the country as a society closed to

⁹ Saudi Vision 2030, “Overview,” Saudi Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, September 22, 2025, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/overview>.

¹⁰ Raisya Nazhifa Andira and Indra Tamsyah, “Saudi Arabia’s Efforts in Nation Branding Through the NEOM Megacity Project in 2020–2024,” *Journal of Power in International Relations* 10, no. 2 (2025): 86–102, <https://www.doi.org/10.22303.pir>.

¹¹ Tamsyah Indra, Muh Nizar Sohyb, and Yuniarsih Manggarsari, “Saudi Vision 2030: Public Diplomacy Efforts Through Transfer of Top European Football Players to the Saudi Arabian League,” *Papua Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 5, no. 2 (2025): 237–60, <https://doi.org/10.31957/pjdir.v5i2.4154>.

social change and modernization. This conservative image has influenced global perceptions of Saudi Arabia, raising hesitation among tourists and foreign investors about visiting and investing. The strict implementation of Islamic law and values also influences international perceptions of Saudi Arabia. Conservative social regulations are often perceived as restricting the freedom of foreign tourists, thus reducing the attractiveness of non-religious destinations¹². Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's tourism image remains heavily dominated by religious aspects, particularly through religious pilgrimages such as the Hajj and Umrah¹³. This situation makes transforming the image of tourist destinations a crucial prerequisite for expanding the appeal of more diverse and inclusive tourism.

To address these challenges, Saudi Arabia held the Riyadh Season to rebuild the country's positive image. This event is an annual entertainment festival held in Riyadh from October to March. The festival includes many recreational activities, such as cultural and arts exhibitions, sports, music, and culinary delights. Riyadh Season is held under the authority of The General Entertainment Authority (GEA), which was established by the Saudi Arabian government to be responsible for the development and expansion of the entertainment sector in Saudi Arabia¹⁴. The first edition of Riyadh Season was held in October 2019, and continues to this day, although it was canceled in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic¹⁵.

This festival is organized by Saudi Arabia with several objectives. First, to diversify the economy; Riyadh Season is expected to shift Saudi Arabia's

¹² Mohammad Abuhjeeleh, "Rethinking Tourism in Saudi Arabia: Royal Vision 2030 Perspective," *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure* 8, no. 5 (2019): 1–16.

¹³ Joan Catherine Henderson, "Religious Tourism and Its Management: The Hajj in Saudi Arabia," *International Journal of Tourism Research* 3, no. 6 (2010): 541–52, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.825>.

¹⁴ "Sovereign Fund to Invest in New Saudi Entertainment City," April 8, 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/04/08/sovereign-fund-to-invest-in-new-saudi-entertainment-city.html>.

¹⁵ "Saudi Arabia: All You Need to Know about Riyadh Season," February 17, 2025, <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/saudi/saudi-arabia-all-you-need-to-know-about-riyadh-season-1.1570450844952>.

primary revenue from oil to tourism and entertainment. Second, to promote Saudi Arabian culture by providing a platform to combine local heritage and international experiences through dedicated zones offering culinary delights, art, music, and interactive performances. Third, to attract global interest and position Riyadh as a global entertainment destination. Riyadh Season is also maximized to support the local economy and achieve the goals of Vision 2030¹⁶.

The Riyadh Season received considerable attention. In 2019, when the festival was first held, 11 million tourists visited. During the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the Riyadh Season was not held, and it was held again in 2021. The number of visitors in 2021 increased to 15 million. Then, in the 2022 Riyadh Season, the total number of visitors reached 15 million people, of which 1 million were foreign tourists. Furthermore, for the 2023 Riyadh Season, the chairman of the General Entertainment Authority (GEA), Turki Al-Alshikh, stated that 10 million to 12 million visitors would come to the festival, and targeted more than one million foreign tourists. However, this target was reached faster, with the number of tourist visits reaching 12 million when the 2023 Riyadh Season was only halfway through. By the end of the event, the number of visitors was approaching 20 million. In addition to the large number of visitors, Riyadh Season is also claimed to have created 150,000 jobs, both directly and indirectly¹⁷.

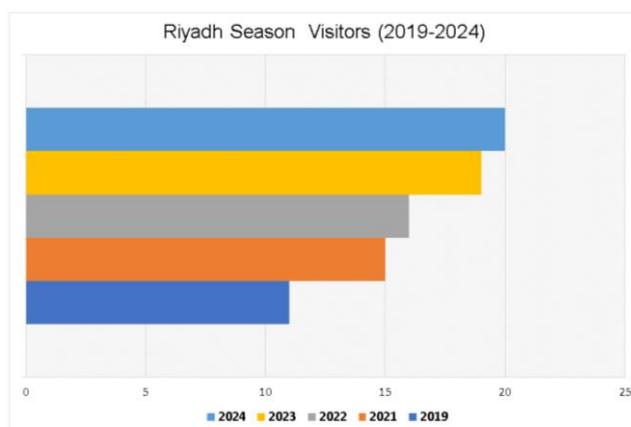
In 2024, the General Entertainment Authority (GEA) again held Riyadh Season which began in October. After running for four weeks, the chairman of the General Entertainment Authority (GEA), Turki Al-Alshikh, claimed that Riyadh Season had been visited by 4 million tourists, and then increased to 6 million tourists in the fifth week. The Saudi Arabian Ministry of Tourism also stated that 5-star hotels in Riyadh achieved an occupancy

¹⁶ "Riyadh Season Surpasses 12m Visitors Mark Midway," January 2, 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2435216/business-economy>.

¹⁷ Arab News, "Riyadh Season 2024 to Empower Entrepreneurs and Productive Families," Arab News, October 20, 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2575978/saudi-arabia>.

rate of up to 97 percent¹⁸. Then, after Riyadh Season 2024 had run for three months, the General Entertainment Authority claimed that the number of visitors had reached 16 million people, and was an indication that the attraction and popularity of this festival had gone global. At the end of the Riyadh Season 2024, the number of visitors managed to exceed 20 million people and became the highest record during the Riyadh Season¹⁹.

Figure. 1 Riyadh Season's Visitors (2019-2024)



The Riyadh Season's scale and measurable outcomes (visitor growth across editions and reported employment effects) make it a relevant case for public diplomacy analysis. Beyond economic diversification, the festival also functions as a strategic platform for image construction and international engagement under Vision 2030. Accordingly, this study investigates how Saudi Arabia operationalizes public diplomacy through Riyadh Season, using Cowan and Arsenault's (2008) three-layer framework as the paper's primary analytic lens. Specifically, the article examines how (1) monologue is enacted through controlled branding and official messaging, (2) dialogue

¹⁸ Saudi Gazette, "Huge Draw at Riyadh Season with 6 Million Visitors in 5 Weeks," November 7, 2024, <https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/647109>.

¹⁹ General Entertainment Authority, "Riyadh Season Attendance Surpasses 16 Million Visitors," January 10, 2025, <https://www.gea.gov.sa/en/16-million-visitors/>.

is pursued through social-media participation and influencer-mediated interaction, and (3) collaboration is institutionalized through co-created projects with non-state actors.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

This study aims to identify and explain the public diplomacy strategies Saudi Arabia employs through Riyadh Season. Guided by Cowan and Arsenault's three-layer framework, it asks: How are monologue, dialogue, and collaboration operationalized through Riyadh Season's branding, digital outreach, and partnerships with non-state actors?

METHOD

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative design using directed content analysis, where the coding categories are derived from Cowan and Arsenault's public diplomacy layers (monologue, dialogue, collaboration). The unit of analysis is Riyadh Season's publicly available communication outputs and partnership artifacts, enabling systematic interpretation of how Saudi Arabia frames messages, engages publics, and builds networks through the festival.

This research relies on documentary and digital-trace data rather than primary interviews. Primary materials include Riyadh Season logos and slogans across editions, official promotional videos and posts (YouTube/Instagram), and official information about festival zones and partnerships (e.g., Beast Land). Secondary materials include Vision 2030 documents, official statements from relevant Saudi institutions, and

reputable news coverage used to contextualize claims about attendance, tourism, and event objectives^{20 21 22}.

Data collection focused on three empirical domains aligned to the theoretical framework: (1) monologue (official visual identity: logos/slogans by year), (2) dialogue (creator-led promotional content and observable audience interaction such as comments/reactions/reposts), and (3) collaboration (co-created initiatives and institutional partnerships such as Beast Land). Analysis followed Miles and Huberman's interactive model (data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing), operationalized through a coding matrix that links each artifact to (a) the intended message, (b) the communication directionality (one-way vs. interactive), and (c) the presence/absence of co-creation and network-building with non-state actors²³. This method involves four stages: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The following is an explanation of these four stages.

- Data Collection: the process of collecting and examining data related to the research topic.
- Data Reduction: the process of selecting, centralizing, simplifying, extracting, and converting the obtained data. Data reduction aims to sharpen, classify, focus, select, and organize the data in such a way as to facilitate the process of drawing conclusions.
- Data Display: the process of displaying data using matrices, graphs, tables, charts, and other formats. This is done to enhance the researcher's understanding of the information obtained, making it easier to understand.

²⁰ Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Administrasi*, 3rd ed. (Alfabeta, 2016).

²¹ Nur Hikmatul Auliya Hardani, Helmina Andriani, et al., *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif & Kuantitatif* (Pustaka Ilmu, 2020).

²² Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Administrasi*.

²³ Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Administrasi*, 3rd ed. (Alfabeta, 2016).

- Conclusion Drawing: the final step in the data analysis process. Conclusions are drawn based on data reduction and the findings in the data presentation.

In analyzing Saudi Arabia's public diplomacy through Riyadh Season, this study employs Cowan and Arsenault's (2008) three-layer model, which conceptualizes public diplomacy as overlapping and mutually reinforcing practices of monologue, dialogue, and collaboration. The framework is used not only to structure sections, but also as the paper's analytical logic: monologue captures controlled image projection; dialogue captures interactive meaning-making and responsiveness; and collaboration captures network-building through co-created initiatives with non-state actors²⁴²⁵.

RESULT

Geoffrey Cowan and Amelia Arsenault classify public diplomacy into three distinct dimensions: monologue, dialogue, and collaboration. Each dimension operates differently but can complement each other. In the case study of the Riyadh Season, the authors will examine Saudi Arabia's public diplomacy strategies based on these three dimensions.

Monologue

The monologue dimension is a phase of one-way communication in which a state attempts to convey a specific message or image to a foreign

²⁴ Geoffrey Cowan and Amelia Arsenault, "Moving from Monologue to Dialogue to Collaboration: The Three Layers of Public Diplomacy," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 10–30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311863>.

²⁵ Geoffrey Cowan and Amelia Arsenault, "Moving from Monologue to Dialogue to Collaboration: The Three Layers of Public Diplomacy," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 10–30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311863>.

audience. In this phase, the state emphasizes control over the narrative and message it wishes to disseminate, without positioning the audience as a communication partner. The monologue aims to shape perceptions, offer a specific national image, and directly socialize the state's strategic values or agenda. In the context of the Riyadh Season, the monologue dimension is clearly evident in the use of logos and slogans as central branding tools. A logo is very important for building the foundation of a brand's visual strategy, which also functions to shape a brand's image²⁶. This visual identity is designed to project the Saudi Arabian government's desired image to a global audience, as part of its public diplomacy and national transformation agenda within the framework of Vision 2030. Logos and slogans function as image-construction mechanisms, whose messages are planned, controlled, and delivered in a one-way manner by the government.

Figure. 2 Riyadh Season's Logo



Source: https://logos.fandom.com/wiki/Riyadh_Season

The Riyadh Season logo and slogan underwent several changes between 2019 and 2023. In 2019, the first year of the Riyadh Season, the logo featured the main icon of traditional Najdi architecture, complemented by

²⁶ Meghan Kelly, "Analysing the Complex Relationship between Logo and Brand," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 13, no. 1 (2017): 18–33, <https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2016.3>.

ornamental elements such as fireworks, decorative shapes, and colorful illustrations. The event title, "Riyadh Season," was written in both English and Arabic. The slogan used was "*Imagine*." In 2021, there were no significant changes to the logo, only the slogan changed to "*Imagine More*."

Furthermore, in 2022, traditional Najdi architecture remained the main icon, but with a more harmonious design and color composition. The Riyadh Season title was also still written in both English and Arabic. The slogan used was "*Beyond Imagination*." Significant changes occurred in the fourth year of the event. The traditional icon and illustrative approach were removed, replaced by a segmented circle symbol resembling a color wheel or festival bow. The color composition also reduced saturation and simplified the number of colors. The slogan was shortened to "*Big Time!*" in a modern font and the Arabic title of the event was also removed.

Dialogue

The dialogue dimension emphasizes two-way communication between the state and its audience, where messages are not only delivered but also shaped through public interaction, engagement, and feedback. Unlike a one-way monologue, dialogue focuses on the process of exchanging meaning, enabling the global public to become active actors in producing, interpreting, and distributing messages. In the context of the Riyadh Season, this dimension becomes even more important because the communication strategy leverages the digital ecosystem and participatory culture of social media, allowing international audiences to respond to, assess, and construct their own perceptions of Saudi Arabia's image.

In the context of the Riyadh Season, the dialogue dimension is implemented through promotional video content involving international figures such as IShowSpeed, KSI, and MrBeast. The involvement of global influencers in the Riyadh Season promotional video can be read as a manifestation of contemporary public diplomacy practices that emphasize public interaction and participation, the core of the dialogue dimension according to the theoretical framework. By leveraging their extensive and highly active fan

bases on social media, these figures function not only as message conveyors but also as two-way communication bridges between the country and the global audience.

Figure. 3 Riyadh Season's Promotional Video featuring International Influencer



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DijMz1Zi1j0>

The promotional video was released on 28 September 2025 across platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, approximately two weeks before the opening of Riyadh Season on 10 October 2025. Following publication, audiences engaged through comments, reactions, reposts, and secondary content (e.g., reaction videos), indicating that the festival narrative was not only transmitted but also publicly interpreted and negotiated in real time²⁷.

²⁷ Saudi Press Agency, “GEA Chairman Announces Opening of Riyadh Season 2025 amid Massive Public Attendance,” October 10, 2025, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/en/N2418428>.

Collaboration

Collaboration is the highest level of interaction between a state and its public, characterized by the active involvement of non-state actors in designing, creating, and implementing joint initiatives. Collaboration aims not only to convey messages but also to build long-term relationships that generate mutual benefits for both parties. In the context of Riyadh Season, the collaboration between the Saudi Arabian government and global digital creator Jimmy Donaldson, known as MrBeast, in the development of Beast Land presents a concrete example of the transformation of public diplomacy toward a co-creation model characteristic of the digital era.

Beast Land is a dedicated zone within Riyadh Season 2025 co-developed with global digital creator MrBeast, designed to translate his content format (challenge-based participation) into an on-site cultural experience. The zone opened on 13 November 2025 and includes more than 15 attractions and 14 experiences across approximately 188,000 m², with participation incentives exceeding SR 2 million in prizes. These features matter analytically because they demonstrate co-creation: Saudi authorities provide infrastructure and institutional capacity, while MrBeast contributes concept design, brand narrative, and access to a transnational audience network—aligning directly with Cowan and Arsenault’s collaboration layer as network-building through shared ownership of cultural production^{28 29 30}.

²⁸ Riyadh Season Official Website, “Beast Land,” 2025, <https://riyadhseason.com/en/zones/beast-land-rs25>.

²⁹ Rahaf Jambi, “Prizes Worth More than SR2m as MrBeast’s Beast Land Launches at Riyadh Season,” Arab News, November 18, 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2622533/saudi-arabia>.

³⁰ Saudi Press Agency, “Riyadh Season 2025 Launches ‘Beast Land’ Attraction on November 13,” November 7, 2025, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/en/N2438358>.

Figure. 4 Beast Land Poster



Source: <https://riyadhseason.com/en/zones/beast-land-rs25>

Beast Land, an exclusive attraction within Riyadh Season, serves as a cultural product resulting from the interaction of two ecosystems: the Saudi tourism industry and global content creators represented by MrBeast. By providing MrBeast with the space to develop the attraction's concept, narrative, and aesthetics, Saudi Arabia opened the door to the integration of the knowledge, creativity, and international audience networks that have long been associated with the figure. This process reflects a shift from message-based public diplomacy to diplomacy based on the co-production of cultural values and experiences. MrBeast, through his social legitimacy and millions of global followers, becomes a co-producer of Saudi imagery, while Saudi Arabia provides the infrastructure, access, and institutional support that make the project possible.

This collaboration broadens the reach of Saudi public diplomacy, as Beast Land is not only promoted by the government but also distributed through MrBeast's cross-border content channel. Thus, the relationship creates a form of diplomacy rooted in global networks and online community participation. Public interaction with the project is no longer limited to message consumption, but rather a shared experience that renegotiates their

perceptions of Saudi Arabia. Within this framework, Beast Land becomes a public diplomacy medium that enables the creation of a more equal relationship, as both parties contribute their respective capital: Saudi cultural and institutional capital, and MrBeast's social capital.

DISCUSSION

Although monologue, dialogue, and collaboration are analytically distinct, they operate as intertwined layers in practice. In Riyadh Season, monologic branding establishes the preferred national narrative, dialogic influencer engagement tests and amplifies that narrative within participatory digital publics, and collaborative initiatives institutionalize relationships through co-created cultural products. The discussion therefore interprets each layer both on its own terms and in terms of how it reinforces (or constrains) the other layers.

Monologue

The monologue layer of public diplomacy is visible in Riyadh Season's controlled visual identity, where official logos, typography, and slogans function as centralized framing devices. Rather than re-listing all year-by-year design changes, the key pattern is a shift from locally referential and celebratory imagery toward a more minimalist and globally legible brand system, which positions Riyadh Season as an international-standard entertainment product aligned with Vision 2030.

From a nation-branding perspective, symbolic consistency and recognizability are not aesthetic concerns alone; they are instruments for projecting a desired identity and reducing uncertainty in international perception. Interpreted through this lens, the move toward simplified iconography and English-forward messaging supports an image of modernity, professionalism, and openness—an attempt to reposition Saudi Arabia beyond a conservative and religious-tourism-only profile. Here,

monologue does not merely “communicate”; it standardizes the narrative conditions under which later dialogue and collaboration become more credible and scalable.

From 2019 to 2021, the logo used traditional Najdi architectural icons dominated by bright, highly saturated colors like yellow, magenta, green, blue, and orange, which psychologically represent joy, energy, and a festive atmosphere³¹. In 2022, the color intensity was reduced and the color composition became more harmonious. The colors remained bright, but had softer tones. This change reflected an effort to enhance the visual quality for a more modern and premium appearance. The biggest transformation occurred in 2023. The palette became more desaturated, using blues, greens, soft oranges, and grays. The reduced saturation and simplified color palette conveyed a professional, modern, and mature impression. In color theory in branding, this type of palette is typically used to create brand trust, stability, and a global image³².

In 2019 to 2021 typography features bold, rounded, and colorful lettering, semiotically depicting a playful identity that prioritizes public entertainment. The presence of informal fonts indicates that the initial target audience was the general public, particularly families and tourists. In 2022, the use of dynamic script typography marked a shift towards a more artistic and elegant image. The combination of script and sans-serif conveys two messages: creative expression and modern readability. This typographic style is commonly used at arts festivals or premium events. In 2023, the entire typographic identity shifted to a modern geometric sans-serif. The lettering is clean, structured, and devoid of emotional ornamentation. This demonstrates Riyadh Season's repositioning as a global brand that prioritizes professionalism and visual simplicity, in line with the minimalist

³¹ Leatrice Eiseman, *Pantone Guide to Communicating with Color* (Graffix Press, 2000).

³² Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color (50th Anniversary Edition)*, 4th ed. (Yale University Press, 2013).

trend in international corporate branding³³. The slogan used has also changed. From 2019 to 2022, Riyadh Season used an imperative slogan, inviting the target audience to imagine the products they offered. However, since 2023, the slogan has adopted a descriptive approach that specifically highlights the products, services, and experiences³⁴.

These changes demonstrate that Saudi Arabia utilizes logos and slogans as framing devices to guide the formation of international public perceptions of the country's image. As Anholt points out, nation branding depends on a country's ability to frame its desired identity through consistent and communicative symbolic representations³⁵. In the case of Riyadh Season, the logo's increasingly modern, dynamic, and inclusive-oriented transformation reflects the country's efforts to present itself as a progressive global entertainment hub open to the international community. Thus, visuals are a strategic medium for conveying the message that Saudi Arabia is shifting from a conservative nation to one that emphasizes modernity, creativity, and cross-cultural engagement. Therefore, the monologue dimension in Riyadh Season reflects how Saudi Arabia constructs narrative and symbolic foundations to build a global image that aligns with its national transformation agenda.

Dialogue

In this dimension, research findings indicate that Riyadh Season involved global actors such as MrBeast, IShowSpeed, and KSI in promotional videos and digital campaigns. These influencers were chosen not only for their popularity but also for their active, loyal, and intensely engaged

³³ Ellen Lupton, *Type on Screen: A Critical Guide for Designers, Writers, Developers, and Students* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2014), <https://www.perlego.com/book/1099517/type-on-screen-a-critical-guide-for-designers-writers-developers-and-students-pdf>.

³⁴ Alina Wheeler, *Designing Brand Identity: An Essential Guide for the Entire Branding Team*, 3. ed (John Wiley & Sons, 2009).

³⁵ Simon Anholt, *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*, 1st ed. (Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

international online communities through comments, reactions, and discussions.

The presence of influencers shifts Riyadh Season's outreach from a primarily top-down approach to a more dialogic and participation-based model, where publics publicly respond and thereby shape the meaning of the campaign through comments, reposts, and secondary content. To evidence dialogue as a two-way process (not merely "reach"), the analysis should report platform indicators (views/likes/comment volume captured on a specified date) and code a sample of comments to identify how audiences evaluate Saudi Arabia's openness, modernity, or credibility. At the same time, the dialogue remains partially orchestrated: the state selects creators, defines campaign timing, and frames the initial narrative—meaning the dialogic layer is enabled by the state but not fully controlled by it once publics begin interacting³⁶.

IShowSpeed, KSI, and MrBeast functioned as intermediary communicators, bridging official Saudi messages with international audiences through language, interaction styles, and humor that resonated more with a young global audience. This model aligns with the concept of two-way symmetrical communication, as the relationship is not simply one of persuasion, but rather an exchange of values and perceptions³⁷. Public response to their content serves as an indicator of how the Riyadh Season message is received and interpreted within the global digital community.

Thus, this dialogue strategy expands the reach of Saudi public diplomacy into spaces previously difficult for state messages to reach, particularly among global youth who are not exposed to traditional media. The involvement of influencers creates an ecosystem that allows the festival's message to not only be conveyed but also negotiated within international

³⁶ Knut Lundby, *Mediatization: Concept, Changes, Consequences* (Peter Lang Publishing, 2009).

³⁷ James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt, *Managing Public Relations* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), <https://www.researchgate.net/.../Managing-Public-Relations.pdf>.

public discourse. This demonstrates Saudi Arabia's active adaptation to the dynamics of 21st-century digital diplomacy, which demands interactivity, immediacy, and public engagement.

Collaboration

Research findings indicate that Saudi Arabia not only leveraged MrBeast as an influencer but also established a structural partnership to establish Beast Land, an exclusive zone within Riyadh Season, developed based on MrBeast's creative concept. This collaboration reflects a co-creation process between the state and global actors.

From the perspective of collaborative public diplomacy, this type of relationship demonstrates that the state opens up space for negotiation and shared ownership in developing a cultural product that becomes part of its international image³⁸. Saudi Arabia provides the infrastructure, funding, and festival ecosystem, while MrBeast contributes creativity, narrative, brand identity, and access to its network of hundreds of millions of fans. The result of this collaboration is not simply an entertainment platform, but a new, co-produced cultural product that reflects the integration of Saudi values with global digital culture.

Beast Land serves as a soft power medium by creating a live experience that connects the international audience with a new representation of Saudi Arabia: a country capable of innovating, collaborating with global actors, and presenting international-standard attractions. This collaboration also creates legitimacy because the association with MrBeast enhances the festival's credibility in the eyes of a young global audience. Within the context of co-branding diplomacy, this project brings together the MrBeast brand, synonymous with creativity and extreme challenges, with the Saudi national brand, which is building its image as a global entertainment hub.

³⁸ Jan Melissen, *Beyond the New Public Diplomacy* (Netherlands Institute of International Relations “Clingendael,” 2011).

Therefore, Beast Land is not merely a commercial activity but a collaborative public diplomacy mechanism that advances network-building through shared cultural production with a non-state actor. This partnership extends Saudi Arabia's ties to transnational online communities by embedding the national brand within a creator ecosystem that audiences already trust. However, collaboration also introduces reputational risk—because credibility becomes partially contingent on the partner's public standing and on perceptions of authenticity—making governance of these networks a strategic requirement rather than a peripheral concern.

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CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that Riyadh Season functions as a multi-layered public diplomacy instrument consistent with Cowan and Arsenault's (2008) framework. Empirically, the three layers operate as a sequence and a system: monologic branding establishes controlled identity cues, dialogic creator-mediated outreach enables participatory meaning-making in digital publics, and collaborative co-creation institutionalizes relationships through shared cultural products.

In the dialogue dimension, the involvement of international figures such as MrBeast, IShowSpeed, and KSI in promoting Riyadh Season reflects a shift toward two-way communication based on the creators' social proximity to a global audience. This interaction strengthens Saudi Arabia's capacity to reach the international community through digital media and opens up space for a more participatory negotiation of meaning between the state and the global public.

In the collaboration dimension, the collaboration between Saudi Arabia and MrBeast in creating Beast Land illustrates the co-creation model in public diplomacy. This collaboration combines state resources with the social and cultural capital of non-state actors, thus building a more sustainable reciprocal relationship. This model demonstrates that Saudi Arabia is no longer simply conveying messages but is co-producing cultural value with global partners.

Overall, Riyadh Season represents the evolution of contemporary public diplomacy from symbolic communication to interactive and collaborative engagement. This multi-layered approach strengthens Saudi Arabia's position in the global cultural arena and enhances the effectiveness of a nation branding strategy oriented toward long-term transformation.

These findings imply that cultural mega-events can serve as diversification tools while simultaneously functioning as strategic platforms for public diplomacy and nation branding—especially for states undergoing rapid transformation. At the same time, this study is limited by its reliance on publicly available content and the absence of direct measurement of perception change among targeted foreign publics. Future research can extend this analysis by triangulating content findings with survey data, audience interviews, or longitudinal sentiment analysis to assess whether Riyadh Season produces durable shifts in international attitudes toward Saudi Arabia.

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