TOURISM SME STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON THE INAUGURAL 'SAUDI SEASONS': AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Purpose – This exploratory study aims to determine tourism SME stakeholders' perceptions of the performance of the first "Saudi Seasons" initiative 2019/20 developed by the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH).

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative study draws on an interpretivist paradigm that explores participants' views and experiences through immersive, semi-structured interviews. A total of 30 participants were interviewed in three locations: Riyadh, Jeddah and Al-'Ula. A thematic analysis was then conducted and the emerging themes were presented as key findings.

Findings – The Seasons have been successful in increasing business activity and changing the negative perception of Saudi Arabia among international tourists. However, it was also noted that the Seasons have put pressure on local tourism infrastructure, whilst other stakeholders raised concerns regarding the inadequate promotion of heritage sites and ineffective stakeholder engagement.

Originality/value – This exploratory study offers novel stakeholder insights into the performance of the inaugural Saudi Seasons initiative and underscores the important need for SMEs to be more effectively involved in contemporary tourism development discourse in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords Tourism stakeholder, Tourism development, Small to medium-sized enterprises, Saudi Seasons, Saudi Arabia

1. INTRODUCTION

On 25 April 2016, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman, announced the release of the *Saudi Vision 2030*, a strategic framework designed to reduce the country's economic reliance on the production of oil and to create 'a more diverse and sustainable economy' (Saudi Vision 2016a). The strategic framework identified tourism as an important sector for future economic growth and outlined new government investments that would help 'create attractions that are of the highest international standards, improve visa issuance procedures for visitors, and prepare and develop historical and heritage sites' (Saudi Vision 2016b, 44). Although Saudi Arabia revealed increasing numbers of international visitors pre-COVID-19, with more than 17.5 million arriving in 2019 compared to 10.9m in 2010 (UNWTO 2020), its tourism economy has remained

predominantly structured around religious tourism, with many tourists choosing to perform the Hajj, Umrah or visit other important Islamic sites. Whilst the Saudi Vision introduced targets to grow Umrah visitors from 8 million to 30 million by 2030, it also signified an ambition to develop new tourist experiences, most notably at cultural heritage sites and through a series of festivals and events (Saudi Vision 2016b). Thus, the Saudi Vision 2030 strategic framework was not only designed to grow the nation's tourism economy but to diversify the range of tourism products offered.

To support the goals of the Saudi Vision 2030, in 2019 the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH) introduced the inaugural Saudi Seasons program. The Chairman of the SCTH, Ahmed bin Aqil al Khateeb, stated that the Seasons would help foster the notion that, 'Saudi Arabia is full of important tourist attractions, including fascinating natural scenes, the long-standing Arab culture and ancient historical sites and advanced infrastructures… [and] contribute to increasing the domestic expenditure, boosting the economic activity and supporting sectors related to the tourism sector'. The first Seasons were positioned as being 'experimental' and entailed 11 different host cities or regions (Ministry of Tourism of Saudi Arabia 2019). In most scenarios, the Seasons were positioned as important platforms to promote heritage attractions, including museums and buildings of historical significance. However, although the Seasons were designed to broadly promote tourism in their respective geographical settings, they were notably heterogenous in terms of tourism products offered, varied considerably in duration (lasting between a few days and up to three months), and included an eclectic range of sporting, cultural, and business events.

Prior to the emergence of COVID-19, initial reports suggested that several Saudi Seasons had performed well, with the Riyadh Season receiving 11 million visitors and international arrivals to the city revealing 110% growth during its inaugural run (Bridge 2020). Nonetheless, little remains known regarding how tourism stakeholders experienced the impacts of the Saudi Seasons or how they may view the reimplementation of future Seasons towards the end of 2021 (several were cancelled in 2020/21 due to COVID-19). Indeed, in the context of Saudi Arabia, where asymmetrical power relationships exist between government and tourism stakeholders, there is an important need to identify alternative perspectives on state-driven tourism development processes. Therefore, this exploratory study was designed to identify how tourism small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) appraised the initiative, especially as there remains a paucity of literature that has critically examined the challenges faced by SMEs in Saudi Arabia (see Rafiki 2020). Moreover, adhering to recommendations that SMEs should be effectively engaged in tourism planning and development discourse, this study was designed to provide a novel platform for SME stakeholders to offer recommendations on how future Saudi Seasons may be optimised further.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The importance of stakeholder involvement

In contemporary tourism literature, stakeholders are typically framed as 'groups or individuals who are associated with tourism development initiatives and therefore can affect or are affected by the decisions and activities of those initiatives' (Waligo, Clarke and Hawkins 2013, 343). Due to their diverse needs and expectations, stakeholder involvement has been identified as an important process in the achievement of sustainable tourism and in mitigating emergent challenges or potential conflicts (Bramwell and Lane 2000; Marques and Santos 2016; Vodeb, Fabjan and Krstinić Nižić 2021). To address the challenges of managing the eclectic needs and demands of multiple stakeholders, stakeholder theory has commonly been positioned as an important 'cross-sectional and integrated approach' during the development of tourism destinations (Ruhanen, 2009, 285). Most notably, stakeholder theory advocates for the building of strong relationships between different actors that represent private and public interests and acknowledges the 'interconnectedness of a variety of international, national, regional, and local individuals, groups and organisations' (Nguyen, Dong and Ho 2021, 191). This approach is of considerable importance, suggest d'Angella and Go (2009), in helping foster consensus on strategic directions throughout the initial phases of tourism destination planning.

As Marzuki and Hay (2015, 897) note, stakeholder involvement not only promotes the development of a collective vision but deters the likelihood of 'fragmented developments' that may see different parties respond to tourism development deficiencies as individuals rather than collective groups. This notion is structured around the premise that the combined capacity and knowledge of stakeholder groups can yield problem-solving outcomes and support different organisational needs via a shared vision (Mistilis, Buhalis and Gretzel 2014). In addition, by acknowledging different stakeholder perspectives, it has been argued that problems relating to internal competition may be addressed more effectively (Marques and Santos 2016). However, whilst it has been posited that stakeholder engagement is a crucial step in developing destinations sustainably, Moscardo (2011) observed that many engagement strategies have often been observed as being either ambiguous or unfocused in direction. It has also been noted that an absence of formal structures or platforms to facilitate stakeholder engagement can impede progress (see Budeanu et al. 2016). In response, it is argued that effective stakeholder engagements must be underpinned by activities that foster 'participatory and responsible dialog' (Iazzi et al. 2020, 1642), and, as Reed (2008, 2426) suggests, be 'institutionalized' and built around 'empowerment, equity, trust and learning'. In more recent times, it has also been recommended that stakeholder participation strategies should be 'flexible and customised' (Khazaei, Elliot and Joppe 2015, 1057), and that future approaches must not only continue to critically engage the optimal ways in which participation should be facilitated but respond to new destination geographies that present unique social, cultural, and political challenges.

2.2. The importance of SME engagement in emerging tourism economies

In regions considered to be emerging tourism economies, SMEs are frequently identified as an important group of stakeholders. This notion is supported by Jeuring (2018, 148) who acknowledged that many fledging economies are often underpinned by substantial numbers of SMEs that can play 'an innovate role in the development of both local tourism industries and the liveability of regions'. SMEs can also be influential in aiding the transition to a market economy, fostering creativity and innovation, improving competitiveness, and in increasing employment opportunities (see Ahmad, Abdul-Rani and Mohd-Kassim 2010; Ahmad 2012). Due to their frontline engagements with tourists, they may be additionally positioned as 'implementers' of government-driven tourism strategies due to their role in creating dynamic tourism products that often reflect or respond to change (McCamley and Gilmore 2017, 87). However, despite the value of SME stakeholders, a myriad of factors may determine the success of stakeholder engagement strategies, including levels of trust and transparency, inclusivity and a sense of shared responsibility, and the need for consistent organisational support (Marques and Santos 2016; Wondirad et al. 2020). In non-traditional or emerging destinations, tourism development may be impeded by an absence of capacity amongst stakeholders that do not fully understand the requirements of a fledging tourism economy. These issues may be exacerbated in scenarios where stakeholders exhibit highly contrasting capabilities in terms of power and influence (Hall 1999). In terms of stakeholder power dynamics, governments have been frequently positioned as being the most influential (D'Souza and Taghian 2018) and as McCamley and Gilmore (2017, 82) add, SMEs must 'either comply with the national or regional strategic planning framework despite dissatisfaction or find a way to work around it in order to engage in effective tourism delivery'. Therefore, as Zhang, Song and Huang (2009) observed, SME tourism businesses must be adaptive to the external environment in which they operate, especially those that are strongly determined by government-led tourism policies and strategies. In short, though SMEs are crucial actors in the development of tourism and the realisation of positive outcomes, they are amongst those stakeholders most likely to be acutely affected by government directives in relation to tourism development.

2.3. Stakeholder involvement challenges in the Saudi Arabian context

In Saudi Arabia, SMEs must typically operate within a business ecosystem that has been heavily shaped by a range of economic, social, cultural, and political factors. Whilst other studies have attempted to synthesise the challenges faced by SMEs in Saudi Arabia by applying a holistic Middle Eastern lens (see Rafiki 2020), it is problematic to frame the various states of the region as being homogenous. From a political perspective, it is commonplace for the Saudi government to develop top-down strategies and policies that frequently exhibit limited engagement with stakeholders (see Aina et al. 2019). Moreover, businesses must remain agile as they operate within the 'unique blend' of economies influenced by the Saudi monarchies and hyper-centralised power structures that limit political discourse to a narrow range of highly influential actors (Ahmad 2012, 220). Although steps to decentralise power in Saudi Arabia were outlined in the

Saudi Vision 2030, effective changes have yet to be implemented and both regional and local government institutions remain 'inefficient' and 'dysfunctional' (Fathallah 2018). As observed by Buchholz and Rosenthal (2004), the role of government stakeholders can often be problematically understated in stakeholder participation, especially when considering the dominant role they play in settings that reveal uneven power dynamics. Indeed, this issue can also be exacerbated by the notion that government stakeholders are predominantly fixated with policy development and implementation (See Krutwaysho and Bramwell 2010; Nunkoo 2015) and have been frequently observed to be both highly bureaucratic and insular in focus (see McCamley and Gilmore 2017). As top-down government approaches continue to impede constructive stakeholder involvement in Saudi Arabia, calls for 'bottom-up interactions through citizen and stakeholder participation' have therefore persisted (Aina et al. 2019, 2079).

Culturally, challenges remain surrounding how SMEs conduct business and who may be employed or engaged. For example, *wasta*, a term that relates to 'mediation' and the use of power and socio-cultural influence continues to shape business practices in the Middle East (see Lackner 2016) is particularly prevalent in Saudi Arabia (Oukil 2016). Here, personal identities are commonly framed 'in terms of tribal, regional or even city origins' and play an influential role in facilitating trust and decision-making in business (Ahmad 2012, 226). Despite suggestions that *wasta* can lead to positive business outcomes and foster social cohesion more broadly (Lackner 2016), the term has remained synonymous with corruption and nepotism, and symbolic of the challenges many SMEs must navigate. Moreover, as observed by Ahmad (2012), many SMEs in Saudi Arabia are inhibited by their low number of business connections that can frequently impede growth and cooperation. From a different vantage point, women's employment and participation in business remains an ongoing issue, with Saudi women often obstructed by 'firmly entrenched legal, economic and cultural barriers' (Alfarran, Pyke and Stanton 2019, 713). Despite recent efforts by the Saudi government to improve female access to leadership positions in business (see Al-Kwifi et al. 2020), highly gendered employment practices - in tandem with the underlying influence of *wasta* - continue to inhibit the number of women acquiring positions of influence that further dilute representative stakeholder engagement (Alfarran et al. 2019).

It has been additionally posited that SMEs in Saudi Arabia must negotiate a range of further issues, including inadequate infrastructure (especially in regional areas), limited access to financial capital, difficulties in hiring suitable or qualified staff, and inexperienced managerial capacities (see Ahmad 2012; Rafiki 2020). Ahmad's (2012) study on the constraints faced by Saudi SMEs noted that several businesses encountered difficulties in acquiring financial support through government initiatives, found the Saudi business environment bureaucratic and 'unfriendly', and were acutely affected by unpredictable policy changes that could further destabilise the economic landscape. Whilst these issues are not uncommon in settings where SMEs must adhere to government initiatives that involve limited or ineffective stakeholder engagement (see Bramwell 2011), it is important that new approaches are explored to remedy these issues, especially if Saudi Arabia seeks to grow its tourism economy further.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design and data collection

Underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm, this study used semi-structured interviews to explore the views and experiences of tourism SME stakeholders that encountered the inaugural Saudi Seasons in one of three different geographical settings. Semi-structured interviews were selected because of their ability to establish participants' underlying feelings, assumptions, and beliefs on a particular subject theme (see Klenke 2016). They were also selected because of their ability to permit participants to speak in confidence and without fear of criticism that may have been encountered via other engagements, including focus groups. Mirroring the methodological processes of McCamley and Gilmore (2017, 84), this project adopted a case study approach that permitted the acquisition of 'a rich insight into tourism behaviour, taking account of the heterogeneous, diverse and complex nature of tourism to be examined'. Moreover, as McCamley and Gilmore (2017) add, a case study approach allows for regional-specific perspectives to be gained that reflect the unique social, cultural and political landscapes of the region, and this rationale was deemed appropriate for a setting like Saudi Arabia.

When considering the geographical diversity and timing of the Saudi Seasons, three research settings were chosen: Riyadh, Jeddah, and Al-'Ula. These locations were selected because of their relative consistency in terms of Season duration, with all three cities hosting events for a window of more than one month. As the study was undertaken in close proximity to the completion of the inaugural Saudi Seasons in each location, it was designed primarily to be positioned as exploratory research that could provide foundational observations and identify new themes of social enquiry (see Walter 2013). Using a combination of tourism business directories and searches for tourism businesses using Google Maps, a database of potential SME contacts was developed for each location. After an ethics application approval was obtained from the researchers' host institution, business owners and managers were then selected at random and invited to participate. Although definitions of SMEs have varied in Saudi Arabia, this study elected to be consistent with the Saudi Industrial Development Fund (SIDF) that considers small or medium sized enterprises to be those with employee ranges of either 3-49 or 50-200 respectively. Using these criteria, a total of 75 SME tourism businesses were invited to participate via email (twenty-five in each of the three cities) and provided with a range of supplementary documents that contextualised the study purpose and stated clearly that their views would remain confidential. A total of 30 respondents agreed to participate (eleven from Jeddah, ten from Riyadh, and nine from Al-'Ula) and face-to-face interviews were then arranged in settings they deemed appropriate.

The interview sessions were designed to be relaxed and informal, and involved a set of general, non-leading questions (see Alotaibi and Potoglou 2018). Participants were asked to reflect on the impacts of the Saudi Seasons on their businesses and, more broadly, the host city in which they were situated. Consistent with other studies that have explored how SMEs can provide purposeful feedback in addressing local or regional challenges (see Ahmad 2012; Bastakis, Buhalis and Butler 2004), participants were also

asked to consider how future Seasons could be developed so that positive impacts on local tourism SMEs - or host communities - could be further amplified. All interviews were conducted in Arabic (unless the participant requested English) between December 2019 and March 2020, and typically lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour in duration.

3.2. Analysis of qualitative materials

On completion of the semi-structured interviews, all content was transcribed verbatim from digital audio recordings. The transcripts were then translated from Arabic to English text, permitting both authors a period of reflection after the interview phase was completed. This step was the first of six recommended for thematic analysis as per Nowell et al. (2017) and allowed both authors to familiarise themselves with the rich seam of qualitative materials acquired. Step two involved the development of initial codes using NVivo software by labelling and indexing specific passages of text. Consistent with conventional interpretive approaches, NVivo is an important tool for coding and discourse analysis so that emergent themes may be identified by classifying, sorting, and grouping textual material to generate a structure of thematic ideas (Langman 2013). Steps three and four involved the search for emergent themes and the review of the themes respectively. These steps were underpinned by the notion that themes or sub-themes may be literature-influenced (generated deductively) or data-driven (generated inductively) (see Bello, Lovelock and Carr 2017). Step five allowed the authors to develop consensus on the key themes identified by both defining and naming them. This step was crucial in ensuring that the interpretation of qualitative materials remained consistent. At this stage, a thematic matrix was also developed to help ensure that codes and themes were concordant by comparing quotes from different participants. As per the suggestions of Henderson and Segal (2013), thematic matrices support the organisation and interpretation of data and can help summarise the key findings acquired from qualitative materials by individual case, group or theme. In addition, a matrix coding query enabled the researchers to identify theme frequency and how prevalent these themes were in relation to the different Seasons (participants were arranged in to three groups by geographical location: Riyadh, Jeddah, and Al-'Ula). Finally, step six required the authors to identify important passages of text that best represented the emergent themes and discussion narratives (see King 2004). These quotes are now used in the next section of the paper. To ensure participant confidentiality, all participants were assigned a participant number (P#) and are herein identified by their number only.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Overview

A brief biographical summary of the 30 participants who took part in the study is presented via Table I, and a simplified thematic matrix of key themes discussed by participants is presented via Table II. The findings reveal that most participants experienced positive outcomes due to the implementation of the Saudi Seasons in their respective cities. These

outcomes typically involved improved business performances due to increases in both domestic and international visitors. Moreover, when considering the rise in international tourists, it was suggested that the Seasons could play an influential role in changing negative perceptions of the country that could in turn lead to further long-term tourism growth. However, participants also reported several issues that had paradoxically emerged due to the initial successes of the initiative. Here, it was argued that although it was promising to see increasing numbers of visitors from an economic perspective, this scenario highlighted the acute need for additional tourism infrastructure and accommodation for both tourists and temporary employees. In situations where issues relating to accommodation shortages were experienced, it was noted that some SMEs supported each other by finding proactive solutions, highlighting the occasional role of *wasta* in fostering positive outcomes. Nonetheless, whilst ad hoc remedies to challenges were implemented, it was evident that these solutions may not be sustainable if tourist numbers increased further. SME stakeholders also expressed frustrations surrounding the promotion of music festivals and business events over heritage tourism and stated that an opportunity to build on the momentum of increasing visitor interest in cultural heritage could be missed if the government did not act quickly. Thus, ideas and opportunities to improve the Seasons were frequently discussed by a number of participants and this section concludes with a series of recommendations to help optimise the performance of future Saudi Seasons.

Table 1: **Summary of study participants**

Participant #	Gender	Age group	Position/Business type	City
1	Male	35-49	Manager/Hotel	Riyadh
2	Female	20-34	Manager/Hotel	Riyadh
3	Female	20-34	Manager/Hotel	Riyadh
4	Male	35-49	Manager/Hotel	Riyadh
5	Male	20-34	Manager/Restaurant	Riyadh
6	Female	35-49	Manager/Restaurant	Riyadh
7	Male	35-49	Manager/Restaurant	Riyadh
8	Male	35-49	Manager/Travel and Tours	Riyadh
9	Male	20-34	Manager/Travel and Tours	Riyadh
10	Male	35-49	Manager/Travel and Tours	Riyadh
11	Male	35-49	Manager/Hotel	Jeddah
12	Male	35-49	Manager/Hotel	Jeddah
13	Male	20-34	Manager/Hotel	Jeddah
14	Male	35-49	Manager/Hotel	Jeddah
15	Male	35-49	Manager/Hotel	Jeddah
16	Male	50-64	Owner/Café	Jeddah
17	Male	50-64	Owner/Café	Jeddah

Participant #	Gender	Age group	Position/Business type	City
18	Male	35-49	Owner/Restaurant	Jeddah
19	Male	20-34	Manager/Restaurant	Jeddah
20	Male	35-49	Manager/Travel and Tours	Jeddah
21	Male	35-49	Manager/Travel and Tours	Jeddah
22	Male	20-34	Manager/Hotel	Al-'Ula
23	Male	35-49	Manager/Hotel	Al-'Ula
24	Male	35-49	Owner/Hotel	Al-'Ula
25	Male	20-34	Owner/Restaurant	Al-'Ula
26	Male	20-34	Manager/Restaurant	Al-'Ula
27	Male	20-34	Manager/Restaurant	Al-'Ula
28	Female	20-34	Manager/Café	Al-'Ula
29	Male	35-49	Manager/Café	Al-'Ula
30	Female	20-34	Manager/Travel and Tours	Al-'Ula

Table 2: **Simplified thematic matrix of key themes by Saudi Season**

Themes (and sub-themes)	Riyadh	Jeddah	Al-'Ula
Business performance			
Increased financial stability	X	X	X
New employees hired to meet increased demand	X	x	X
Business growth (services offered, new facilities, etc.)	X	x	X
Enhanced tourist experiences			
Foreign visitors now see Saudi Arabia positively	X	X	X
Hosts feel sense of cultural pride and 'value add'	X		X
Emergent concerns			
Accommodation shortages for visitors	X	x	X
Accommodation shortages for temporary staff		x	x
Heritage attractions not promoted effectively	X	X	X
Limited communication channels with government	X	x	X
Opportunities to improve future Seasons			
Build on growing interest in heritage tourism	X	X	X
Diversify range of festivals and events hosted	X	x	x
Extend duration of Seasons to spread tourist arrivals	X	X	

Note: X = Evident (all or majority of interviewees discussed the theme); x = Partially evident (at least one interviewee discussed the theme)

4.2. Business performance

Most participants in this study reported that the Saudi Seasons had produced several benefits relating to business performance (albeit before the emergence of COVID-19). These observations supported the notion that the inaugural Saudi Seasons initiative had achieved initial successes in its attempt to stimulate economic activity through tourism growth (see Ministry of Tourism of Saudi Arabia 2019). In particular, participants stated that they had received substantial increases in bookings and revenue throughout the Saudi Seasons, especially when compared to the same time period in previous years. Moreover, it was reported that both domestic *and* international tourist numbers had increased during the inaugural Seasons. For example, P3, P5 and P8, all noted that the Riyadh Season had positively impacted upon the number of tourists using their businesses and framed the initiative in a predominantly positive light:

I have benefited because of the Seasons in Riyadh and Ad Diriyah … people came from all over the world and I asked them why they chose to visit … they tell me it's because of the many different events and activities we now have [via the Saudi Seasons]. It was great [for business]. (P8)

Over the last four years we saw annual numbers increase slightly but after the Riyadh Season started, the growth [in tourist numbers] over the three months [compared to the same time period in previous years] was very obvious. (P5)

Before the start of the Riyadh Season nothing had really changed [for several years] … but during the Riyadh Season our income was higher … especially because we had more foreign tourists. (P3)

Similarly, P25, the owner of a restaurant in Al-'Ula, had also noted a considerable growth in tourists throughout the Al-'Ula Season:

It was a great experience … in the previous year in winter we served around fifty people per day but this year the Royal Commission for Al-'Ula [responsible for organising the Season] asked us if we were able to serve more than 200 people … obviously this was a rapid increase in demand … so yes, [the Season] has had a huge impact on us. (P25)

As a result of business growth, several SMEs reported hiring additional staff or reinvesting profits in order to offer new tourism services or facilities. However, although positive economic outcomes were reported throughout these discussions, it should be noted at this juncture that the majority of SME participants had remained on the periphery of tourism development discourse during the implementation of the Saudi Seasons. Whilst the absence of engagement did not necessary result in negative outcomes, it reaffirmed the assertion that increasing calls for 'bottom-up' engagements with a more diverse range of stakeholders in Saudi Arabia remain unheeded (see Aina et al. 2019). Indeed, as will be disclosed later in this section, concerns surrounding limited stakeholder engagement were raised by several participants, especially amongst those that had encountered problematic scenarios and challenges.

4.3. Enhanced tourist experiences

Although many participants framed the impacts of the Saudi Seasons through an economic lens, several additionally considered the broader impacts of the Seasons on Saudi Arabia's destination image, including potential shifts in international tourist perceptions. These beliefs were often structured around encounters with visitors from a variety of international destinations, including increasing numbers from beyond the Middle East:

What is happening now [via the Seasons] will change people's perception of Saudi Arabia … I think [international] tourists' perceptions will gradually improve … eventually they will learn that it is not a state of terrorism and political problems but a peaceful country for tourism. (P22)

The [Al-'Ula] Season was beautiful … I was shocked by the changes [hosting festivals and the promotion of tourism] … it is good because most [international] tourists' ideas about Saudi Arabia come from negative media … many people still think it's a place that's impossible to visit. Saudi Arabia needs to change its reputation but things like this [the Seasons] are helping. (P25)

I think there is still confusion about what tourism in Saudi Arabia represents … people think it's just religious tourism and they do not understand that it is much more … now they are [positively] surprised by what they see. (P4)

These findings reveal that SME stakeholders valued the Saudi Seasons due to its potential role in deconstructing misconceptions surrounding the country, predominantly for international tourists. Indeed, the Saudi Seasons were reported to be a source of cultural pride amongst participants and it was additionally observed that some had gone beyond their normal duties to help ensure that first-time international visitors received positive experiences. Consistent with the findings of McCamley and Gilmore (2017), SMEs played an important role in 'value adding' to tourist experiences. For example, it was found that several adopted roles as informal 'ambassadors' or 'cultural custodians' (see Butler, Szili and Huang 2020) that endeavoured to showcase Saudi culture and hospitality. Although it was a minimum expectation for tourism SME stakeholders, and their employees, to be courteous and to provide advice to tourists, it was observed that business owners or managers were more proactive when dealing with international tourists deemed to be 'beyond their comfort zone'. These actions included giving recommendations to places they deemed to be special or unique, translating information from Arabic into English, and by initiating in-depth conversations with tourists due to concerns that they may be unsure about what they were permitted to do, as demonstrated by P1:

By hosting international events [during the Saudi Seasons] we have met American tourists. I did not believe there was a one percent chance this would happen … but they [the American tourists] did not know what else to do [beyond attending events]. So, one day I approached them and recommended a restaurant in a nearby village [that outsiders would not know]. The next day they came back to say, 'thank you' and added

that they would one day return because of the good treatment they received … they said we [Saudis] are the people of hospitality. (P1)

This example was indicative of several proactive SME stakeholder exchanges that led to positive experiential opportunities for international tourists. Many participants were eager to support the collective vision of the Saudi government and reported a desire to help change perceptions of the country by supporting the needs of tourists that were rarely encountered prior to the hosting of the Seasons. These behaviours were consistent with those of McCamley and Gilmore (2017, 87) who noted that SME stakeholders can play and important role as 'implementers' of government tourism development strategies due to their frontline role in creating tourism products and building positive experiences.

4.4. Emergent concerns

Although the initial impacts of the Saudi Seasons were framed as being predominantly positive, a range of issues were apparent. Accommodation shortages were reported amongst stakeholders in all three host cities, with P2 suggesting that whilst it was positive that his hotel was fully booked throughout the Riyadh Season, some of his regular customers had to be turned away. This presented P2 with the challenge of balancing the needs of a regular client base and the substantial growth in demand from tourists visiting as a one-off. Similarly, P14 suggested that the Jeddah Season had placed him under 'increased pressure' to not only meet a significant growth in demand for accommodation but to manage tourists from a highly diverse range of countries that his staff struggled to converse with. However, it was the Al-'Ula Season in particular that yielded the most problematic scenario:

The attractions they chose [to promote during the Al-'Ula Season] were well organised … but more needs to be done in terms of accommodation because the city is not ready to receive huge numbers of visitors … things were so bad that the government tried to build a temporary caravan resort to cover the shortage but the price [to stay] was too expensive so few visitors used them. (P25)

There needs to be better coordination [between tourism SMEs and the government] … it has improved but Al-'Ula now needs more hotels. (P23)

This shortage not only affected tourists but employees too, who were often unable to find temporary accommodation. In response, *wasta* was reported to play an important role with some SME stakeholders, such as P24, supporting local businesses in finding solutions for their employees:

Many people arrived during the Season to work on the Mirrors Theatre project but they could not find accommodation for them … [as we were connected] I found them somewhere to stay in our resort and then also arranged an Airbnb for other staff when we were full. (P24)

This observation, as well as similar participant narratives, supported the notion that SMEs can adopt a strong entrepreneurial ethos and may play a proactive role in addressing market challenges faced by the local or regional tourism industry (see McCamley and Gilmore 2017; Mistilis, Buhalis and Gretzel 2014). It also reveals that *wasta*, via personal connections, could remedy some of the challenges faced by SMEs (see Lackner 2016). However, these findings reaffirm the claim that inadequate or limited infrastructure in regional areas in Saudi Arabia (see Ahmad 2012) continue to hinder destinations that seek to rapidly attract tourists. Throughout these conversations it became apparent that tourism SME stakeholders required further guidance from the government, especially due to the bureaucratic nature of some engagements and a failure to acquire commercial licenses to expand businesses or offer new tourism services:

Providing more accommodation is essential here … but dealing with the Royal Commission is complicated when construction procedures and tourist licenses are involved … my application [to expand] was not accepted, so we don't know precisely what the Royal Commission wants ... there are also many foreign investors who wish to set up accommodation projects but they are afraid to develop something that could cost millions and then be busy only three months per year during the Season … there are many rumors about what the Royal Commission will do to manage accommodation in the future … but we [SMEs] do not know what will happen … we do not see any direction from the Royal Commission in Al-'Ula. (P24)

These observations suggest that many problems that have persistently affected SMEs in Saudi Arabia remain. As observed in previous studies (see Ahmad 2012; Rafiki 2020) it was noted that access to financial support remained a highly bureaucratic process that rarely yielded successful outcomes. As asserted by P24, clearer government communications were now required so that SMEs could prepare more effectively for future Seasons. In short, and consistent with other calls for effective stakeholder participation, it was argued that there was a greater need for organisational support (see Wondirad et al. 2020) and engagements that supported genuine participation and trust (see Iazzi et al. 2020; Reed 2008).

4.5. Opportunities to improve future Saudi Seasons

The final theme identified in this study related to the need to build momentum on the successes of the first Saudi Seasons. Although participants welcomed the role of the Seasons in promoting heritage sites, it was argued that more could be done to position heritage tourism more prominently in future campaigns. P6 suggested that the country's regional 'customs and traditions' required stronger promotion, whilst P25 posited that it would be beneficial to 'highlight the history of Saudi Arabia more' because this was what international tourists had reportedly enjoyed the most. Indeed, based upon several stakeholders' interactions with international tourists, most positive experiences often involved encounters with heritage sites:

In my view, I think it [the Al-'Ula Season] is good in showing what else we have [to international tourists] … but our archaeological sites should be internationally recognised … [more] people need see what is here. (P23)

Saudi Arabia's culture is about a life of simplicity … we need to show our traditional shops, our heritage… because foreigners want to see authentic Saudi places … but we need more [government] support. (P17)

Building upon the views of P17, and the calls for further support, it was found that some participants were critical of the government's approach to heavily promote music festivals and business events at the expense of built heritage sites:

The weaknesses [of the Riyadh Season] included the lack of investment in promoting our heritage … places like Masmak Fort and the King Abdulaziz Museum … the latter is one of the most beautiful museums I have ever visited! But our problem is that they were not marketed [during the Riyadh Season] … all they listed were opening and closing times. (P1)

We need to make it clear [to international tourists] that we have historical and archaeological sites [in future Saudi Seasons] … and we need more [heritage-focused] activities to be promoted in Al-'Ula. (P30)

In summary, although tourism SMEs were highly supportive of the continuation of the Saudi Seasons they remained frustrated by the absence of effective communication channels with the government and other relevant actors. This frustration was not necessarily caused by the poor performance of the Seasons but rather the potential fears surrounding missed opportunities to further grow international tourism. Thus, as per the arguments of Nguyen, Dong and Ho (2021), it was evident that further stakeholder engagement was required to develop a marketing strategy that recognised and acknowledged the views of non-government stakeholders in particular. Similar to the observations of Nunkoo (2015) it was noted that Saudi SMEs remained at the mercy of government strategies that did not always mirror their views with regards to future tourism development directions. Whilst stakeholder engagement may be difficult to implement in settings that reveal highly contrasting levels of power and influence (see D'Souza and Taghian 2018; Hall 1999), participants suggested that further engagement was required so that they could not only raise their concerns but share their *positive experiences* of the Seasons to help inform future tourism strategies. Thus, based on the views and experiences of study participants, the following recommendations should be considered when developing future Saudi Seasons:

- Collate and incorporate the feedback of 'frontline' tourism SME stakeholders involved in the inaugural Seasons into future strategies to address or mitigate emergent challenges. This is of particular importance in cities or regions that currently exhibit limited tourism infrastructure.

- Develop and promote new communication channels between government institutions and tourism stakeholders that actively facilitate two-way dialogue and foster trust, transparency and inclusivity. These channels could encourage 'bottom-up' discourse through stakeholder workshops, forums or focus groups.

- Develop government support networks for SMEs that encourage entrepreneurial activities and build cooperation between stakeholders to help strengthen problem-solving capabilities and the creation of a shared vision amongst similar actors.

- Engage other stakeholder groups that experienced the Saudi Seasons (especially international tourists and host communities) to ensure that future Seasons continue to meet expectations. Broader stakeholder interactions should also be developed to further refine what is offered during future Seasons and to establish marketing priorities.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1. Summary

This paper has provided exploratory insights into the performance of the inaugural Saudi Seasons from the perspective of tourism SME stakeholders. By adopting an immersive, qualitative approach, unique appraisals from tourism stakeholders that must negotiate complex asymmetrical power relationships in Saudi Arabia have been acquired. Moreover, the study adds to the rich tapestry of tourism discourse on stakeholder participation by engaging a geographical setting that remains on the periphery of contemporary tourism research. The findings presented reveal that stakeholders were predominantly satisfied with the performance of the Seasons, irrespective of their host city, and that positive outcomes could be eclectic in nature and often ventured beyond economic gain. Indeed, participants were frequently found to be conscious of the broader benefits of the Saudi government's ambition to develop tourism, including the role of tourism as potential vehicle for change that could help shift or dilute negative perceptions of the country.

However, it was also evident that despite these successes, paradoxical issues emerged that must be taken into further consideration, particularly the challenges posed by large volumes of tourists visiting host cities or regions during relatively short time windows. Tourism SMEs were affected by the strains of increased tourism on accommodation and infrastructure, reaffirming McCamley and Gilmore's (2017) observations that many businesses remain susceptible to the shortcomings of national or regional strategic planning. Even though SMEs identified a willingness to support other businesses in managing emergent issues triggered by the Seasons, most solutions were deemed to be temporary and unfeasible in the event of further tourism growth.

Consistent with the observations of other scholars (see D'Souza and Taghian 2018; Hall 1999), the contrast in power and influence between SMEs and government stakeholders evidently remained a barrier to meaningful and effective stakeholder participation. Whilst most participants were positive in their appraisal of the inaugural Saudi Seasons,

it was clear that there was an embryonic demand from stakeholders for opportunities to share their views to help the Saudi government achieve its strategic goal to develop tourism via the Saudi Vision 2030. These views align with those of Wondirad et al. (2020) who advocated for stakeholder participation that builds on inclusivity and a sense of shared responsibility, as well as the establishment of consistent organisational support throughout the course of tourism destination planning and development. Thus, although contemporary literature continues to underscore the need for all appropriate stakeholders to be actively engaged in tourism discourse, it is recommended that future studies explore potential strategies to engage tourism SME stakeholders in Saudi Arabia more effectively. These studies could aid Saudi policy makers and practitioners by assessing the viability of engagement tools and techniques or platforms that engage the broader public (see Khazaei, Elliot and Joppe 2015).

5.2. Limitations

This paper is of course not without limitations due to its exploratory nature. First, the gender balance of participants in this study was heavily skewed toward male participants. Whilst the sample may be indicative of the gender distribution of people in leadership roles in Saudi SMEs, where possible, the views and experiences of emergent female leaders should be sought in future studies. This may be pertinent when considering the growing calls for women to be further integrated into managerial positions across the country. Second, this study engaged SME stakeholders from just three of the eleven Seasons. It would be a useful contribution to explore how other Seasons - especially those that represent contrasting geographies and timeframes - have performed since their inauguration. Third, this study only focuses on one particular group of stakeholders. When considering that host communities often remain on the periphery of tourism development decision-making processes (see Nguyen, Dong and Ho 2021; Vodeb. Fabjan and Krstinić Nižić 2021), a timely contribution to literature could include the experiences of host communities towards the Saudi Seasons initiative. As a concluding remark, this paper reiterates that future tourism stakeholder research must not only continue to critically engage the optimal ways in which participation should be facilitated but respond to new destination geographies, like those in Saudi Arabia, that present unique economic, social, cultural and political contexts.

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