

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sports investment to improve the destination image and optimize tourism performance in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of sports investment on the optimization of tourism performance, with a particular focus on destination image as a mediator in the context of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). As KSA persists on spread and diversify its economy under the Vision 2030, sports have appeared as a key sector to attract international events, investing in digital platforms and broadcasting, and improving sports infrastructure to attract international visitors and improve the nation's global reputation as a desirable destination. The current study aims to examine the relationship between tourism and hospitality performance in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and sports industry investment aspects, specifically investment in digital platforms and broadcasting (IDPB), investment in football infrastructure (IFI), and investment in hosting international events (IHIE), using perceived destination image as a mediator. 402 football fans participated in this study and the collected data was analyzed through PLS-SEM with Smart PLS V.3. PLS-SEM was used with Smart PLS V.3 to test the suggested model with multiple variables. The study's findings show that investment in organizing international events, developing broadcasting and digital platforms, and increasing sports infrastructure can positively foster tourism performance and improve perceived destination image in KSA. This study underscores the importance of sports investments in fostering a positive perceived destination image, thus advancing tourism performance. Several implications for policymakers and tourism industry professionals are elaborated and discussed.

Keywords: economic diversity; mega-events; football fans; international events; digital broadcasting; sports infrastructure

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 22 October 2024 | Accepted: 13 November 2024 | Available online: 29 November 2024

CITATION

Elshaer IA, Azazz A, Alyahya M, et al. Sports investment to improve the destination image and optimize tourism performance in Saudi Arabia. *Environment and Social Psychology* 2024; 9(10): 3178. doi: 10.59429/esp.v9i10.3178

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1. Introduction

Sports investment and tourism and hospitality sector performance are closely related. Sports investments, in general, and sporting events, especially, are perceived as the drivers of tourism and hospitality development^[1]. Sports investment and the resulting organization of sports events, operation of digital platforms and broadcasting, and investment in sports infrastructure play an influential role in the marketing strategies of tourist destinations, attracting considerable concentration from the media^[2]. Furthermore, empirical studies

proved that sporting events and what followed with investments positively influence prospective tourists' intentions to visit the host destinations^[3]. Images and information shared about host destinations during events can generate positive perceptions of a destination, which are likely to be linked to positive behavioral intentions to visit the destination in the future^[2]. However, a number of investigations question the economic effect, specifically the long-term impact of mega-events, such as sports events, on the tourist destination^[4,5]. Because the effects of developing sports infrastructure are complex, it is crucial to use financial resources as efficiently as possible. The enhancement of facility design to accommodate the particular requirements of players and guests is another outcome of effective financial management^[6]. One way to assess the efficiency of sports resources is to look at the amount of money spent on sports infrastructure^[7]. Further, governments can employ financial resources to address enduring problems by encouraging innovation, developing technology, and preserving environmental sustainability^[8]. Consequently, the government's efficient use of financial resources is essential to both economic sustainability and societal well-being^[9]. On the other hand, a considerable number of studies proved the positive impact of sports investments on the economic aspects of the destination, including the tourism and hospitality sectors. The economic results of the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa were analyzed. It demonstrated positive effects on many industries, such as transportation, construction, and tourism, enhancing GDP and increasing employment^[10]. Similarly, in South Korea, the influence of investing in organizing the World Cup on the destination's macroeconomic figures was significant^[11]. On the other hand, because few events have been staged in developing countries, the literature on mega-events in this setting, including analyses about destination images, is still small compared to developed countries^[12]. Here, it was found that Brazil's image did not change as much after the Rio 2016 Olympic Games as expected^[13]. On the other hand, Qatar's success in organizing the FIFA World Cup increased the number of incoming tourists. It promoted location loyalty, emotional bonds, and repeat visits, enriching its image and making it a more appealing destination with lasting positive impacts^[14]. Consequently, further studies are needed on the role of investment in the sports industry in supporting the performance of the tourism and hospitality sector^[15-17], especially in developing countries seeking to develop their capabilities in the sports industry, such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Destinations can take a 'shortcut' towards international distinction by producing special events, such as sports events, that garner a global audience^[18,19].

Saudi Arabia seeks to follow the example of UAE Centennial 2071 in diversifying its economy and not relying solely on fossil fuels^[20]. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 strategy plan aims to diversify its economy. One of these strategies is to invest in the sports sector by funding leagues, particularly football leagues and clubs overseas, running digital platforms and broadcasting, planning sporting events, and investing in sports infrastructure^[21]. The Kingdom has chosen to invest in sports, particularly football, as part of its nation branding and destination image objectives in addition to diversifying its economy. In order to demonstrate to the world that they are the leaders of the global football map, KSA was granted the right to organize and host the FIFA World Cup in 2034^[22]. In this regard, research has shown that travelers' travel behaviors, inclinations to return, and perceptions and sentiments toward a destination are all influenced by its perceived image^[23,24]. As a result, by improving the Kingdom's reputation, investments in the sports sector in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can support the performance of the travel and hotel industry. Based on this, the current study aims to investigate how tourism and hospitality performance are affected by sports industry investment aspects using perceived destination image as a mediator in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. These aspects include investment in digital platforms and broadcasting (IDPB), investment in football infrastructure (IFI), and investment in hosting international events (IHIE).

Based on the analysis of the study results, it was found that the development of the football sector in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has developed and encouraged investment in digital platforms and broadcasting

(IDPB), investment in football infrastructure (IFI), and investment in hosting international events (IHIE), and this has been significantly reflected in improving the image of the destination and from there to improving the performance of the tourism and hospitality sector in the Kingdom.

This article is structured into seven distinct parts. Part 2 sets the theoretical foundations and formulates hypotheses. Part 3 delves into research methodology and data analysis. At the same time, Part 4 presents the discussion and theoretical implications, followed by Part 5, which explores the practical implications. The study provides the limitations and future work with Part 6. Part 7 summarizes the findings and conclusions.

2. Literature review

2.1. The relationship between sports and tourism

The Vision 2030 initiative of Saudi Arabia, which was focused on encouraging foreign direct investment and fostering economic development, was greatly aided in 2016 by the Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA)^[25]. According to^[26], sports investments function as a type of sports diplomatic efforts, augmenting Saudi Arabia's worldwide reputation and sway. Taylor et al.^[27] argued that Saudi Arabia's strategic use of sport is upending current sports the hegemony. Saudi Arabia has been investing extensively in the largest leagues, teams, and stars in sports in an attempt to position itself as a worldwide economic power^[28]. Sports are a critical tool that the Kingdom is strategically exploiting to enhance its public image internationally^[29]. Since Mohammed bin Salman's ascent to prominence, Saudi Arabia has invested more than US\$1.5 billion in sports between 2016 and 2021^[30]. Moreover, the Private Investment Fund formed Savvy Gaming Group in 2022 as part of its 2021–2025 plan in Vision 2030 with the aim of boosting significant industries, which will encompass entertainment and sports^[31], as it intends to put 142 billion riyals (\$37.8 billion) into projects meant to establish the country as a major gaming destination worldwide^[25].

On the other hand, in 2018, the PIF made a \$100 million investment in sector Wrestling Entertainment, an American company, signalling the Kingdom's intention to break into the sports sector^[32]. The Public Investment Fund (PIF) of Saudi Arabia, has made approximately \$6.3 billion in global investments in sports teams, leagues, and players since 2021^[33]. Further, four Saudi Pro League teams that are domestic teams received financial support from the PIF in the summer of 2023, Al-Ahli, Al-Ittihad, Al-Hilal, and Al-Nassr received a total of \$907 million that same summer, which allowed them to sign world-class players like Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar Jr^[34]. Consequently, The Saudi sports industry depends heavily on investment initiatives to propel growth^[29].

As part of a larger plan to establish legitimacy on the international sports scene, Saudi Arabia is participating in international sports through the LIV Golf Invitational Series, which is supported by PIF, the country's sovereign wealth fund^[35]. Additionally, several international sporting events were held in the Kingdom, such as the Formula E, the Saudi Cup horse race, and the Dakar Rally^[36]. Similarly, Saudi Arabia has already volunteered to serve as the host city for three consolidated AFC Champions League groups^[37], it will also host the finals of the preliminary group stage Asian qualifications for the Asian Cup in 2023 and the Qatar 2022 World Cup, in addition to trying to host the Asian Cup in 2027^[25]. Organizing major sporting events is seen as one of the defining ways to use sports to boost a state's international exposure and familiarity as well as its international reputation^[38]. A state's worldwide reputation can be shaped by a variety of strategies and tactics, such as country branding efforts, international exchanges, and the planning of international events^[39]. As a result, Bids from cities worldwide^[39] have been enticed to compete for the chance to host major international events, such as the contemporary Olympic Games^[40]. So far, there have been 28 Summer Olympic Games held in 22 locations and 23 Winter Olympics held in 20 towns across the globe^[41]. Saudi Arabia is a

relatively new nation when it comes to hosting big events, therefore in order to guarantee long-term tourism growth and economic sustainability, the government will now need to make large investments^[32].

These days, digital technology is being used by broadcasters, incorporated into sports events at all levels, and used by the global sports industry more and more^[42]. The development of digital technologies and the Internet has altered the landscape of contemporary sports psychology and offers potentially significant advancements for athletes and sports fans^[43]. Further, the way sports media broadcast globally and how sports fans interact with those broadcasts have also been impacted by these changes, in addition to sports itself^[44]. Digital technology has also played a significant role in the diversification of broadcast platforms by uniting followers of different sports and facilitating communication amongst them^[44]. Hence, the processes of producing, selling, presenting, and displaying sports information for the screen have been dominated by advancements in digital technology, including the Internet and new media^[45]. Consequently, the rise of new broadcasting platforms, particularly on mobile devices, including online, offline, uploaded, downloaded, broadcast, narrowcast, and podcast^[46]. Large technological investments, however, are being made to create complex scoring systems that will enable sports broadcasters and athletes to exploit technology to their advantage^[43].

It seems that increasing physical activity and the ensuing improvement in health are not possible without the development of physical training and sports facilities or a developed sport infrastructure that is accessible to all demographic groups^[47]. Saudi sports have evolved progressively since Indonesian residents founded the first football team in Makah in 1926^[48]. Today, one of the most important aspects of the football industry is its infrastructure, since all of the major teams and clubs' museums, training centers, sports bases, retail stores, and stadiums with spectator stands play important roles in the game^[49]. According to Taylor et al.^[27], Saudi Arabia has made significant expenditures in sport media and supports European football clubs, in addition to strategically hosting important international sporting events such as the 2019 Asian Winter Games^[50]. Consequently, The Saudi government is spending billions of dollars on sports infrastructure in an effort to promote the Kingdom as a destination for sporting events^[22]. Taylor et al.^[27] drew attention to the headline-grabbing acquisition of Cristiano Ronaldo by Al-Nassr, a Saudi Arabian football team, for an estimated £177 million a year, further, Brazilian superstar Neymar committed to Al-Hilal SFC; and top striker Karim Benzema, a Frenchman from Algeria, joined Al Ittihad FC^[28,48,50]. Similarly, for over \$400 million in 2021, the PIF acquired an 80% share in Newcastle United Football Club (NUFC), an English Premier League team^[33].

In order to attract foreign tourists, tourism policy and decision makers employ a range of marketing strategies, emphasizing their countries' incomparable natural resources, such as their rich cultural heritage^[51,52]. A lot of focus has been placed on organizing sporting and cultural events in the literature on tourism destinations, management, and marketing^[16]. In particular, tourism and economic academics have recently come to comprehend the relationship between mega-sport events and tourist attractions, which has made it possible for organizers and officials to more fully understand the management and marketing of such locations^[53-55]. Sporting activities have the potential to increase tourism and improve the reputation or image of a place^[16]. Following this discussion, the following hypothesis is formulated:

2.2. Investment in the sports industry and perceived destination image (PDI)

Murray^[26] argues that sports investments enhance Saudi Arabia's influence and reputation globally. Furthermore, sports are a critical tool that the Kingdom is strategically exploiting to enhance its public image internationally^[29]. Different destination features and attributes are evaluated to create an image of the destination^[56]. According to Pike^[57] and Bigné Alcañiz et al.^[58], an image is a concept created by an individual's perceptions of emotional assessments and cognitive and perceptual evaluations related to their attitude toward

a destination. Zhang et al.^[59] pointed that the image is the culmination of all people's perceptions, ideas, and beliefs about a particular place, or destination. Destination image often emphasizes event sustainability and external tourist pleasure^[60].

When tourists are pleased with a destination, they are inclined to show a high degree of commitment to that destination^[61]. Allameh et al.^[62] revealed that perceived value and destination image are the most important antecedents of visitor satisfaction. Predicated on the widespread recognition that loyalty plays a major role in determining a travel destination^[63], considering the context of the tourism sector, a destination's image, perceived value, and visitor happiness may be important determinants of destination loyalty^[39]. Moreover, the level of tourist satisfaction with a destination contribute to achieve a positive perception of a destination, hence increases the intention to revisit the destination over time^[64,65]. Because sporting events are said to offer a variety of chances to enhance a destination's image, promote local goods, foster local patriotism, and create jobs, they may ultimately result in increased destination loyalty^[41,66,67]. In the same vein, the level of sporting events and the services provided determine the attitudes and actions of tourists, which in turn shapes the perceptions and image of the destination^[67,68].

The usage of influencer-generated content on websites like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok has replaced traditional advertising in tourism promotion techniques^[69]. Influencers can improve the perception of a destination by presenting captivating stories that showcase the most distinctive, alluring services and events that are offered there^[70]. According to^[71], social media content promotes brand awareness, which in turn affects brand image^[72]. Moreover, favorable imagery is reinforced via electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)^[73]. Based on these considerations, we can make the following hypothesis:

H1. Investment in hosting international events (IIE) is positively correlated with perceived destination image (PDI)

H2. Investment in digital platforms and broadcasting (IDPB) is positively correlated with perceived destination image (PDI)

H3. Investment in football infrastructure (IFI) is positively correlated with perceived destination image (PDI)

2.3. Perceived destination image (PDI) and tourism and hospitality sector performance (THP)

According to Koo^[61], tourists who are happy with their destination are more likely to be highly committed to it. Destination image, as defined by Hallmann et al.^[56], is crucial for summarizing and advertising the destination's offerings since it describes how tourists perceive the attractions that are available there. Given the context of the tourism industry, a destination's image, perceived value, and tourist satisfaction may be significant determinants of destination loyalty^[39]. This is based on the widely acknowledged fact that loyalty plays a significant role in selecting a travel destination^[63]. Tourists' attitudes and behaviors are influenced by the quality of sporting events and the services offered, which in turn forms their impressions of the location^[67,68]. Moreover, if tourists find tangible elements like design, equipment, and parking or intangible elements like dependability, security, communication, and assurance to be valuable or enjoyable, they might choose to stay longer, buy souvenirs, or share about the event on social media^[39,72,74,75]. Destination image frequently places a focus on the sustainability of events and outside tourist enjoyment, which in turn enhance the tourism sector performance^[60]. Based on this argument, the study hypothesis that:

H4. Perceived destination image (PDI) is positively correlated with tourism and hospitality sector performance (THP)

2.4. Perceived destination image (PDI) mediates the relationship between Investment in the sports industry (ISI) and tourism and hospitality sector performance (THP)

Investments in sports increase a state's standing and influence internationally^[26], they are regarded as an essential instrument that the state is deliberately using to improve its reputation abroad^[29]. Lobo et al.^[60] argued that destination image frequently places a focus on the sustainability of events and outside tourist satisfaction. Further, tourist attitudes and behavior are influenced by the quality of sporting events and the services offered, which in turn defines the destination's perceptions and image^[67,68]. Therefore, sports activities present a number of opportunities to improve a destination's image, advertise locally produced items, and generate employment; in the end, they may lead to a rise in destination loyalty^[41,66,67].

Satisfied tourists are more likely to have a strong sense of loyalty to their place^[61]. Loyalty is a major factor while choosing a destination for a trip^[63]. Jeong and Kim^[39] pointed that destination loyalty may be significantly influenced by factors such as a destination's image, perceived value, and level of tourist satisfaction. The standard of sports events and the services provided impact visitors' attitudes and behaviors, which in turn shapes their perceptions of the destination^[67,68,76]. Consequently, deciding to stay longer, purchasing mementos, or posting about the event on social media^[72,75,77]. Through this discussion, the following hypothesis can be developed (See **Figure 1**):

H5. Perceived destination image (PDI) mediates the relationship between Investment in hosting international events (IIE) and tourism and hospitality sector performance (THP)

H6. Perceived destination image (PDI) mediates the relationship between Investment in digital platforms and broadcasting (IDPB) and tourism and hospitality sector performance (THP)

H7. Perceived destination image (PDI) mediates the relationship between Investment in football infrastructure (IFI) and tourism and hospitality sector performance (THP)

Based on the literature review and hypotheses, we propose the research model in **Figure 1**.

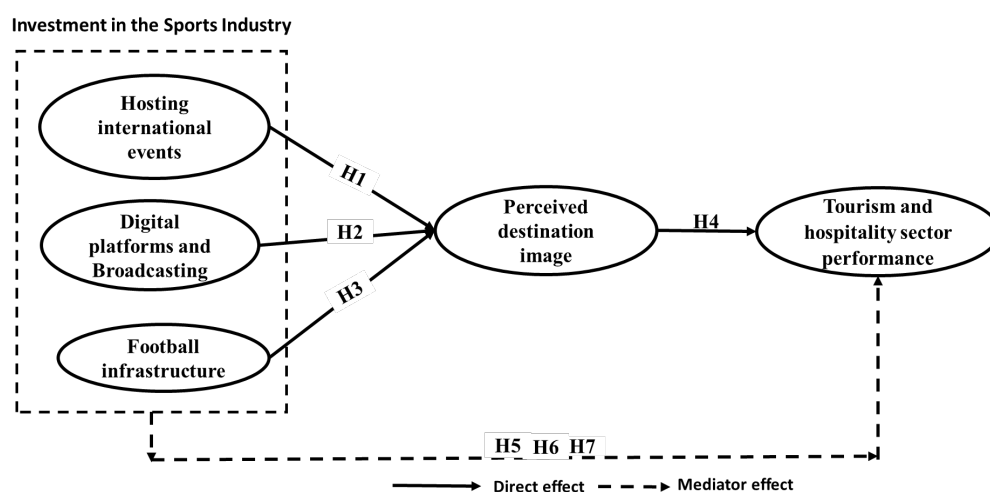


Figure 1. Study hypotheses and conceptual model.

3. Methods

3.1. Measures

All gauging items were derived from previous studies. 4-items from Kock et al.^[78] were employed to gauge PDI dimension. While IHIE, IDPB, and IFI dimensions were measured by employing a 3-item scale for

each one developed by Fornell et al.^[79]. This scale has been used in recent studies, for example, Elshaer' s^[34] study. Finally, to assess THP variable, 5- items suggested by the study of Llach et al.^[80] were employed. Twenty-one academics and executives in the sports and tourism investing field evaluated the survey items' validity, and nothing changed. The study developed questionnaire was originally in English, therefore it was translated into participants Arabic language, and afterward validated employing back- translation approach by English-Arabic fluent professionals, the two versions were found to be consistent. Further, to avoid the incident of instrument method bias, Harman's single-factor inspection was also conducted. Disposed that Harman's single factor value is less than 50%, the revealed output showed that the single factor retrieved is 46.4%, signaled that there are no bias problems with our study^[81].

3.2. Data collection

The questionnaires were distributed among football and sports fans in Saudi Arabia, operating "convenient samples and drop-off and pick-up" approaches. Data were collected during the Roshn Saudi League season (December (2023) to March (2024)). The study received help from a professional data collection company. The research group ensured compliance with the study protocol which involved explaining the aims of the study to the respondents and obtaining their consent. The selected data collection firm enabled contact and collection of the requisite data from the selected respondents. Having obtained consent from willing participants, all questionnaires were sent for completion. Participants were selected from the football event entrance gate (organized in Riyadh and Jeddah cities) with the assistance of the data collection firm. In the course of the event, filled questionnaires were retrieved at the exit gate. 421 out of 600 targeted respondents completed the survey, and 402 (67%) replies were deemed valid after removing unqualified inquiries. The study sample included 254 males (63.2%) and 148 females (36.8%), and their ages ranged between 19 and 60. Also, 294 participants (74.1%) had a college degree, followed by 62 (15.4%) with graduate degrees. All survey items were operated on a five-point Likert scale assessment except for the demographic data.

3.3. Data analysis

PLS-SEM was operated with Smart PLS V.3 to check the hypothesized model for certain criterion. Firstly, this technique makes it easier for the researcher to assess connections between constructs in the outer model and the latent variables that go along with them in the inner model. Moreover, PLS-SEM treads efficiently with complicated models, which include direct and indirect effects. Additionally, in comparison to other data analysis techniques like AMOS, PLS has a good graphical user interface. Finally, this approach has been applied widely in previous studies^[82]. This method has a dual-step analysis strategy: in the first point, the measurement outer model should be evaluated with regard to construct validity and reliability, and in the second point, the structural (inner) model is tested to evaluate the proposed hypotheses^[83].

4. Results

4.1. Scale Psychometric properties (outer model evaluation)

The reliability of the measurement scales was confirmed by examining various statistics (**Table 1**). The values of Cronbach's alpha (α) ($0.892 \leq \alpha \leq 0.767$) and Composite Reliability (CR) ($0.920 \leq CR \leq 0.865$) significantly passed the threshold of 0.70, which ensured the internal consistency of all scales. Likewise, the convergent validity was established where the outer loadings (λ) of all items were significant and outperformed the threshold of 0.7 ($0.751 \leq \lambda \leq 0.885$). Similarly, the "Average Variance Extracted" (AVE) exceeded the value of 0.5 ($0.629 \leq AVE \leq 0.763$) indicating that study measures are convergently validated^[84]. Also, **Table 2** displays that an item loading within its construct is larger than any of its cross-loadings with other constructs, ensuring the discriminant validity.

Table 1. Psychometric results.

Factors and items	Loading (λ)	(<i>a value</i>)	(C_R)	(AVE)
Investment in hosting international events (IHIE)		0.767	0.865	0.682
IHIE_1	0.844			
IHIE_2	0.876			
IHIE_3	0.753			
Investment in digital platforms and Broadcasting (IDPB)		0.845	0.906	0.763
IDPB_1	0.862			
IDPB_2	0.873			
IDPB_3	0.885			
Investment in football infrastructure (IFI)		0.788	0.876	0.702
IFI_1	0.829			
IFI_2	0.843			
IFI_3	0.842			
Perceived destination image (PDI)		0.804	0.871	0.629
PDI1	0.813			
PDI2	0.818			
PDI3	0.789			
PDI4	0.751			
Tourism and hospitality performance (THP)		0.892	0.920	0.698
THP1	0.832			
THP2	0.834			
THP3	0.864			
THP4	0.816			
THP5	0.830			

Table 2. Factor cross-loadings.

	IDPB	IFI	IHIE	PDI	THP
IDPB_1	0.862	0.587	0.528	0.608	0.539
IDPB_2	0.873	0.545	0.453	0.576	0.461
IDPB_3	0.885	0.634	0.532	0.673	0.583
IFI_1	0.602	0.829	0.498	0.608	0.544
IFI_2	0.531	0.843	0.477	0.566	0.477
IFI_3	0.564	0.842	0.427	0.619	0.487
IHIE_1	0.488	0.452	0.844	0.522	0.563
IHIE_2	0.562	0.523	0.876	0.552	0.542
IHIE_3	0.363	0.396	0.753	0.405	0.337
PDI_1	0.637	0.643	0.552	0.813	0.561
PDI_3	0.562	0.552	0.442	0.818	0.568

PDI_4	0.537	0.529	0.450	0.789	0.466
PDI_5	0.507	0.531	0.461	0.751	0.446
THP_1	0.582	0.563	0.575	0.584	0.832
THP_2	0.551	0.510	0.563	0.542	0.834
THP_3	0.522	0.515	0.518	0.575	0.864
THP_4	0.426	0.460	0.389	0.506	0.816
THP_5	0.440	0.449	0.414	0.486	0.830

Table 2. (Continued)

Furthermore, discriminant validity was also established through inspecting recommended statistics (Table 3). Specifically, the square roots of AVE ($0.557 \leq \phi \leq 0.714$; $0.793 \leq \sqrt{AVE} \leq 0.874$) were significantly exceeding the correlation coefficients^[85]. Furthermore, no heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) value exceeded threshold of 0.90 (Table 4), as suggested by^[86].

Table 3. “Fornell–Larcker criterion matrix” and HTMT Matrix.

	IDPB	IFI	IHIE	PDI	THP
IDPB	0.874				
IFI	0.676	0.838			
IHIE	0.579	0.557	0.826		
PDI	0.711	0.714	0.603	0.793	
THP	0.607	0.601	0.594	0.648	0.836

Note: “Values off the diagonal-line are squared inter-construction-correlations, while values on the diagonal-line are AVEs”.

Table 4. HTMT Matrix.

	IDPB	IFI	IHIE	PDI	THP
IDPB					
IFI	0.824				
IHIE	0.706	0.712			
PDI	0.854	0.891	0.756		
THP	0.691	0.712	0.697	0.756	

Note: “for appropriate DV, all HTMT values need to be < 0.90”.

4.2. Structural model testing (inner model)

considering that PLS-SEM dearth the standard fit metrics that CB-SEM has, an inner model is supposed to be evaluated by employing some criterion such as the “Variance Inflation Factor” (VIF), R2, Q2, and path coefficients^[84]. For the likelihood of “multi-collinearity” among factors, VIFs should be < 5.0, and the Q2 values should also meet the satisfactory point value of 0.0^[84].

As shown in Table 5, VIFs values were from 1.421 to 2.515, and below the threshold value. Thus, no multi-collinearity problem persists. Regarding R2, PDI's R2 is 0.630, which signifies that 63.0% of the variation in this variable was explained by the remaining constructs in the structural model that was suggested. Likewise, the R2 of THP was 0.419, meeting the acceptable threshold of 0.25 or higher. Q2 surpassed the suggested threshold score of 0.0. Furthermore, at p = 0.01 level, all path coefficients were significant (Table 6). All previous criteria, when considered together provided signals that the structural model fits the data.

Table 5. VIF, R², and Q² outcomes.

Label	(VIF)	Label	(VIF)	Label	(VIF)	Label	(VIF)	Label	(VIF)
IDPB_1	1.938	IFI_1	1.584	IHIE_1	1.642	PDI_1	1.727	THP1	2.336
IDPB_2	2.134	IFI_2	1.752	IHIE_2	1.781	PDI_2	1.825	THP2	2.397
IDPB_3	2.035	IFI_3	1.651	IHIE_3	1.421	PDI_3	1.749	THP3	2.491
						PDI_4	1.606	THP4	2.365
								THP5	2.515
Perceived destination image (PDI)						R ²	0.630	Q ²	0.370
Tourism and hospitality performance (THP)						R ²	0.419	Q ²	0.273

Also, the PLS-SEM model's Goodness of Fit (GoF) can be estimated by calculating the equation below. Values of 0.1, 0.25, and 0.36 predict low, medium, and high GoF, respectively. The GoF of our model is 0.604, implying a high GoF^[87].

$$GoF = \sqrt{AVE_{avy} \times R^2_{avy}}$$

After accepting the validity of both models (outer and inner), a bootstrapping technique with 5000 iterations was conducting employing SmartPLS V.3 to assess the study hypotheses (**Table 6**).

Table 6. Hypotheses results.

Paths	β value	t value	p value	Result
Direct Paths				
H1- IHIE -> PDI	0.195	4.766	0.000	✓
H2- IDPB -> PDI	0.347	7.714	0.000	✓
H3- IFI -> PDI	0.371	9.064	0.000	✓
H4- PDI -> THP	0.648	19.996	0.000	✓
Indirect Mediating Paths				
H5- IHIE -> PDI -> THP	0.127	4.575	0.000	✓
H6- IDPB -> PDI -> THP	0.225	7.462	0.000	✓
H7- IFI -> PDI -> THP	0.240	7.691	0.000	✓

The data presented in **Table 6** and shown in **Figure 2**, indicate that the IHIE, IDPB, and IFI positively affected PDI at ($\beta = 0.195$, $t = 4.766$, $p = 0.000$), ($\beta = 0.347$, $t = 7.714$, $p = 0.000$), and ($\beta = 0.371$, $t = 9.064$, $p = 0.000$), correspondingly, supporting H1, H2 and H3. Additionally, The PDI impacted THP at $\beta = 0.648$, $t = 19.996$, and $p = 0.000$, thus proving H4. Regarding the mediation effect, at ($\beta = 0.127$, $t = 4.575$, $p = 0.000$), ($\beta = 0.225$, $t = 7.462$, $p = 0.000$), and ($\beta = 0.240$, $t = 7.691$, $p = 0.000$) the PDI mediate the link between the IHIE, IDPB, and IFI and THP, respectively, thus accepting H5, H6, and H7.

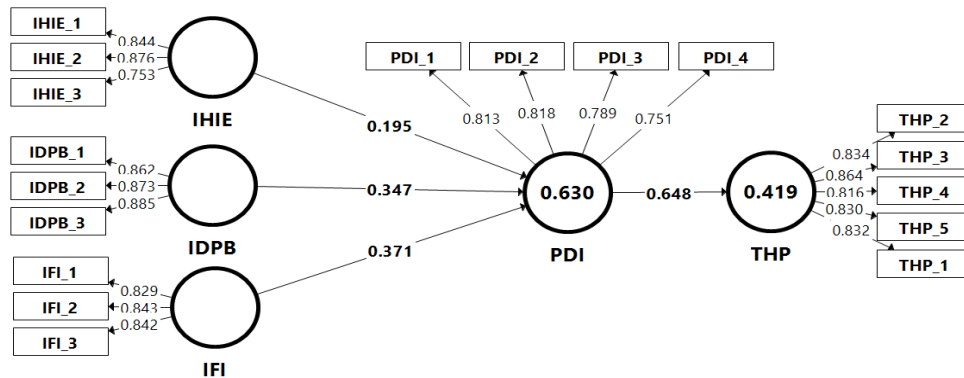


Figure 2. Estimation of structure model.

5. Discussion and Theoretical Implications

According to Hassan et al.^[29], Saudi Arabia is carefully utilizing sports as a vital instrument to improve its reputation abroad. Further, sports investments are a kind of sports diplomacy that strengthen Saudi Arabia's standing and influence internationally^[26]. In this context, The Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority significantly assisted Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 plan in 2016^[25]. In an effort to establish itself as a major global economic force, Saudi Arabia has made significant investments in the biggest sports leagues, clubs, and athletes^[28]. Tourism policy and decision makers employ a range of marketing strategies to draw in foreign tourists^[52]. The literature on tourism destinations, management, and marketing has given a great deal of attention to the organization of sporting and cultural events^[16]. Sports have the power to boost travel and enhance image^[67].

Investing in sports components, especially hosting international events, digital platforms and broadcasting, and football infrastructure, as well as attracting football celebrities to the Saudi Football League, has helped significantly in directing the attention of fans from around the world to the desire to explore Saudi Arabia up close rather than receiving opinions from sources that may be unverified and biased. This is likely to improve Saudi Arabia's image as a destination. In this vein, the study findings proved that investment in hosting international events, digital platforms and broadcasting, and football infrastructure are positively correlated with perceived destination image (H1, H2, H3), Murray^[26] contends that Saudi Arabia's influence and reputation are enhanced internationally by its investment in sports. Sports are a critical tool that the Kingdom is strategically exploiting to enhance its public image internationally^[29]. According to Lobo et al.^[60], destination image frequently places a focus on the sustainability of events and outside tourist enjoyment. Visitors' attitudes and behaviors are influenced by the caliber of sporting events and the services offered, which in turn forms their impressions of the destination^[67,68]. Therefore, the degree of visitor satisfaction with a place helps to create a favorable impression of the place, which in turn raises the intention of returning there in the future^[64,65]. Bruhn et al.^[71] state that social media content influences brand image by raising brand awareness^[72]. Moreover, electronic word-of-mouth propagates positive imagery^[73]. Taylor et al.^[27] claim that Saudi Arabia has supported European football clubs and made large investments in sports media. Consequently, to advertise the Kingdom as a destination for sports competitions, the Saudi government is investing billions of dollars on sports facilities^[22].

Regarding (H4), the study result proved that perceived destination image is positively correlated with tourism and hospitality sector performance. Koo^[61] suggests that tourists who are content with their destination are more likely to be devoted to it. This is predicated on the generally accepted notion that loyalty is a major deciding factor when choosing a travel destination^[63]. Moreover, the caliber of sporting activities and the

services provided impact visitors' attitudes and behaviors, which in turn shapes their perceptions of the site^[67,68]. The sustainability of events and tourist enjoyment are often prioritized in destination image, which improves the performance of the tourism sector^[60].

Notably, the research results demonstrated that perceived destination image mediates the relationship between investment in (hosting international events, digital platforms and broadcasting, and football infrastructure) and tourism and hospitality sector performance (H5, H6, H7). Sports may increase traveler loyalty by providing a lot of chances to enhance a destination's reputation^[41,66]. The caliber of athletic events and the amenities provided impact visitor attitudes and behavior, which in turn shapes the destination's perceptions and image^[67]. The sustainability of events and factors other than visitor satisfaction are usually prioritized in destination image^[60]. On the other hand, digital transformation holds significance in the realm of sports as it plays a pivotal role in extending the reach of content and enhancing the overall fan experience^[34]. Further, the global sports industry, broadcasters, and sporting events at all levels are utilizing digital technology more and more^[42]. According to Jeong and Kim^[39], a destination's image, perceived value, and degree of visitor pleasure are only a few examples of the variables that may have a big impact on destination loyalty. Visitors' views and behaviors are influenced by the caliber of sporting events and the amenities offered, which in turn affects how they perceive the location^[67,68]. Thus, choosing to extend one's stay, buying souvenirs, or sharing information about the occasion on social media^[72,75]. Additionally, Football has developed into a symbol of Saudi Arabia's international visibility in nation branding, capitalizing on the sport's global appeal and its reach to a global audience^[22]. Football is a symbol of passion and unity that transcends boundaries, languages, and cultural differences^[88].

6. Practical Implications

This study makes a considerable contribution to the existing literature by empirically validating previous arguments regarding the influence of sports and sports events, especially football, on destination image and hospitality and tourism performance, as evidenced by the case of Saudi Arabia. By examining how developing countries strategically leverage their capabilities in developing sports events or leagues to enhance their soft power and global appeal, this study emphasizes the transformative possibility of such developments on a country's international perception. Based on the results of the study, some practical recommendations can be made to those responsible for the tourism and sports sectors, the first of which is the need for long-term planning to develop the components of sports investment, I mean encouraged investment in digital platforms and broadcasting (IDPB), investment in football infrastructure (IFI), and investment in hosting international events (IHIE), as it is the soft power through which proactive branding initiatives for the destination and targeted promotional campaigns can be implemented to maximize and improve the image of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a unique tourist destination. Sports platforms should be exploited to market the unique tourist destinations in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, whether cultural, entertainment or their capabilities to organize any event. Finally, it is recommended to benefit from the Saudi football celebrities in the Saudi League promote and activate electronic word of mouth about tourist destinations in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by encouraging them to provide information, photos or videos about tourist destinations in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on their accounts on social media, thus enhancing the image of the destination and maximizing the benefits of the tourism sector.

7. Conclusion

Sports investment presents a significant opportunity for Saudi Arabia to enhance its destination image and optimize tourism performance. The study seeks to respond to some calls that encourage examining the

effects of sporting events and investments in different countries, given the different results reported in previous studies. The study surveyed the opinions of 402 football and sports fans in Saudi Arabia. The data were analysed using the structural equation method through partial least squares with the help of the SmartPLS program. The results showed a positive impact of each investment in digital platforms and broadcasting (IDPB), investment in football infrastructure (IFI), and investment in hosting international events (IHIE) on Destination Image, as well as a positive impact of Destination Image on Tourism Performance in Saudi Arabia. Finally, Destination Image successfully mediates the relationship between the three components of sports investment and improving tourism performance. The study recommended the need for long-term investment in sports magazines to improve the image of Saudi tourist destinations, with the need to fully adhere to the local culture, which is considered one of the strengths in creating a distinctive national brand.

8. Limitations and future research

This study, like other studies in social science, has some limitations that open avenues for future research opportunities. The study is conducted in a specific context and regions (sports industry in KSA), possibly influencing the generalizability of the study results to other contexts. Future research opportunities might conduct comparative research papers to involve different countries to determine the key dimensions that can explain the interrelationship between the variables in the research model. Our study did not account for a number of external variables like worldwide economic conditions, political turmoil, or even epidemic outbreaks such as the COVID-19 pandemic which could affect sports investment and tourism performance independently. It may be possible in future research to consider these variables with a view to getting a greater insight into the dynamics at work. In conclusion, alternative mediators like social media influence on sport fans' experiential satisfaction or environmental sustainability can be used to get better understanding of how sports investments affect tourism performance

Funding

“This work was supported by the Deanship of Scientific Research, Vice Presidency for Graduate Studies and Scientific Research, King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia (KFU242484)”.

Institutional Review Board Statement

“The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the deanship of scientific research ethical committee, King Faisal University (project number: KFU242484, date of approval: 01/04/2024)”.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

Data is available upon request from researchers who meet the eligibility criteria. Kindly contact the first author privately through e-mail.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest and confirm that there are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests.

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