CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The new image of Saudi cultural shift; MDL Beast music festival; Saudi Vision 2030

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Abstract: Saudi Arabia is introducing new entertainment opportunities and undergoing significant cultural change as part of its new Vision 2030, which aims to diversify its economy away from oil. This will be done by increasing local spending and international tourism. This study seeks to understand how the MDL Beast music festival (held in December 2019 in Riyadh) was utilized by Saudi Arabia to portray its new image to the world through Instagram (a social media site). A mixed-method approach was used for qualitative research that interviewed three of the main MDL Beast festival organizers and analyzed 100 Instagram posts using the framing analysis method. Opening up to the world, positive change, and national pride were the most common frames to promote a new image of Saudi Arabia through the MDL Beast festival. MDL Beast festival sends the message that Saudi Arabia no longer confirms stereotypical conservative perceptions and has been changing.

Subjects: Events; Tourism; Visual Culture; Media Communication; Cultural Studies

Keywords: Vision 2030; Instagram; social media; media frames; MDL Beast; Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

Over the last few years, Saudi Arabia has undergone tremendous cultural change, including removing public segregation of sexes, lifting the ban on women driving, concerts and theatres becoming the new norm and religious police losing their authority. The rationale behind its Vision 2030, i.e., the government’s new plan of being a vibrant society welcoming to tourists, so that the reliance on revenue can be shifted from oil to tourism and local spending.

The dependency on oil revenue created a social contract between the government and the people in the Kingdom, according to which the public would refrain from demanding accountability from the government in exchange for a minimum tax on the public (Ross, 2001). This social contract has been challenged by Vision 2030, which will reduce subsidies and introduce value-added taxes. Since no new political freedom will be enjoyed by the population, to gain support from the youth, propagation of nationalism through various channels, including the entertainment sector, is crucial (Alhussein, 2019). According to Diwan (2018), the Crown Prince’s new Saudi national image has been tactically promoted by the media, especially social media, as it is essential in fostering patriotism and instilling national identity (Chaudhary, 2016). Alhussein (2019) posits that the Crown Prince is instilling “Saudi Pride” using visual communication by visiting remote sites and directly linking to the core constituencies he is cultivating. In addition, to promote a sense of pride locally and in tourism abroad, events and festivals have been held at the sites of national importance.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This study will validate the facts regarding the MDL Beast festival to understand its importance in achieving Vision 2030 of Saudi Arabia.
The new vision, 2030, has three main pillars: an ambitious nation, a thriving economy and a vibrant society (The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Vision 2016; Vision 2017 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2017). Moreover, this Vision was framed with a nationalist discourse that emphasized “taking pride in national identity” by highlighting the importance of Saudi’s position, culture and heritage in the Islamic world. Furthermore, it stresses the importance of national and international entertainment and culture (The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Vision 2016; Vision 2017 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2017).

For the pillar of a vibrant society, a General Entertainment Authority (GEA) was created to organize and develop the Kingdom’s entertainment sector to help its tourism and quality of life (GEA, 2020). The GEA has organized various events in many cities within the Kingdom; some are month-long events known as “Seasons”. Among these is a three-day MDL Beast music Festival which provides a global creative platform for culture, art and music and introduces an entertainment and lifestyle experience (MDLBEAST, 2020). The festival had over 80 musical performances, and more than 400,000 attendees. It also made a Guinness World recording of staging the tallest temporary stage (Arabia, 2020). Due to a large number of local and international attendees and A-list international performers, it received wide local and international media publicity. The local press promoted it as a progressive and legendary event, whereas the international media back-lashed it as an attempt to whitewash the damaged reputation of the country (Thebault and Mettler, 2019). Due to it being the first public event of mixed-sex gathering on music, the MDL Beast festival is monumental in the entertainment sector of the Kingdom.

The number of social media influencers (SMIs) is expanding, changing how consumers behave in the travel sector. In influencer and tourism marketing, the concept of trust is crucially important because it is what establishes and sustains fruitful long-term connections between businesses and customers. Tourism marketers are advised to use SMIs to increase and stimulate the desire to travel as clearly, a means by which consumers search for information about their next trip, according to a study by Pop et al. (2022) that uses customer journey theory to explain the impact of SMI trust on customer travel decision-making. The Middle East included many SMI attendees from different career backgrounds (models, singers etc.) that are usually not in-line with the cultural environment of the Kingdom. However, perhaps that is the reasoning behind their attendance since breaking stereotypes, as mentioned by Avraham (2014) and Giffard and Rivenburgh (2000)13, can be an important goal of events aimed at promoting a national brand.

Therefore, this study investigated the role of the MDL Beast music festival held in December 2019 in Riyadh by GEA in promoting a new image through social media. This event was chosen due to its international appeal, massive attendance, and traditional and social media coverage. Unlike other GEA events, it had a far-reached audience, and this event was attended by many international stars and social media influencers (SMIs). This study aims to understand how the MDL Beast music festival (held in December 2019 in Riyadh) was utilized by Saudi Arabia to portray its new image to the world through Instagram (a social media site). The other objectives include (1) understanding the relation of the MDL beast festival with the Vision 2030 plan and its main goals of it; (2) identifying the narratives and frames used by social media coverage of the MDL Beast festival to promote a new image of Saudi Arabia; (3) to understand the influence and importance of social media in promoting images of countries to the world as tourist destinations. Even though this festival received massive media attention, no prior research has been conducted to understand the social media frames used to promote Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination. Additionally, a lot of media claims were based on speculations. Therefore, this study will validate the facts regarding the MDL Beast festival to understand its importance in achieving The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Vision 2016 of Saudi Arabia.

2. Framing theory
The media has undoubtedly played an important role in endorsing development in the Middle East, as it can help shape public opinion and transform cultures (Adams, 2006: 171). The process of
media framing is critical as it invites “audiences to participate in a particular way of perceiving and living in the world” (Adams, 2006: 174). MDL Beast festival is introducing a new Saudi status quo to the world. It is essential to consider the frames utilized to understand the media’s role in changing public opinion about Saudi Arabia’s national image.

Cacciatore et al. (2016) re-evaluated the concept to create a more rigid definition of framing, considering how the media environment has changed with the internet and social media, creating a “preference-based effect” media model. Further, Lina Khatib’s (2013) “Image Politics in the Middle East” was also helpful in understanding how images play a massive role in the region as constructs infused with meanings. Her research provides a deep understanding of frames in visual content, which is helpful for this study’s purpose. Additionally, to relate the concept of framing to online media discourse, the research of Zhou (2007) was examined. The authors mention how online discussion create importance and meaning to events transforming them into issues that draw nationwide attention (2007: 93); a relevant concept to the scope of this research.

Dietram Scheufele’s, a key researcher in the field of framing, work on Framing as a Theory of Media Effects (1999) answers to Entman’s (1993) call for the development of a consistent concept of framing. Scheufele examines the role of the audience in his constructivist approach of understanding media framing, which seems to be an expansion to the work of Pan & Kosicki (1993). He also distinguishes frames as either dependent or independent variables. Studies of frames as dependent variables examine the role of different factors that affect the creation of a frame (Scheufele 1999: 107). Whilst, studying frames as independent variables allows for the examination of the effects of framing. Scheufele proposes asking the following question when looking at media frames as an independent variable: “what kinds of media frames influence the audience’s perception of certain issues and how does this process work?” (1999: 108). A worthwhile question to ask when examining Instagram posts for the purpose of this research.

Another relevant study to this research is Munoz & Towner’s (2017) study on the use of Instagram within the 2016 presidential primary season. They explored “how presidential candidates are using Instagram to visually construct and manage their political selves” (2017: 313). They did so by looking at the different methods candidates “framed themselves via Instagram”, revealing that “a majority of their sampled images fall within the ideal candidate master theme” (2017: 300). Images were framed to show statesmanship, through employing “patriotic symbols, campaign paraphernalia, and elected officials/influencers in their images”; compassion, by using “family associations, affinity gestures, and physical embraces” in their images, and mass appeal by “depicting large audiences” to persuade potential voters (Towner & Munoz 2020: 311). The methodology of the study would be helpful in this research considering the similarity in approach.

Furthermore, more closely related to this research is Alshaikh’s (2019) study on “the framing process on Twitter by the analysis of Vision 2030.” Her study decoded the frames in which Twitter users utilized the platform to evaluate the Vision 2030 strategy” using hashtags to identify and collect related Tweets. This study examined how media frames can shape public opinion and how states may change their image through media agenda-setting and to host events. Therefore, it will be interesting to measure these theories against Saudi Arabia’s utilization of the MDL Beast festival as a marketing tool.

2.1. Destination branding, and national image

Further, since at its heart, the events analyzed in this research are used to promote a new image of Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030, research on destination branding and national image formation are essential to explore. A brief overview of the literature shows that the majority of work highlights the importance of national branding in promoting tourism and investments, both a part of the Vision 2030 goals for the Kingdom. Gifford and Rivenburgh (2000) studied the effect of hosting UN Summits on six nation’s image management strategies by analyzing three international news’ agencies presentations of the host city. The three news agencies were the Associated Press
(U.S. based), Reuters (European-based), and Inter Press Service which is an international agency specialized in Third World News. This gave the authors a more wholesome overview for their analysis. The authors explained how amongst the prominent strategies for national image management is hosting global media events. They inferred that “global media events are a unique form of diplomacy because they attempt to reach not just other governments, but a global public” (Giffard & Rivenburgh, 2000: 8). This is especially relevant to Saudi’s GEA events as they specifically aim to target global public opinion through the usage of international social media influencers, as will be explored in the interview section.

Avraham (2014) and Piva et al. (2017) specifically look at the influence of events and cultural events in enhancing destination brand images. Amongst the two works, there is a varied analysis of the different kind of events that are used to promote a national brand by having a large media exposure. Avraham’s discussion of the use of events that brand a destination contrary to the typical stereotypes associated with it (2014: 67) is very helpful in analyzing Saudi’s MDL Beast music festival and its portrayal of a new progressive and modern Saudi Arabia.

Previous research has shown how media frames can shape public opinion and how states may alter their image through media agenda-setting and hosting events. Thus, it will be interesting to measure these theories against Saudi Arabia’s utilization of the MDL Beast festival as a marketing tool in this study.

3. Materials and methods

This empirical research aims to understand the frames used to project a new image of Saudi Arabia through coverage of the MDL Beast music festival on the social media platform Instagram. Therefore, 100 Instagram posts concerning the MDL Beast festival were examined using relevant mentions and hashtags to understand the frames used. In addition, three organizers were interviewed to understand the purpose of conducting this festival, its role in portraying a new image of Saudi Arabia, and the importance of SMIs in promoting the event.

Instagram has been widely used in Saudi Arabia. As of 2019, it had 20.31 million active users in Saudi Arabia (GMI, 2019), which was why it was selected as the social media platform. A survey examining the role of social media in Saudi society revealed that 48.1% of the respondents used social media for “engaging in social issues which may have positive effect on social change” (Askool 2013: 210).

Another popular social media platform among the SMIs was Snapchat; however, due to its short-lived (24 hours only) posts, it was not a feasible approach in this study. For the targeted search of only 100, the examined posts were done between December 19th to January 3rd and were done by SMIs, celebrities and other public accounts. Here, those SMI accounts with a minimum of 6000 followers were included as, according to The Petal Team (2020), the micro-influencers should have followers between 6000 to 10,000. These posts were then analyzed by the images used and the framing of the captions in terms of their language. It was imperative to understand if the used terminologies highlighted “change” and “progression”. By using content analysis and monitoring the repetitiveness of certain words and phrases, deductions were about the most common themes, and frames used to describe the MDL Beast festival and Saudi Arabia. Whilst the images were analyzed to portray a “modern” Saudi Arabia, for instance, adherence to the traditional-cultural representation of women and Islamic social conduct were considered. Additionally, the images and captions were assessed against their usage of a nationalistic discourse.

The study considers a qualitative research approach as, according to Weiss (1995), for efficient qualitative research, interviews are an efficient method as they help in developing a holistic description, understanding events without physical attendance, learning about different interpretations of an event, integrating several perspectives and allow the development of detailed description. Here, only three interviews were conducted as, according to Weiss (1995), each
interview provides a great deal of information; therefore, a qualitative study should have a small sample size. Varied perceptions and relevant data were supplied as each respondent was associated with a different firm, although they all worked in the organization process of the MDL Beast event.

A semi-structured approach was followed for interview conduction as they generally are open-ended questions around research objectives and further questions emerge from the discussion between the interviewee and interviewer (DiCicco, Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This semi-structured interview allowed the participants to answer in their language and terms, which helped provide the overview for the desired purpose (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). As this approach allows freedom in response, it helped reveal various aspects and perceptions regarding the MDL Beast event.

For a successful interview, a good rapport is essential. Therefore, it is crucial to provide the interviewee with an environment of safety, respect and trust (DiCicco, Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Since the culture in Saudi Arabia does not celebrate freedom of speech, for a good rapport, the interviewees must be comfortable talking about an event organized by the Saudi government. Moreover, confidentiality was given the utmost importance to minimize risk, and was communicated to the interviewees in the consent form they signed before participating in the interview. Furthermore, the participants were informed about the nature of the study, their right to anonymity and to not answer any questions that they were not comfortable answering. Due to social distancing and risks associated with COVID-19, the interviews were conducted by phone and were recorded and transcribed with the participant’s consent. Due to their open-ended nature, the interviews lasted for about 40–45 minutes each.

On reflection, some restrictions were faced by the researchers during the study. Firstly, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all the interviews were conducted over the phone, which might have compromised the rapport. Secondly, the respondents asked for a lot of provided information to be “off the record” due to cultural norms, which provided difficulty in analyzing the data. Additionally, with the first interview, some questions became obsolete or repetitive as the respondent preferred to talk about the event before being asked the specific question. Finally, the ethical issue was the most pressing for the framing analysis. Despite all the posts being available online and public, the researcher couldn’t contact each person to inform them regarding using their posts for this research. Moreover, it was difficult to assess the response to content on Instagram as it no longer shows the number of likes each post receives.

4. Result and discussion

4.1. Framing analysis of Instagram posts
This research is based on 100 Instagram posts between December 19th, 2019 and January 3rd, 2020, found by searching the keyword “MDLBeast” in the tags section of Instagram. The Instagram posts were examined to derive the general themes and frames presented through their captions and images. The most common narratives derived from the captions relate to positive change, nationalist, and pride, whilst in the pictures, the main themes were partying fashion and grandeur.

4.2. Social media influencers and celebrities
Of the 100 posts examined, 65 were uploaded by SMIs or celebrities. Some of their posts could be distinguished by using the “#MDLBeastAmbassador” hashtag and by thanking and tagging the festival’s Instagram account (@mdlbeast) in their captions. Nichearabia (2016), a “Saudi premier luxury and communications & marketing agency”, was also often mentioned in posts and thanked. These “visual cues often indicate a paid partnership” (Thebault & Mettler 2019). Though “festival organizers did not respond to a request from The Washington Post to confirm whether or not they paid influencers to promote the event” (Thebault and Mettler 2019), respondent 1 was able to confirm the paid sponsorships in his interview.
Interestingly, most of the SMI and celebrity attendees are known for modelling. The models’ profiles are usually filled with swimsuits and other revealing pictures which are not in line with the conservative Saudi Arabian Muslim culture. For instance, among the celebrities invited were models Romee Strijd (6.6 million followers), Irina Shayk (13.8 million followers), and Victoria’s Secret model Alessandra Ambrosio (10.2 million followers). The 3 models might have been invited since images of them “partying” in Saudi may be used to break conservative stereotypes about the country. As mentioned by Avraham (2014) and Giffard and Rivenburgh (2000), breaking stereotypes can be an important goal of events to promote a national brand. The interview section will expand more on the choice of SMIs for the event and the logic behind it.

4.3. Captions and hashtags

Through content analysis of the Instagram posts’ captions, some phrases and keywords mentioned frequently were quantified to derive general themes. The following table shows the words/phrases and the number of captions they appear in Table 1.

The most common recurring themes within the captions are nationalistic pride, the emphasis on social change, and praise for the event. The word “incredible”, synonyms, and “history” were the most frequent amongst captions, highlighting the grandeur of the festival and the new positive image of Saudi Arabia to the world, respectively. This is also evident from the hashtags used to promote the event shown in Table 2.

It seems that how the Instagram posts have highlighted the historical aspect of this event is attempting to showcase the Crown Prince’s ability to create change. While most were just identifying the event, 19 posts used hashtags to mention social change and the new image of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the mention of #MBSin hashtags and captions, and #Vision2030, which is widely associated with him, relates to Price and Tewksbury (1997) revelation on how media

Table 1. Recurring words and themes in 100 Instagram posts

| Word/phrases                          | Number of posts mentioned |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Partying in the desert                | 3                         |
| New Saudi/Nationalistic               | 13                        |
| Incredible/Amazing/Unreal             | 18                        |
| Awesome/Epic/Spectacular             |                           |
| Proud                                 | 14                        |
| History/change/progress               | 19                        |

Table 2. Hashtags and the times they were mentioned in 100 Instagram posts

| HashtagTitle                        | TimesMentioned |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|
| #Mdlbeast                           | 74             |
| #Riyadh                             | 31             |
| #Riyadhseason                       | 25             |
| #Soundstorm                         | 21             |
| #Saudi                              | 27             |
| #Visitsaudi                         | 6              |
| #Saudigoesglobal                    | 3              |
| #Makinghistory                      | 6              |
| #Vision2030                         | 2              |
| #Mbs                                | 2              |
| #Mdlbeastambassador                 | 12             |
agendas affect public evaluations of leaders. The findings seem to prove that excessive reporting on cultural events has a dual motivation of changing the Kingdom's image and enhancing its leader's image.

Furthermore, a prominent nationalistic frame could be viewed in the captions of Saudi SMIs. They frequently emphasized their pride in being Saudi Arabian. For instance, Saudi SMI and TV presenter Sara Murad (@sara_murad 262k Instagram followers) said in her post on 21 December 2019, “I am so proud Riyadh!” and emphasized the grandeur of the event and how she was so proud that it was in Saudi Arabia. @LinaMo a Saudi photographer with over 12 K followers, emphasized, “History was made last weekend. Glad to be a part of it” on her post on December 25th. A similar comment was made by FahadAl-Saud(@yolofahad Prince and public figure 123 K followers), saying that it was “one of the most powerful experiences I had this year. It is so beautiful to see how far Saudi and especially the new generation of Saudis have come”.

Further, Saudi blogger Lama al-Akeel (@Lama.alakeel 582 K followers) mentioned, “SO HAPPY TO BE LIVING THIS IN MY BELOVED COUNTRY” in her caption on December 20th, using two Saudi flag emojis which further highlight the nationalistic theme by symbol. Additionally, the following post captions by Saudi public figure Mohammed al-Turki (@moalturki326k followers) also show an undeniable nationalistic narrative. What is more unique in his captions is their defensive nature; he defends the changes in Saudi as definite, explaining that the proof is self-explanatory through this festival.

Caption1(December22nd2019)

“love my country and happy to have been with my friends from all over the world. We have no time nor any reason to justify ourselves … (book your tickets) 2words … SEEING IS BELIEVING … Thanks to everyone that came and showed love. And for the hypocrites hiding their posts, remember Saudi is a nation of over a 33MILLION people, so your negative opinions on the notion of positive change really doesn’t matter. Love from the Kingdom (Saudi_flag emoji) #pullup

Caption2(December25th2019)

“Cheers to progress and an open heart and mind … this is the start of many great things. Merry Christmas to those who are celebrating (Santa Claus emoji) Love from the Kingdom (Saudi flag emoji and heart) #seeingisbelieving #pullup”

As apparent from the discourse in the captions, there is a prominent theme of nationalistic pride. Change and progress are highlighted, and the historic attribute is celebrated. The nationalistic narrative is also apparent in emojis within captions, i.e. The Saudi flag emoji, which was frequently used. As Billing (1995) mentioned, symbols, like flags, play a role in instilling a sense of nationalism. The nationalistic narrative can also be viewed in international influencers’ and celebrities’ posts. For instance, public figure Dan Ghenacia (@danghenacia 29 K followers) explained in an image caption posted on December 23rd that he was “Glad to see boys and girls dancing together in Saudi Arabia.@mdlbeastfestival was their first party ever in this country where things are changing”, a comment which underlines the historical aspect of the festival. Moreover, actor Armie Hammer(@armiehammer) mentioned to 1.4 million followers on December 22nd:

“What I just witnessed was truly special. I saw Saudi men and women ecstatic about an event they never thought they would see in their life-time … it felt like a cultural shift, a change. Like Woodstock in the 1960s. Social revolution is slow and takes time, but what I was able to be a part of felt like one giant seed of growth. The people there throwing themselves into the experience will lead a cultural revolution that we all need to get behind and support#mdlbeast.”
The post undoubtedly highlights the historical aspect of the event by referring to it as a part of Saudi’s “social revolution”. As one of the SMIs attending the event, he portrayed a massive perception of positive change to his sizeable international following. So did world-renowned DJ Afrojack (@afrojack 3.7 million followers) on December 22nd, saying, “This was#MDLBeast!! Proud to be a part of the road to the future in #riyadh!! Thank you (heart emoji +Saudi Arabian flag emoji)”. In addition, Indian actress Sonam K. Ahuja (@sonamkapoor 30.5 million followers), in a series of concise image captions posted on December 21st, highlighted the nobility of the event in beginning a new chapter where Saudi is more open to the world.

“(music emoji) changes the (earth emoji)@mdlbeast”

“That was Epic! (Music emoji) makes the (world emoji) come together! @mdlbeast”

“(music emoji) makes History at @mdlbeast.”

Zhou and May’s (2007) research mentioned how online discussion creates meaning and importance to events. This can be seen through the captions of SMIs and influencers since they emphasized the historical stance of the festival rather than just reporting it as another concert. Additionally, out of the 100 captions overviewed, none mentioned any negative comments, unlike news reports by western sources; instead, the grandeur of the event in terms of its scale and organization and its landmark status is highlighted. Analysis of captions validates Pan and Kosicki (1993), who point out the importance of linguistic choices in framing audience perceptions.

4.4. Framing of images

Sometimes accompanying nationalistic and celebratory captions and other times standing alone, the images posted from the festival portray an exciting vision of Saudi Arabia. The photos mainly consist of impressive pictures of one of the five festival stages or pictures of people enjoying the festival. The three most prominent themes from the images are partying (dancing), fashion, and grandeur.

4.4.1. Partyimg

A lot of the images and videos posted showcased crowds dancing to international music. The photos of people dancing highlight the lack of segregation between females and males as women and men are seen to be crowded together and dancing next to one another (a concept that in itself is somewhat controversial in the conservative culture of Saudi Arabia); showcasing a new image of the Saudi youth that is separate from their culture and traditional identity. American actor Armie Hammer posted pictures showing women and men dancing together in groups with blue paint on their faces to his 1.4 million followers.

4.4.2. Fashion

The fashion choices within the images are noteworthy for several reasons. To begin with, it seems that the dress code guidelines and restrictions that have long been enforced on Saudi nationals have been lifted. None of the crowd members seemed to be wearing traditional Saudi conservative clothing. Some women were even wearing short dresses. Event invitee model, @seymasubasi (3.2 million followers), was wearing a revealing top that showed her stomach, a previously unfathomable sight in the Kingdom. The fashion portrayed a more open image of Saudi to the world, which, as respondent 3 mentions in the interview, “creates commonalities between them and us”. Secondly, fashion choices were quite festive and over-the-top, similar to those seen in western music festivals like the famed Coachella festival held yearly in California, USA. Females and males with face art, extravagant head-pieces and costume-like ensembles were the norm. The bold, expressive fashion showcased a more western view of the Saudi youth.
Moreover, some images portray a merge of western and Saudi culture. Whilst traditional dress was not highlighted at all in the images of crowds, some performers seemed to have used it as props. For instance, DJ Salvatore Gannaci wore the traditional Saudi head garment on stage while bringing Saudi Arabian traditionally-dressed men on stage to serve him Arabic coffee and dates, a Saudi custom. In addition, videos show some performing world-renowned DJs creating mashups with traditional Saudi songs. Such posts and actions, manifest the theme of Saudi Arabia opening up to the world, which as will be shown, through the interview findings, is one of the main goals of the event.

4.4.3. Grandeur
The theme of extravagance was largely visible in the posts related to the festival. The fact that the MDL Beast festival was the largest in the region was significantly highlighted in the images as in the captions. Photos of massive stages, impressive performances, huge crowds, fireworks, artworks, and murals were prolific. The technology in terms of lighting and stage direction was also portrayed impressively through the images. The pictures were reflective of the festival’s impressive scale and organization. Still, it is interesting to consider Aksool’s (2012) point on women being more restrictive in their social media posts than men. Her point was validated since the 100 posts viewed were by public accounts, and except for Saudi female influencers, most posts were made by Saudi men. This could be due to cultural restrictions that deem it unacceptable for a Saudi female to have an open public account.

4.5. Interview findings and analysis
Three interviews were conducted with the main organizers of the event. The first respondent’s firm was responsible for the whole creative aspect of the festival. The second respondent was a part of the GEA team, tasked with being a companion to celebrities during the festival. The third respondent is a GM and Design Director of 9SSCreative and 9 Sick sick, as well as one of the founders of Mirkaz. He attended the festival as a DJ and head of branding and communications. Thus, the interviews helped in understanding the event holistically and supporting the arguments made through the framing analysis.

To begin with, respondent 1 revealed that the GEA only entered the festival’s planning group two weeks before the event’s launch. This is shocking, considering it is widely known to the public as a GEA-organized event and a historic government initiative. Respondent 1 also explained that with the GEA’s involvement came a change regarding the anticipated crowd for the event. Initially, the plan was to have a primarily international audience to display the Saudi talent to the world; however, with the involvement of the GEA, ticket prices were lowered and marketed towards locals so that the pictures show a packed crowd. This is in line with the theme of grandeur common in the images. According to respondent 1, this may also have been the reason behind the backlash on sexual harassment that rose after the event.

He mentioned that the original plan was to have 100 K attendees per day, “but when the ticket prices were lowered, and the GEA came in, the goal was changed to 200k—300k attendees per day," which they were consequently not prepared for in terms of security and safety measures. Such logistical difficulties relate to Gifford and Rivenburgh (2000) as they point out that despite holding mega-events to improve a nation’s image, there is no way to control all aspects involved, including the media, which may defeat the purpose of holding the event altogether.

When asked about social media promotion and the amount of SMIs invited, respondent two mentioned, “We are relying heavily on this factor as another way of promoting events and showcasing activities to drive traffic”. She also mentioned that the Instagram platform was used “because MDL Beast targeted a certain age group”, highlighting the value of using social media to promote Saudi Arabia’s image abroad. Similarly, respondent 3 explained that “most Saudis are young” and “the best way to get to them is through social media”. However, respondent 2 alluded that social media is sometimes a double-edged sword: “even when influencers promoted MDL
Beast on social media platforms, backlashes were seen, and stereotypical comments were said. But it was promoted globally, and the message was sent”. Respondent 3 was somewhat critical of the choice of SMIs used for promotion, saying, “not every influencer is fit for the brand. There’s a fine line between preserving the integrity of the brand and selling out just for number’s sake”.

Furthermore, respondent 1 explained that the SMI’s and international celebrities were called by one of the organizers based on his connections rather than through a marketing firm. As such, there was no apparent harmony in the posts, i.e. no unified hashtag, “the most important thing was for the influencers to come and take pictures”. The reason behind using a massive amount of social media marketing was also explained by respondent 1; when asked if MDL Beast is playing a role in promoting a new image of Saudi, he replied “100% percent.” That was the whole point”. He explained that there were two main pillars to the MDL Beast festival: the first was to showcase local talent and the underground music scene in Saudi Arabia, and the second was to show the world that Saudi is opening up.

He even mentioned that the name of the festival was serving that new image since “Saudi and the Middle East is always known for being dangerous and war-ridden etc. So we wanted to take that concept and turn it on its head” in the sense of showing that Saudi’s are crazy in a good way and that they have a vibrant party scene. Respondent 1 also stated that breaking stereotypes was one of the main aims. Respondent 3 supported this by mentioning that the event’s main goal was “to help Saudi shift its negative perception to a positive one in the eyes of the world, and by doing so, encouraging tourism and boosting the economy” to fulfil Vision 2030. Moreover, respondents 1 and 3 greatly emphasized the event’s value in promoting tourism. Respondent 1 explained how promoting tourism was a crucial event goal, explaining that visa applications have now become easy to encourage international visitors. She also talked about efforts to increase local tourism by promoting “beautiful places in Saudi that we have never heard of like waterfalls in Jazan, Wadi Aldisa, Wadi Tayeb Esm.” Furthermore, respondent 3 explained that hosting such events helps “having people like being here instead of trying to escape any chance they get” since they would have similar options as they would abroad “in terms of events, restaurants, shopping and entertainment in general”.

5. Conclusion
In conclusion, this research aimed to investigate the media frames used to market a new image of Saudi Arabia by promoting the MDL Beast music festival on the social media site Instagram, both nationally and internationally. The 3-day long festival held in December 2019 created considerable media controversy. Traditional news sources varied in their depiction of the event; the general theme seemed to be a positive connotation in Saudi and Arab sources and a rather negative one in western sources. Considering the large number of international SMIs and celebrities attending the festival, and their millions of followers on Instagram, it seems like the event successfully introduced a new image of Saudi to the world. The image’s truthfulness is beyond the scope of this research; however, the positive connotation of the comments and the themes convey a clear message that Saudi has changed, and for the better. Through secondary research, it became clear how and why countries use events and media frames to depict a new image of themselves. Empirical research was collected through content analysis of Instagram posts related to the event and three interviews with the event’s main organizers. Through framing analysis, it was revealed that the most prominent themes were nationalism, pride, and making History. The images showed grandeur, dancing and a lack of segregation, a concept which is not usually associated with the conservative culture of the Kingdom. The event was star-studded because, as revealed by the interviews, its goal was to invite as many celebrities and SMIs as possible to gain media attention worldwide. The discussions also confirmed that the festival's goals were to promote tourism and change the image of Saudi to the world to a more open one. This has been done by highlighting change and showcasing images contrary to the stereotypical conservative, alienated perception of Saudis.
On the other hand, establishing sizeable international music festivals in Saudi Arabia is crucial to promoting favourable opinions of the country and eradicating the stereotypical impression held by many people who have had unfavourable views of it for a long time. The findings also indicate that Saudi society will have a fantastic opportunity to interact with other institutions and learn about their cultures through the arrival of visitors from different nations around the world to these international musical events, which will increase local awareness and acceptance of other cultures and religious differences. Additionally, some people will learn new languages and cultures through interaction with others.

6. Recommendations
The study was quite limited due to its scope and time restraint. The topic is worth exploring further considering the major cultural shift that Saudi Arabia is undergoing. To further understand the consequences of holding such an event on the country’s brand image, it would be helpful to quantify the difference in the number of tourist visas issued before and after the festival to understand if there was indeed a peak in tourist inflow and interest. Additionally, to assess the success of the media frames utilized on Instagram posts and the use of SMIs to market the event, it may be helpful to survey some SMI followers and understand their perception of Saudi and whether the posts have influenced their opinion. Additionally, viewing other interactive social media platforms such as Twitter would be helpful to assess the frames used in Tweets and how people reacted to them.

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