

Saudi Arabia's Efforts In Nation Branding Through The NEOM Megacity Project In 2020-2024

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ABSTRACT

Oil is a major sector in Saudi Arabia's economy, the COVID-19 pandemic and the decline in oil prices have created difficulties for Saudi Arabia's economy. This has caused concern for Saudi Arabia, which is trying to reduce dependence on oil and increase economic diversification through Saudi Vision 2030, one of which is the NEOM megacity project, which is expected to become a futuristic area and a new place to live. However, in the process of development, the project has faced a variety of dynamics, namely human rights violations, exploitation of migrant workers, impacts on the environment, and development adjustments due to inflated funds. The purpose of this research is to see how Saudi Arabia's efforts in nation branding through the NEOM megacity project in 2020-2024 using the theory of nation branding by Keith Dinnie. The research method used is a qualitative research method with a descriptive model of secondary data sources. The results of this study show that Saudi Arabia's efforts are carried out with ten indicators of nation branding strategies, namely nation brand advertising, public relations, online branding, social media and mobile applications, customer and citizen relationships, nation brand ambassadors, internal brand management, nation days, the naming of nation brands, performance measurement, and institutions involved in nation branding.

Keywords : Nation branding, Saudi Arabia, NEOM, Saudi Vision 2030

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1. INTRODUCTION

Public diplomacy can be defined as the deliberate and strategic efforts by international actors to manage the international public through engagement with foreign publics. Public diplomacy is defined as the interaction between the government of one nation and the populace of another (Cull, 2009). The transformation of information and communication technology has changed the dynamics of public diplomacy. The use of developments in information and communication technology to facilitate the global spread of information has blurred the boundaries between domestic and international news coverage and the use of the internet as a real-time communication tool (Cull, 2009). In the context of evolving public diplomacy, nations are increasingly prioritizing the enhancement of their international image and reputation through strategic branding initiatives. In the context of nation branding, the image and reputation of a nation's capital are of significant importance. Nation branding is a strategic marketing tool employed by countries worldwide to differentiate their national identity and economic activities from those of other nations in the global marketplace. This approach is intended to enhance a country's international competitiveness, stimulate exports, attract investment, and promote tourism, thereby contributing to the nation's economic growth and development (Dinnie, 2008). The enhanced image and reputation achieved through nation branding can facilitate the development of a favorable image among the international community, thereby augmenting a nation's soft power (Fan, 2008). In this context, Saudi Arabia is among the countries that are actively utilizing nation branding as part of its economic and social transformation, a process that is realized through the ambitious Saudi Vision 2030 program.

Saudi Arabia is the world's second largest oil producer, with a production of 54,972 /104 t in 2023 (WANG et al., 2024). The Saudi Arabian oil sector contributes about 50 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and about 85 percent of export revenues (Pistilli, 2024). In 2020, a double shock occurred in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic and falling oil prices, which posed challenges for Saudi Arabia's economy, one of the world's largest oil exporters (Al-Najjar, 2022). In addition, the oil market is vulnerable to changes such as shifts in long-term risk perceptions in the capital markets in this sector, developments in drilling technology, advances in materials science, and other technological and scientific developments that affect the energy sector, including oil. This has led to increased uncertainty in future supply and demand forecasts. Although Saudi Arabia benefits as the world's lowest-cost oil producer and is likely to be the last producer still pumping oil (Akbar & Rasyidah Resa, 2024), oil remains a non-renewable energy source that will eventually run out (Grand & Wolff, 2020). This raises concerns for Saudi Arabia, whose economy is primarily supported by the oil industry. In an effort to reduce its dependence on oil, Saudi Arabia is pursuing economic and social reforms through the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative.

Saudi Vision 2030 was initiated by Prince Mohammad bin Salman as a response to two major issues facing Saudi Arabia: falling oil prices and demographic challenges. Saudi Vision 2030 is an economic reform and social transformation plan aimed at opening Saudi Arabia to the world stage (Grand & Wolff, 2020). This vision is built on three main pillars: a dynamic society focused on the community, Islam, and Saudi Arabian culture; a rapidly growing economy focused on economic growth and the creation of diverse job opportunities for the community; and an ambitious nation focused on accountability, effectiveness, and transparency in government strategy (Saudi Embassy, n.d.). One concrete step toward this vision is the NEOM project, announced on October 24, 2017, by Prince Mohammad bin Salman (Farag, 2019). The name NEOM comes from the combination of the Greek word "NEO," meaning new, and the Arabic word "Mustaqbal," meaning future. The goal of the NEOM development project is to create a futuristic region that is expected to become a new place for living, working, and long-term well-being (NEOM, n.d.-d). The development of NEOM consists of five cities: Oxagon, Sindalah, The Line, Trojena, and Magna. The Saudi Arabian government plans for these cities to utilize the latest technology, with a focus on artificial intelligence, equipped with airports, high-speed trains, and drones, all powered by renewable energy (Holleis & Knipp, 2023). NEOM's development began with the opening of NEOM Bay Airport in 2019, with 130 passengers on the first flight, intended for those working on NEOM's development to acclimate to the area (Arab News, 2019), and construction of the NEOM city began in 2020 (Staff Writer, 2018).

However, this ambitious project is confronted with substantial challenges, including human rights violations against the Huwaitat tribe, whose territory is the site of the project and has a population of approximately 20,000 people (ALQST for Human Rights, 2023). In March 2020, the government initiated a series of actions aimed toward local communities. These actions included the deployment of special forces to the residences of individuals who had refused to be evicted. The primary objective of this initiative was to intimidate and persuade these residents to acquiesce to the government's demands. This culminated in the apprehension of at least twenty residents. The most notable incident occurred in April 2020 when Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti, a tribal member, was fatally shot after refusing to leave his ancestral land and criticizing the government on social media (ALQST for Human Rights, 2023). Moreover, the NEOM project has been the subject of criticism concerning the exploitation of migrant workers. According to interviews conducted by Human Rights Watch with construction workers on the NEOM project, the remuneration provided did not align with the initially promised contracts. The workers were promised a salary of \$267 per month, yet they received a payment of \$213 per month. Similarly, other workers were promised a base salary of \$320, yet their actual payment was \$213 (Human Rights Watch Researcher, 2024). The conditions experienced by migrant workers are further exacerbated by tight deadlines, which force workers to labor even in hazardous conditions (Human Rights Watch Researcher, 2024). By 2024,

the death toll among migrant workers involved in the construction of this project had already reached over 21,000, as reported (Aprilia, 2024).

Another impact is on the environment, as the development of NEOM requires significant resources and energy, potentially leading to increased emissions and environmental degradation (ECDHR, 2024). The urban projects planned within NEOM have negative impacts on biodiversity and ecosystems. The Sindalah project, with its cruise ship industry, poses risks to marine flora and fauna in the region, and the planned ski resort in Trojena could threaten mountain biodiversity due to the use of artificial snow (ALQST for Human Rights, 2024). The Line project, with its extensive mirrored walls stretching 170 km, could negatively impact local biodiversity by blocking animal migration routes and posing collision risks for birds. Additionally, the construction process generates significant emissions and environmental risks, necessitating advanced mitigation strategies (Alwafi, 2025).

Another challenge faced by Saudi Arabia in the development of this project is the adjustment of construction due to budget overruns. According to a recent Wall Street Journal report, an internal audit presented to the NEOM board revealed that the capital expenditure required to complete the project amounts to 8.8 trillion dollars, more than 25 times Saudi Arabia's annual budget (Putri, 2025). The budget overrun has also led to the scaling back of one of the cities in the NEOM project, The Line, which was originally planned to accommodate 1.5 million residents and span 170 km, but has now been reduced to 2.5 km and will accommodate 300,000 residents (Fattah & Matthew Martin, 2024). In addition to the budget overrun, the reduction in the estimated length of The Line is due to rising oil prices and challenges in attracting foreign investment (Middle East Briefing, 2024).

In response to the issues and dynamics that have arisen, Saudi Arabia has taken measures to address the violence against the Huwaitat tribe. Saudi Arabia has issued a formal denial of the allegations, terming the reports of violence against the Huwaitat tribe as "inaccurate and baseless." Saudi Arabia has also denied allegations of forced evictions, asserting that such practices have not been implemented in NEOM or any other projects (Middle East Monitor, 2023). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has initiated a program offering compensation to local residents ranging from \$27,000 to \$265,000 (Bajec, 2022). Additionally, with respect to migrant laborers, NEOM mandates that all contractors and subcontractors adhere to the NEOM Code of Conduct, which is predicated on Saudi Arabian legislation and International Labor Organization policies. Contractors and subcontractors are obligated to undergo periodic inspections of the living and working conditions of their laborers (Akkad, 2024). With respect to the reduction in scope of The Line city project, Prince Mohammad bin Salman, in accordance with the NEOM board meeting held in the spring of 2024, has asserted that the decision to scale back The Line was not the optimal approach and that cost savings should be sought in other areas (Putri, 2025). Despite the challenges that have emerged in the process, Saudi Arabia remains committed to its ambitious project, NEOM, which is intended to serve as a symbol of economic and technological transformation. The project has garnered global attention, yet it has not been halted. Therefore, based on this background, the author will analyze how Saudi Arabia is conducting nation branding through the NEOM mega-project from 2020 to 2024.

2. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Nation Branding

According to Keith Dinnie, nation branding is a unique concept formed from several multidimensional elements. Cultural differences complement the uniqueness of a country, with its people becoming the target of that uniqueness (Dinnie, 2008). The three objectives of nation branding are to attract tourists, encourage investment and promote exports. It also aims to stabilise a

country's currency value by building investor confidence, restoring the country's international credibility and improving its international ranking. According to Keith Dinnie, there are eleven elements of nation branding. The first is nation brand advertising, which uses advertisements and campaigns to enhance the country's positive image in collaboration with advertising agencies (Dinnie, 2016)

Secondly, public relations involves collaboration between public relations agencies and the government in order to manage a country's international perception among not only the general public, but also other target audiences such as policymakers and journalists (Dinnie, 2016). Third is online branding, social media and mobile applications. In this digital age, countries can use these platforms to introduce themselves. Fourth is customer and citizen relationship management (CRM), which involves government or policymakers communicating with the public or audience by providing platforms for interaction (Dinnie, 2016). Fifth are nation brand ambassadors, who may come from specific circles such as athletes or other influential figures. A brand ambassador must be able to represent the intended image.

Sixthly, internal brand management involves the government or policymakers engaging the public in nation branding strategies. Seventhly, diaspora mobilization leverages the diaspora spread across other countries to build the nation's reputation and enhance its image (Dinnie, 2016). Eighth, nation days utilize national or Independence Day celebrations to generate interest among domestic and international citizens. Ninthly, nation branding involves the use of taglines or names to highlight a brand's distinctive characteristics (Dinnie, 2016). Tenth, performance measurement involves assessing the effectiveness of a country's nation branding. Eleventh, institutions involved in nation branding include those established by the state for the purpose of managing nation branding.

3. METHOD

The research method used in this study is descriptive qualitative research to explain the phenomenon in depth. The type of data used in this study is qualitative data, which involves the collection of descriptive and explanatory information sources related to the main research problem, using secondary data sources gathered through literature review techniques. These techniques involve collecting data from books, journals, articles, official reports, news, and the internet to access websites providing information relevant to this study.

The validity technique used in this study is source triangulation. Triangulation is a method of testing credibility by checking data from various sources using different methods and at different times. According to Sugiyono, triangulation is divided into three types: source triangulation, technique triangulation, and time triangulation (Sugiyono, 2018). In this study, source triangulation was used to test the credibility of the data obtained from various sources.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Nation Brand Advertising

There are several collaborations undertaken by Saudi Arabia to promote NEOM. First, through partnerships with Vogue Arabia and WIRED Middle East, NEOM is promoted via short videos circulating online, with a total of five videos uploaded in 2022. The NEOM X Vogue Arabia video can be viewed by the global community by accessing the official NEOM YouTube page or by searching for the keyword "The Beauty of NEOM." Additionally, the advertisement video is in English and includes Arabic subtitles (NEOM, 2022). The NEOM X Vogue Arabia advertisement

video is divided into four short videos, each under one minute in length. The NEOM X WIRED ME video can be accessed globally through the NEOM Facebook page. The three-minute advertising video is in English with Arabic subtitles. All five videos depict how women have the freedom to work and engage in activities in NEOM.

Second, through outdoor billboards in several major cities worldwide showcasing Trojena, one of the cities in the NEOM project, with 3D visuals depicting the offerings available in Trojena (Advertising Week, 2022). The billboards depict someone snowboarding down a mountain slope and a speedboat crossing a lake between mountains, giving the impression of stepping out of the advertisement screen. The billboards were displayed for one month, from March 3 to April 3, 2022, at Riyadh City Boulevard in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; Times Square in New York, United States; and Piccadilly Circus in London, United Kingdom (Advertising Week, 2022). The NEOM billboards in these three cities were an effective and innovative effort because the locations of the three billboards were strategically placed in high-traffic areas frequented by many people, thereby increasing NEOM's exposure in those regions.

Thirdly, YouTube ads can be used to display videos on the YouTube home feed (YouTube Masthead), show six-second Bumper Ads that cannot be skipped to make them memorable, show TrueView Video Ads in display form, and show vertical videos in Shorts to reach audiences watching Shorts videos (Zarea, 2024). The promotional impact of using YouTube ads has been significant: searches related to NEOM have increased more than threefold year-on-year and by 40 per cent month-on-month; understanding of NEOM has increased fourfold; and positive perceptions of NEOM have risen by 26 per cent (Zarea, 2024). Fourth, there has been a collaboration with Saudi Arabian Airlines (SAUDIA) to promote NEOM as a tourist destination for global travelers, creating travel packages and experiences for visitors by leveraging its global network spanning 94 destinations (NEOM, 2019). Additionally, SAUDIA has placed the NEOM logo on its aircraft to promote the NEOM project (Saudia, 2022).

Online and billboard advertising videos in Riyadh, New York and London have effectively portrayed NEOM. Viewing the NEOM X Vogue Arabia and NEOM X WIRED ME advertising videos online reveals the opportunities available to women in Saudi Arabia, such as the chance to enjoy well-being and freedom of expression and employment. Billboards in Riyadh, New York and London depict the offerings available at Trojena, a ski resort. Advertisements on YouTube have also significantly increased global awareness of NEOM. Furthermore, NEOM's collaboration with SAUDIA has boosted its promotion in the tourism sector and strengthened its brand identity by featuring the NEOM logo on SAUDIA aircraft.

B. Public Relations

Saudi Arabia's nation branding strategy with public relations is carried out by Saudi Arabia with positive narratives and communication management carried out by several public relations agencies working with Saudi Arabia on the NEOM project. The first agency is Ruder Finn, which seeks to reduce negative publications and responses related to the NEOM project, which has been criticized by various international groups (Caramazza, 2020). Ruder Finn collaborated with NEOM in 2020 to develop the NEOM website and social media campaigns. The company also assigned two to three employees in Saudi Arabia to work on the NEOM campaign promoting NEOM as a sustainable city of the future (McCauley, 2020).

Another firm is Edelman, which signed a contract with NEOM in 2022 to assist NEOM with strategy, media relations, stakeholder identification and engagement, and other branding and promotional efforts for NEOM in the United States (Lowenstein, 2022). The last one is Teneo, which signed a contract with NEOM in 2019. Teneo collaborates with NEOM to develop a comprehensive

communication strategy to promote NEOM's sectors, parts, and regions. In addition, Teneo also acts as an extension of NEOM's communication team (DAWN, 2024). Efforts undertaken through collaboration with public relations firms include creating narratives for NEOM regions, promoting NEOM through campaigns, communication strategies, and media relations. Collaboration with public relations firms has helped NEOM enhance its positive image on the global stage and mitigate negative issues circulating during NEOM's development.

C. Online Branding, Social Media, and Mobile Applications

As part of the effort to introduce NEOM to the global community and enhance its image, a website has been created that is accessible worldwide at <https://www.neom.com/en-us>. The site provides information about the NEOM project, including an overview, its focus on sustainable environments, and its vision. The website also provides the latest news about NEOM, information about the project's social responsibility initiatives, job opportunities, and the global community within NEOM. Additionally, it offers details about investment opportunities in the project. Using the website in NEOM's branding efforts makes it easier for the global community to access information about NEOM. Additionally, the NEOM website features an attractive yet simple design, making it user-friendly. In addition to the website, Saudi Arabia utilizes social media platforms to share information about NEOM with users of those platforms. According to the NEOM website, seven social media platforms are used to share information about NEOM: Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat, LinkedIn, TikTok, and X.

First, Instagram with the username *discoverneom* has more than 500,000 followers who provide information about every project in NEOM and information about the facilities available in each city. The NEOM Instagram account can be accessed globally by anyone with an Instagram account. In addition, the photos and videos uploaded on NEOM Instagram are mostly in English, making it easier for the global community to obtain information about NEOM through its official Instagram account. Second, the Facebook page created in October 2017 under the username NEOM has 1.1 million followers, featuring posts such as photos, short videos, and videos lasting several minutes that provide information about the supporting facilities available in each NEOM city. Third, the YouTube channel, which has been active since October 2017, has a total of 584 videos uploaded as of May 9, 2025. The NEOM YouTube account features a variety of short videos, lasting between one and three minutes, showcasing the NEOM cities, as well as videos of activities taking place in NEOM, such as the NEOM Beach Games 2024. There are also brief explanations or discussions with architects involved in the development of the NEOM cities. In addition to architecture, there are also explanatory videos about the NEOM project, lasting 30 to 37 minutes, featuring policymakers and experts such as the Head of the NEOM Development Office, the Executive Director of Trojena, the CEO of Oxagon, and the Director of NEOM Sports Marketing. The most popular video on the NEOM YouTube account, which has been viewed over 50 million times since its release two years ago, is a one-minute video about The Line, followed by the video "What is The Line?" which has been viewed 43 million times. The general introduction video about NEOM is also quite popular, having been viewed 22 million times since its release three years ago.

Fourth, Snapchat is used to upload short videos about NEOM cities' offerings, what makes each city unique, and NEOM's advantages. However, the NEOM account was last updated on October 29, 2024, indicating that NEOM's use of Snapchat for promotion is not very active. Fifth, the LinkedIn account has 1.96 million followers. On the account page, there is information about the number of employees on the NEOM project, the official website, and the location of the NEOM office. NEOM's LinkedIn account provides complete information about NEOM, including an explanation of what NEOM is, life in NEOM, work in NEOM, and exploring NEOM. This information is supported by pictures and videos. Additionally, the account shares the latest information related to NEOM's cities,

environmental efforts, and participation in global events. It also promotes innovative projects. LinkedIn may help enhance NEOM's image by targeting a professional audience, which sets it apart from other social media platforms.

Sixth, tiktok which has been followed by more than 790 thousand followers and received 8.1 million likes. The NEOM Tiktok account shares short videos about the NEOM cities project, the beauty of each city, the richness of biodiversity and animals that live in NEOM, and videos explaining that this megacity project is a project that supports sustainability in the environment. In addition, the NEOM Tiktok account can also be seen videos about events that have been held in NEOM, namely the NEOM Beach Games. The videos uploaded use English to make it easier for the global community to understand the contents of the videos uploaded to the NEOM account. Seventh, X has been around since October 2017 with the account name @NEOM which has been followed by more than one million followers.

The use of social media in NEOM's nation branding strategy has been utilized quite well. The use of social media can be quite an effective effort because it can reach a variety of global audiences using a variety of social media. Media uploaded on social media is done quite actively, but the use of Snapchat social media is not used actively enough. Therefore, the use of Snapchat can be maximized just like the use of other social media to improve NEOM's branding by targeting Snapchat social media users as audiences.

For apps, there is a Visit NEOM app that can be downloaded from the App Store or Google Play. The app can be used without registering an account, or an account can be created to save activity history, make reservations, and save favorite experiences. The app is available in two languages, English and Arabic, to make it accessible to a global audience interested in NEOM. Using the Visit NEOM app can increase branding because it provides information about places in NEOM, its advantages, and location details of the nearest tourist destination if you are already in the NEOM area. The app is easy to use and does not require registration if you are just curious about NEOM.

D. Customer and Citizen Relationship (CRM)

The CRM strategy is implemented with NEOM's social media such as Instagram and Tiktok which are quite active in providing answers to public questions in the comments of NEOM's uploads so that there is interaction between NEOM and the public. On NEOM's website, there are FAQs or Frequently Asked Questions which are questions that are often asked by the public about NEOM. This feature makes it easy for the public to find out general questions about NEOM. Some of the questions in the FAQs include 'What is NEOM?', 'When will NEOM be built?', 'Do people already live and work in NEOM?', 'Is NEOM a city?', and 'Who will live in NEOM?' (NEOM, n.d.-d). The NEOM website also lists the addresses of NEOM's headquarters and NEOM's office in Riyadh.

Saudi Arabia's nation branding efforts through CRM are not very visible because there is no specific number or channel used for interaction with the public. Active interaction is only done through NEOM's social media, namely in the comments column or through direct messages on several social media. If you look further at NEOM's office address in Riyadh on maps, there will be a telephone number that can be contacted. However, it would be easier for the public if the number or special services to interact with the government related to the NEOM project were published through NEOM's social media and website.

E. Nation Brand Ambassadors

Through the efforts of brand ambassadors, Saudi Arabia has collaborated with Othman Almulla,

the first Saudi Arabian golf athlete and an inspiring example in the field of sports. As a brand ambassador, Almulla helps NEOM promote an active and healthy lifestyle through sports, an important pillar of NEOM, by leveraging his experience as a professional golfer (NEOM, 2023b). Othman Almulla is a golf athlete who has been playing golf since the age of 15 and is famous for being fast and has competed in various world tournaments, Othman Almulla has played as the main member of the Saudi Arabian National Golf team for 18 years, became a professional golf player in 2019 and became the first in Saudi Arabia (NEOM, 2023b). Othman Almulla has participated in various international tournaments such as Pan Arab Amateur Golf in 2007 and won the title then won the Qatar Open in the same year and received an invitation to play in the Qatar Masters in 2008 and in the same year Othman Almulla also won the individual title at the Pan Arab Championship and won the Saudi Aramco International Tournament. In 2014, Othman Almulla won the Saudi Aramco Invitational Tournament again (Manuel & Arab News Staff, 2014). Othman Almulla continued to participate in various international tournaments and by 2024, Almulla had participated in ten international tournaments (Asian Tour, n.d.). By looking at Othman Almulla's track record and achievements in golf, choosing Othman Almulla as brand ambassadors is a good choice for NEOM to promote NEOM's vision of sports and healthy lifestyle in Saudi Arabia.

Promotion with ambassadors was also done by opening branch offices abroad located in London and New York. London became the first city to become NEOM's overseas office which became NEOM's business center in the UK and European region (NEOM, 2023c). Secondly, NEOM's overseas office in New York which became NEOM's base in the United States (NEOM, 2024a). The opening of NEOM's overseas offices became part of the ambassadors because NEOM's offices in other countries are a form of NEOM's existence in that country which is able to increase the promotion of NEOM and its vision, build international partnerships, and support NEOM's ambition to become a transformative project in the global realm.

F. Internal Brand Management

In an effort to improve NEOM's image through internal brand management, NEOM conducted several programs that were able to improve NEOM's branding in the community and involve the community in promoting NEOM. First, the cooperation between NEOM and Saudi Broadcasting Authority (SBA) to produce local content and develop Saudi Arabian talent in the media industry by developing training programs across the creative industry value chain supported by TV production. Through this program there will be 80 trainees graduating by 2025 (NEOM, 2024c). This training is part of the internal brand management strategy supporting NEOM which is committed to strengthening its position and becoming a major center for the media industry competing on a global scale with state-of-the-art infrastructure and supported with global talent through such training (NEOM, 2024c).

Second, the Herfa+ program launched by NEOM with Dulani Business Center by providing development assistance and training to improve the efficiency of local artisans and their contribution to Saudi Arabia's sustainable business is aligned with NEOM's objectives and aims to empower and unlock the potential of local communities, preserve culture through crafts and contribute to NEOM's economic growth (Arabnews, 2021a). Fourth, the 'You are the future' program, which seeks to support and inspire young students in the NEOM and Tabuk regions by providing students with eco-friendly backpacks in preparation for back to school. The program is a way for NEOM to connect with the community and contribute to social development by supporting students' learning experience. NEOM also provided more than 400 scholarships of which 150 were recruited by NEOM (Arabnews, 2021b).

Additionally, as part of its social responsibility initiatives in 2023, NEOM implemented 26

programs that benefited the local environment, particularly in the Tabuk region. These programs provided employment opportunities for 583 individuals through partnerships with local Tabuk companies (NEOM, 2024b). NEOM also offers a Career Counseling Program that provides job seekers with training and consultation services. The program provided 5,068 services to 1,700 trainees in NEOM and the Tabuk region (NEOM, 2023a). These efforts can improve NEOM's image in the local community and educate the public about NEOM, increasing Saudi Arabia's nation branding of NEOM through internal brand management.

G. Diaspora Mobilization

The number of Saudi Arabian diaspora in the world is relatively small compared to the number of migrants entering the country, in 2015 the number of Saudi Arabian diaspora in the world was 106,451 people which is less than ten percent of the population of Saudi Arabia (Plaza & Salsac, 2016). Then in 2019, the number of Saudi Arabian diasporas increased to 303,904 with the largest destination country to the United States, followed by Libya, England, Palestine and Canada (Migrants & Refugees Section, 2023). However, while branding NEOM from 2020 to 2024, the author did not find any data on the mobilization and utilization of the diaspora carried out by Saudi Arabia as a supporting strategy to improve NEOM's image abroad.

H. Nation Days

Through nation days, NEOM made several efforts to enhance its image. In 2020 to coincide with the 90th Saudi National Day, NEOM hosted the Saudi National day celebration that emphasized the heritage, culture and artistry of Saudi Arabia. The event took place in NEOM, Tabuk Province, northwest Saudi Arabia. The celebration included a burger-making competition, free food stations, fifteen local artists exhibiting graffiti, Arabic calligraphy exhibitions and presentations (Nesma Insider, 2020).

In 2021, NEOM released a campaign titled #IamTheChange that describes the present and focuses on the future by highlighting Saudi Arabia's creative and innovative youth as the future face of Saudi Arabia (Rensburg, 2021). The main video of the #IamTheChange campaign features five young individuals representing different fields. The five young people are Tareek Hamdi a karate athlete of the Saudi Arabian national team, Emon Shakoore a neuroscience researcher and technology entrepreneur of Blossom Accelerator, Saeid Alzharani an unmanned aerial aircraft expert who developed drones and CEO of BRAQ Aerospace, Noura bin Saidan a graphic artist who promotes Saudi culture and heritage and is one of the young people driving change in Saudi Arabia, and Amjad Alamri the first gokart racing champion in Saudi Arabia and a mechanical engineer in the NEOM industrial sector. Through this campaign video, the branding shows that the NEOM megacity project aims to focus on the potential of the younger generation, innovation and sustainability.

In 2022 NEOM uploaded a video with the title We Are The Change featuring a diverse group of young people in various fields such as sports, technology, and art that highlighted that the youth of Saudi Arabia are the future of the nation and a change is not only the responsibility of individuals, but the result of cooperation and mutual support (Rensburg, 2022). In addition, there is also a campaign from the government of Saudi Arabia with the title "This is Our Home" which is visualized into an animated image. "This is Our Home" animated image can help improve NEOM's image, because on this card there are elements that describe the NEOM project cities, which are The Line and Trojena (Obeid & Al Arabiya English, 2022).

In 2023, NEOM organized a cultural festival in Al-Bidda Province. The highlight of the festival was held at the Al-Bidda Sports Club Stadium with cultural performances, art and artistic venues,

and a folk market attended by citizens from the province and visitors outside the province. The cultural festival used a lot of bright colors that are synonymous with the rich cultural and artistic heritage of Al-Bidda province (Leaders Magazine, 2023). In addition, just like the previous year, there was also an animated picture with the title “We Dream and We Achieve” and there were two NEOM cities in the animation, namely Sindalah and The Line (Abueish & Al Arabiya English, 2025).

In 2024, the 94th National Day of Saudi Arabia NEOM shared a campaign video with the title “Keep Dreaming Keep Achieving” This video illustrates that although dreams may change, the desire and determination to achieve those dreams remain consistent and achievable. In addition, the campaign video also illustrates NEOM's goal to create a place where the people of Saudi Arabia can pursue their dreams (TBWA The Disruption Company, 2024). Saudi Arabia's nation branding efforts through nation days were actively carried out from 2020 to 2024 in various ways, namely the creation of campaigns, short videos and festivals. This nation days strategy helps in image enhancement especially in the global community who previously had a negative view of the NEOM project development.

I. The Naming of Nation Brands

The branding conducted to promote NEOM through this strategy is by name, logo and tagline. The name NEOM which means New Future depicts the Saudi Vision 2030 commitment and NEOM's goal to create an innovative and sustainable environment (NEOM, n.d.-d). The selection of NEOM's name started from 2,000 suggested names and then selected according to the requirements and standards to 150 names which then left five names, but none of the names were selected from the 2,000 names. Furthermore, two names emerged from the discussion of the board of directors, namely NEO MSCTACBEL which MSCTACBEL symbolizes the main sectors of the NEOM project, namely Media, Sport, Technology, and Energy which are then abbreviated again and symbolized by the letter M as well as the meaning of Mustaqbal or the future. The name NEOM was then chosen and unanimously approved by the board of directors (NEOM, n.d.-c).

The NEOM logo is inspired by the basic vision and core values of the NEOM project, which in the NEOM logo is divided into five parts, each of which has a unique pattern and different colors, each of which represents the values of NEOM. The leaves represent the environment, the digital network represents technology, the related circles represent communication, the blue box represents energy, and the fingerprints represent life (Rayes, 2018).



Picture 1. NEOM
Logo (Source:
www.weforum.org)

The tagline of the NEOM project is “Made to Change” which emphasizes that NEOM is designed for global change by integrating futuristic design, sustainability, and advanced technology (NEOM, n.d.-a). by integrating futuristic design, sustainability, and advanced technology (NEOM, n.d.-a). The image built through the tagline “Made to Change” can enhance the branding of Saudi Arabia through NEOM, namely by building a project that creates new solutions to overcome global challenges. Because, through the name and tagline, Saudi Arabia promotes the development of NEOM by emphasizing NEOM as a grand plan for a better future by prioritizing the environment, sustainability, and technology and innovation.

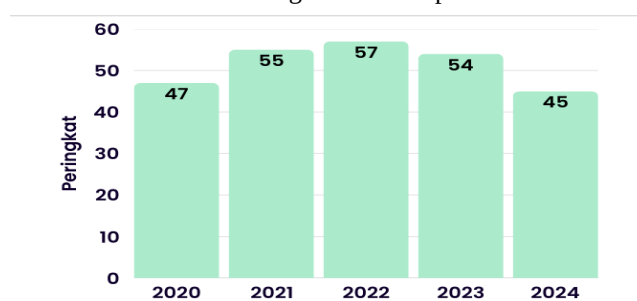
Each city in the NEOM project also has its own, more specific tagline. Sindalah with its tagline “An Escape Like No Other”, Oxagon with its tagline “A Reimagined Industrial City”, The Line with its tagline “A Revolution in Urban Living”, Trojena with its tagline “Journey To New Heights” and Magna with its tagline “A New World of Discovery”. Each tagline of these cities describes the uniqueness or advantages of these cities, which each NEOM city has its own advantages (NEOM, n.d.-a).

Nation branding efforts through the naming of nation brand strategy are carried out with the selection of the name NEOM which is done with negotiation and carefully shows that the selection of the name was chosen seriously and represents Saudi Arabia. Logo creation is also done in detail, where each part symbolizes NEOM's vision and main values that can promote and enhance NEOM's image. In addition, the tagline also plays an effective role in image enhancement because the tagline will make it easier for the global community to remember the main advantages of NEOM and each city.

J. Performance Measurements

To see the performance of Saudi Arabia's nation branding, the author takes data from several survey institutions, namely the Anholt-Ipsos Nations Brand Index and the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index. In the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brand Index (NBI) survey, Saudi Arabia's ranking has increased and decreased several times, in 2020 Saudi Arabia was in 47th position which afterwards experienced a decline for two consecutive years, namely 55th in 2021 and decreased again in 2022 to 57th (Mcgrath, 2021). After experiencing a decline for two years, Saudi Arabia again experienced an increase in ranking, namely in 54th position, which indicates that Saudi Arabia is experiencing an increase in its country's nation branding. Furthermore, in 2024 Saudi Arabia experienced a significant increase of nine ranks to 45th. It can be seen that Saudi Arabia experienced a decline in performance in its nation branding in 2021 and 2022 so that there was a decline in that year, after which Saudi Arabia experienced an increase in its nation branding index which indicates that Saudi Arabia's branding efforts have increased the positive image of Saudi Arabia on the global stage.

Graphic 1. Saudi Arabia Ranking on Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brand Index 2020-2024

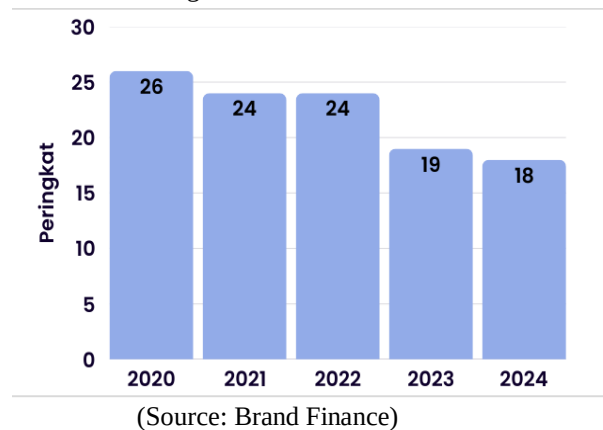


(Source: *Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brand Index*)

Based on the overall NBI framework and factors affecting country rankings, the decline in Saudi Arabia's nation branding ranking in 2021 and 2022 can be attributed to several factors namely government and political perceptions, cultural and social factors relating to cultural openness or people's rights, economic perceptions and negative perceptions around geopolitical tensions or perceptions of regional instability (Ipsos, 2022).

The next survey institution is the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index where Saudi Arabia is ranked 26th in 2020 with 41.9 points, the following year Saudi Arabia experienced a ranking increase to 24th in 2021 with 44.2 points, the same ranking was obtained by Saudi Arabia for the following year, 2022, but there was an increase in points this year to 47.1 points (Brand Finance, 2022). Then, in 2023 Saudi Arabia experienced an increase in ranking from 24th to 19th with an increase in value of 4.1 points (Brand Finance, 2023). In 2024 Saudi Arabia was in 18th place out of a total of 193 countries with a score of 56.0 points. This year, Saudi Arabia experienced an increase of one rank with an additional point of +4.7 points (Brand Finance, 2024). Saudi Arabia is able to increase its soft power quickly through strong and sustainable strategies such as the famous sports and tourism campaigns under Saudi Vision 2030 (Brand Finance, 2024). This soft power strategy by Saudi Arabia opens up opportunities to change global views and form a competitive advantage.

Graphic 2. Saudi Arabia's ranking on the Brand Finance Soft Power Index 2020-2024



From 2021 to 2024, Saudi Arabia has always increased in value although there was no increase in rank in 2021 and 2022. Both nation branding measurement institutions which are Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brand Index and Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index show that Saudi Arabia's nation branding has increased due to the attractiveness of the country's tourism and culture and Saudi Arabia's commitment to the renewable energy transition which has improved public perception and investment (Brand Finance, 2023).

Both nation branding measurement institutions namely Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brand Index and Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index show that Saudi Arabia has a fairly good nation branding or soft power. In Anholt-Ipsos NBI, Saudi Arabia experienced an increase in 2023 after experiencing a decline for two consecutive years, indicating that there were developments in nation branding carried out by Saudi Arabia that made an increase in its ranking. In the Brand Finance Index, Saudi Arabia has always experienced an increase in ranking from 2022 to 2024, for 2021 and 2022 Saudi Arabia is in the same ranking position but still has an increase in the assessment points obtained by the country.

K. Institution Involved in Nation Branding

In promoting the NEOM megacity project, Saudi Arabia formed a company called NEOM Company which is responsible for running the NEOM megacity project as a whole. There is no special institution or agency created to do branding related to the NEOM project, the promotion of the NEOM project is carried out by NEOM Company under the marketing team. Through this marketing team, the promotion aims to build NEOM city branding as a futuristic and sustainable area, attract tourists, and attract investors and partners. The NEOM marketing team consistently builds NEOM's branding through video stories and utilizes social media as a place to showcase the NEOM project as well as create trust and communicate with audiences (Ramanunni, 2023). In promoting NEOM, NEOM Company collaborates with local and international companies that are experienced in their fields to assist in promoting the NEOM megacity project.

NEOM Company entered into partnerships with various international entities to enhance the visibility and credibility of the project such as partnerships with McLaren Electric Racing and the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) which are expected to make NEOM known globally as a sports center. Another partnership was also made with the World Economic Forum (WEF) to collaborate in finding innovative solutions to global problems and to build NEOM's image as a center for technological innovation and sustainability. In addition, NEOM also partnered with OceanX which focuses on scientific exploration and conservation to protect and understand the ecosystem in the Red Sea, and to enhance NEOM's image towards sustainability and environmental preservation (NEOM, n.d.-b).

NEOM Company, which is responsible for the NEOM project, promotes and enhances NEOM's image well through the strategies mentioned in the previous nine subchapters, so the absence of an institution that made specifically for promotion alone is not an obstacle in promoting the NEOM megacity project.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Saudi Arabia's efforts in nation branding through the NEOM megacity project in 2020-2024 were carried out to improve the image of Saudi Arabia as a result of the issues and dynamics that occurred in the NEOM development and promote the development of the NEOM megacity project. Of the eleven nation branding strategies by Keith Dinnie, there is one variable that is not used in this study, that is diaspora mobilization which is not implemented in Saudi Arabia's nation branding efforts through the NEOM megacity project. While the other ten nation branding strategy variables are implemented quite well, according to the author, strategies through online branding, social media, and mobile applications are nation branding strategies that are actively used by Saudi Arabia to promote and show a positive image of the NEOM project development, especially through social media that can be accessed easily. Judging from the performances measurements, Saudi Arabia has experienced a significant increase in its nation branding to the global community. However, the effectiveness or success of nation branding efforts through the NEOM megacity project must be further researched to get better results.

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