

Nation Branding of Kuwait Versus Saudi Arabia: A Comparative Thematic Content Analysis of
Official Tourism Instagram Accounts @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Kuwait and Saudi Arabia use their official Arabic-language tourism Instagram accounts to frame their national identity. Despite sharing a common Gulf context, the two countries differ substantially in their global visibility. Drawing on framing theory and Anholt's nation branding competitive identity framework, the thesis conducts a comparative thematic content analysis of 300 posts from @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar, coded using a 12-theme codebook for dominant theme ($\alpha = .857$), post format, and audience engagement. Both accounts prioritize events and entertainment but differ in their national identity construction: Kuwait foregrounds patriotism, people, and future-oriented narratives, while Saudi Arabia emphasizes nature, culture, and art. Kuwait generated stronger engagement per post despite its smaller follower base, suggesting thematic focus matters more than scale. People and hospitality theme drove the highest engagement in both accounts, and video reels consistently outperformed photos and carousel formats. The findings offer an empirically grounded, Gulf-specific contribution to nation branding and digital communication research, with actionable implications for Kuwait's tourism strategy.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the span of less than a decade, Saudi Arabia has become one of the most talked-about destinations on the global stage. Formula One races light up the Jeddah Corniche Circuit. The ancient sandstone city of Al-Ula draws international visitors who have never previously associated the Saudi Kingdom with cultural tourism. NEOM commands global media coverage. Six Flags Qiddiya City, which is the first Six Flags theme park outside North America, opened on New Year's Eve 2025. AMAALA has launched along the Red Sea coast as an ultra-luxury wellness destination. Diriyah, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is being transformed into a cultural tourism hub. Cristiano Ronaldo serves as a prominent global ambassador, promoting the Kingdom's tourism, culture, and sports initiatives following his 2023 move to Al-Nassr (AlSahli et al., 2025; Alsaaidi, 2020). The 2034 FIFA World Cup is on its way (FIFA, 2024). All of this is unfolding under Vision 2030, a national transformation strategy that has repositioned Saudi Arabia from an oil-dependent economy into one of the most aggressively pursued tourism frontiers on earth.

Kuwait on the other hand, sits fewer than 500 miles away. It shares the same Gulf coastline, the same language, the same Islamic heritage, and many of the same geopolitical ambitions. It is one of the wealthiest nations per capita on earth (World Bank, 2023). However, beyond the immediate Gulf region, Kuwait remains largely invisible on the international stage, which is a pattern consistent with the broader visibility challenges that Arab Gulf states outside the UAE and Qatar continue to face in the global branding marketplace (Zeineddine, 2017). On the global stage of nation branding, where visibility, image, and narrative are strategic assets, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia occupy dramatically different positions, despite being neighbors.

This contrast is not merely anecdotal. It reflects a deeper and consequential difference in how these two Arab Gulf states have approached the practice of nation branding, which is the strategic effort to shape how a country is perceived internationally through deliberate communication (Anholt, 2007). Saudi Arabia, galvanized by Vision 2030 and its leadership's ambitions, has invested heavily in projecting a transformed national image (Alsaaidi, 2020; AlSahli et al., 2025). Kuwait, despite its own long-term development strategy—Kuwait Vision 2035, known as New Kuwait (Sarie & Ismail, 2021)—has yet to achieve comparable international visibility. The question is not whether Kuwait has a story worth telling. The question is whether it is telling that story effectively, to whom, and through what channels.

Nation Branding, Social Media, and the Gulf Arab Countries

Nation branding, which is the strategic management of a country's international reputation, has become one of the defining communication challenges of the 21st century. As Anholt (2007) argues, nations that fail to manage their image risk being defined by others' perceptions rather than their own narratives. In an increasingly interconnected global economy, where countries compete for tourism revenues, foreign investment, skilled talent, and geopolitical influence, the ability to project a compelling, coherent national identity is no longer optional; it is strategic.

Social media, and Instagram in particular, has emerged as a primary arena for this competition (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Official tourism accounts, which are state-operated, carefully curated, and globally accessible, function as the most direct vehicle through which governments frame their national identity to international audiences. Unlike broadcast media or press releases, Instagram allows destination organizations to communicate visually, continuously,

and at scale, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers entirely (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). What a government chooses to photograph, caption, and publish on its official tourism account, is a series of framing decisions: choices about which aspects of national life to foreground, which stories to tell, and which version of the nation to present to the world (Entman, 1993).

For Arab Gulf states, these framing decisions carry particular weight. Both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are navigating a pivotal moment of national transformation, seeking to diversify their economies away from oil dependency, attract international tourism and investments, and reposition themselves on the global stage (Sarie & Ismail, 2021; Alsaaidi, 2020). However, the two countries are at distinctly different stages of this journey, and their social media communication strategies can reflect this journey. Understanding how each country frames its national identity on Instagram, which themes it emphasizes, which narratives it constructs, and how audiences respond, is therefore both an academically significant and practically important question.

Researcher Positionality

Since arriving in the United States in 2009, I have frequently been asked where I am from. When I identify myself as Kuwaiti, I am often met with a follow-up question such as, “Where is that?” Over time, I found myself repeatedly explaining Kuwait’s location by referencing more globally recognized places nearby, such as Saudi Arabia or Dubai. This recurring interaction has been personally meaningful and has also highlighted a broader issue relevant to this thesis: Kuwait’s relatively limited visibility in international public awareness compared with neighboring Gulf destinations.

These everyday encounters crystallized a question that is simultaneously personal and scholarly: why are some nations immediately legible to international audiences while others, equally rich in history, culture, and resources, remain nearly invisible?

This lived experience of Kuwait's invisibility on the world stage is what first directed the researcher's attention toward nation branding as a field of inquiry, and toward Instagram as a site where that branding is actualized. The researcher's positionality as a Kuwaiti national brings both an advantage and a responsibility to this thesis.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing importance of social media in destination marketing and nation branding, comparative studies of official tourism Instagram accounts in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region remain scarce. The existing literature on Gulf nation branding tends to focus on the UAE, Qatar and recently Saudi Arabia—particularly Dubai and Abu Dhabi—with Kuwait receiving minimal scholarly attention (Zeineddine, 2017; Alsaaidi, 2020). No known published study has systematically compared Kuwait's and Saudi Arabia's official tourism Instagram communication through the lens of framing theory.

This gap is consequential. Without empirical data on how these countries currently frame their national identities on social media, and without comparative analysis that reveals differences among them, policymakers, tourism communication professionals, and scholars lack the evidence base needed to understand, evaluate, and improve Gulf nation branding strategies. This thesis addresses that gap directly.

Also worth noting, this thesis was completed within a rapidly changing world. In late February 2026—while the final pages of this study were being written—the Middle East was

shaken by a new wave of conflict, as the United States and Israel launched a series of strikes on Iran, triggering a wave of retaliatory missile and drone attacks across the Gulf region. Kuwait was directly affected: Ali Al Salem Air Base came under ballistic missile attack, Kuwait International Airport was struck, the US Embassy in Kuwait was targeted and subsequently closed, and critical national infrastructure—including oil facilities, desalination plants, energy installations, and governmental buildings—sustained damage. These events fall outside the timeframe of this study, but they remain relevant. If anything, they serve as a reminder of why nation branding matters, because when a country is navigating uncertainty on multiple fronts, a clear and confident national identity becomes one of its most important assets.

Situation of the Thesis

The goal of this thesis is to conduct a comparative thematic content analysis of @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar on Instagram, examining how each country frames its national identity through official tourism communication, and assessing how post themes and formats relate to patterns of audience engagement.

The thesis analyzes a sample of 150 posts from each account (N = 300), collected from October 31, 2025, and working backward chronologically until the sample size is obtained. Posts are coded along five variables—format, theme, language, like count, and comment count—using a 12-theme codebook derived from past nation branding and tourism communication literature (McCallum, 2025; Alsaaidi, 2020; Altamimi et al., 2023; Mele et al., 2021; Mele et al., 2023; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013; Zeineddine, 2017). The analytical approach is framing theory, which holds that communication involves the selective emphasis of certain realities over others, shaping how audiences perceive the subject being communicated (Entman, 1993).

Research Questions

The thesis is guided by three research questions, each comprising sub-questions that address specific dimensions of the comparative analysis:

RQ1. Which themes are most and least prevalent in Kuwait's and Saudi Arabia's official tourism Instagram accounts?

RQ1a. Which themes are most and least prevalent in @VisitKuwait?

RQ1b. Which themes are most and least prevalent in @VisitSaudi.Ar?

RQ1c. How do theme distributions differ between @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar?

RQ2. How does engagement vary across themes in @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar?

RQ2a. How do likes vary across themes in @VisitKuwait?

RQ2b. How do likes vary across themes in @VisitSaudi.Ar?

RQ2c. How do comments vary across themes in @VisitKuwait?

RQ2d. How do comments vary across themes in @VisitSaudi.Ar?

RQ2e. How do theme–engagement patterns compare between @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar?

RQ3. How does engagement vary across post formats in @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar?

RQ3a. How do likes vary across post formats in @VisitKuwait?

RQ3b. How do likes vary across post formats in @VisitSaudi.Ar?

RQ3c. How do comments vary across post formats in @VisitKuwait?

RQ3d. How do comments vary across post formats in @VisitSaudi.Ar?

RQ3e. How do format–engagement patterns compare between @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar?

Significance of the Thesis

This thesis makes contributions at three distinct levels. First, academically, it addresses a documented gap in Gulf nations' communication research by providing the first systematic comparative content analysis of the official tourism Instagram accounts of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. It applies framing theory to a regional context that the existing literature has understudied, and it produces a validated 12-theme codebook for Gulf tourism Instagram content that future researchers can adapt and build upon.

Next, from a policy standpoint, the thesis generates directly actionable findings for Kuwait's tourism communication strategy. By mapping the thematic frames currently used by both accounts and measuring which frames drive the highest audience engagement, the thesis provides an evidence base for the Kuwait Tourism Authority and relevant ministries to evaluate and improve their social media communication (El Amine, 2023; Sarie & Ismail, 2021). In a context where Kuwait is actively seeking to develop tourism as a pillar of its post-oil economy (Sarie & Ismail, 2021), this kind of empirical, comparative intelligence is both timely and valuable.

Finally, more broadly, this thesis demonstrates that communication scholarship has a concrete and practical role to play in the development of Gulf national strategy, that the question of how a country tells its story is not merely an aesthetic concern, but a matter of economic and geopolitical consequence.

Organization of the Thesis

The remainder of this thesis is organized as follows. Chapter 2 presents the literature review, followed by Chapter 3, which details the methodology, including the research design,

sampling strategy, codebook, intercoder reliability procedure, and data analysis plan. Chapter 4 presents the results, organized by research question. Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical frameworks and prior literature, drawing out implications for Kuwait's nation branding strategy. Chapter 6 concludes with a summary of contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter establishes the theoretical and contextual foundation of the thesis. It develops the conceptual framework for systematically analyzing framing in the official tourism Instagram accounts of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The review flows into six parts: It begins by outlining the key concepts and major debates in nation branding scholarship, then situates nation branding within the broader literatures on soft power and public diplomacy. It next examines framing theory as the thesis's primary analytical lens, with particular attention to prior research on the conceptualization and operationalization of framing in nation branding and digital public diplomacy. The fourth part addresses the affordances of Instagram and their implications for visual framing and destination branding. The fifth part establishes the Gulf context and provides the rationale for selecting Kuwait and Saudi Arabia as comparative cases. The chapter concludes by identifying the research gap, presenting the conceptual model, and linking the literature review to the methodological design discussed in Chapter 3.

Nation Branding: Definitions, Development, and Foundational Frameworks

Nation branding has become increasingly prominent in global communication and international image management over the past few decades (Gilboa, 2008). In its broadest sense, nation branding refers to the strategic effort through which a country seeks to shape or improve its image in the eyes of external audiences. According to Anholt (1996), nation branding involves a state's attempt to create and project a deliberately designed and managed national image through coordinated communication. Similar to commercial branding, its purpose is to influence associations, shape perceptions, and distinguish the nation in a competitive international environment. The term is widely associated with Simon Anholt, whose work helped formalize the field through a multidimensional understanding of national reputation. As shown in Figure 1, Anholt's framework organizes national branding into six key dimensions: tourism, exports, people, culture and heritage, investment and immigration, and governance (Anholt, 2007). These dimensions are closely related to what Anholt later developed more explicitly as competitive identity, which emphasizes the alignment between a nation's internal sense of identity and the image it projects externally.

Figure 1. Anholt's Nation Brand Hexagon Model



The literature also draws important distinctions between nation branding and related concepts. Country image refers to the set of perceptions, associations, and attitudes that external publics hold about a given nation as a result of exposure to its products, people, media, and political actions (Kotler & Gertner, 2007). In contrast to nation branding, which functions as a strategic input, country image is better understood as an outcome, and the two are not necessarily aligned (Rojas-Méndez & Khoshnevis, 2023). Place branding is broader than destination branding, as it encompasses subnational entities such as cities and regions (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). In contrast, destination branding is more narrowly focused on promoting a

place as a tourism product (Morgan et al., 2011). For this thesis, official tourism Instagram accounts operate at the intersection of these concepts: they function as instruments of destination branding, given their tourism-specific and promotional orientation, while simultaneously serving as vehicles of nation branding by projecting state-managed identity claims through Arabic-language tourism communication.

At the same time, nation branding has been subject to substantial critical scholarship that questions its normative assumptions. Anholt (2011) himself argues that strategic communication alone rarely produces measurable changes in national reputation, and that a country's image is shaped more by its actual policies and practices than by promotional messaging. Aronczyk (2013) extends this critique by arguing that nation branding can commodify national identity, reducing complex, contested cultural realities into simplified, internationally legible narratives. Van Ham (2002) similarly argues that nation branding can allow authoritarian or semi-democratic governments to project an image of openness and modernity to the outside world while maintaining domestic political restrictions that contradict that image. This concern is particularly relevant in the Gulf context. In both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, official tourism discourse may be understood not only as promotional messaging but also as a strategic site where internal tensions, such as those between religious tradition and social liberalization, are selectively managed and communicated.

Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, and Nation Branding in Digital Media

Nation branding exists within the broader field of public diplomacy, which Nye (2004) describes as the effort to shape the perceptions of foreign publics through communication, cultural exchange, and the projection of values. Soft power is a central logic of public

diplomacy: the ability to attract rather than coerce, rooted in a country's culture, political values, and policy choices (Nye, 2004). Within this framework, scholars conceptualize nation branding as a strategic communication practice that transforms soft power aspirations into systematic reputation management within the contemporary global arena (Van Ham, 2002).

The rise of digital media has significantly restructured the communicative environment of both nation branding and public diplomacy. States no longer rely solely on traditional broadcast media or formal diplomatic channels to reach foreign audiences; instead, they produce and circulate content through algorithmically organized platforms that offer unprecedented scale, speed, and immediacy (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). This shift enables states to communicate more directly without relying entirely on international intermediaries. However, it also exposes official narratives to commentary, counter-narratives, and user-generated criticism in ways that were less central in traditional diplomatic communication (Dinnie, 2008). As a result, digital platforms create a competitive symbolic environment in which states must maintain strategic consistency across large volumes of content while also responding to the participatory nature of online communication.

It is in this context that Gilboa (2008) identifies a shift toward what he describes as media diplomacy, in which mass media platforms are no longer merely channels of diplomatic communication but active actors in shaping the conditions under which national reputation is framed. The algorithmic logic of social media platforms further intensifies this process by introducing platform-specific patterns of visibility, curation, and amplification that do not necessarily align with state communication priorities (Bucher, 2017). The practical implication is that digital nation branding requires more than strategic content production; it also requires

platform-specific communication strategies that adapt national identity claims to the affordances and constraints of particular platforms. The present thesis examines Instagram as one such platform-specific environment, focusing on how Kuwait and Saudi Arabia align their nation-branding objectives with a visual-first, algorithmically curated communication ecology.

A related concept is commercial nationalism, developed by Bolin and Miazhevich (2018), which argues that contemporary states increasingly define themselves through the logics of commercial branding, presenting the state itself as a product and its cultural and political values as exportable assets. This model is especially relevant to Arab Gulf states, where economic diversification strategies place strong emphasis on tourism promotion as both a revenue source and a reputational instrument (AlSaied, 2023). In this context, official tourism communication in both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia does more than promote travel; it also advances specific forms of national identity designed for international consumption. This makes such communication an analytically useful site for examining the overlap between commercial branding logics and diplomatic image management.

Digital public diplomacy research has examined how states use platforms such as Instagram, X, and Facebook for crisis communication, foreign ministry messaging, and leader branding (AlSaied, 2023; Collins et al., 2019; Savic & Sahovic, 2014). However, official tourism Instagram accounts have received far less attention as a distinct form of state digital communication. Unlike ministerial or overtly political social media, these accounts are more visual, more commercially oriented, and more explicitly curated around destination promotion. At the same time, they continue to encode national identity claims for external audiences. As

such, official tourism Instagram accounts occupy an under-explored space between tourism marketing research and political communication research, a space this thesis seeks to address.

Framing Theory as a Lens for Digital Nation Branding

The primary theoretical framework used in this thesis is framing theory. In Entman's (1993) foundational formulation, framing refers to the selection and emphasis of certain aspects of perceived reality in order to define a problem, identify causes, make moral evaluations, and suggest appropriate responses. In this sense, framing simultaneously highlights some elements of reality while marginalizing or obscuring others; what is made visible is analytically important, but so is what is omitted. This selective logic operates across multiple levels of communication, including the communicator, the text, and the audience. A similar idea appears in Tuchman's (1978) earlier metaphor of the news frame as a window, which emphasizes that any representation offers only a partial view rather than a complete one.

Entman (1993) further argues that frames may be located in the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the broader culture. In the present thesis, however, the primary analytical focus is the text, understood here in a broad sense to include the visual and written elements of Instagram posts. At this level, the frames can be identified by the patterned presence or absence of key words, images, phrases, symbols, and thematic clusters that function as framing devices. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) operationalized this logic by coding generic frames through a standardized instrument, identifying five recurring frames in European news coverage: attribution of responsibility, conflict, human interest, morality, and economic consequences. Their work established an important methodological precedent for the systematic and

comparative coding of frames across multiple texts, a logic that the present thesis adapts to Instagram's visual and multimodal environment.

Rhee (1997) conceptualizes framing as a socio-cognitive process that unfolds across three stages: acceptance of an informational message, assimilation of that information into existing schemas, and the development of a discursive model used to interpret subsequent related events. This perspective is especially relevant to destination branding, where visual representations may activate prior schemas about place, culture, and experience without requiring explicit verbal argumentation. For example, an urban skyline or luxury resort image may evoke associations with modernity and aspiration. In contrast, an image of traditional crafts or a cultural festival may evoke authenticity and heritage, even when those meanings are not explicitly stated in the caption. Van Gorp (2007) further emphasizes that such schemas are culturally embedded: frames depend on shared cultural knowledge, and their effectiveness is shaped by the degree to which their symbolic codes resonate with the interpretive resources of the audience.

Framing in Nation Branding and Public Diplomacy Research

Framing theory has been applied productively to nation branding and public diplomacy research, helping explain the strategic construction of communicative identity. In this context, frames function not only as cognitive structures but also as competitive instruments through which states promote preferred national identities over alternative or competing representations (Browning & de Oliveira, 2017). Anholt's (2007) concept of competitive identity is closely aligned with framing logic: effective nation branding depends on a state's ability to consistently foreground selected identity claims, such as modernity, heritage, safety, or cosmopolitanism, while limiting the salience of politically sensitive or reputationally damaging associations.

Entman (2008) extends framing theory to mediated public diplomacy through his concept of cascading activation, in which frames generated at the governmental level move through media networks and shape public interpretation. A similar dynamic may be observed in state-managed social media. However, in a more compressed form, official tourism accounts produce and distribute frames simultaneously, often with fewer traditional media intermediaries. Sheaffer and Gabay (2009) further argue that frame dominance—the sustained ability to establish a preferred frame as the dominant mode of interpretation—depends not only on the quality of communication, but also on institutional resources, strategic consistency, and media reach. This has direct relevance to the Kuwait–Saudi comparison, where Saudi Arabia’s larger institutional infrastructure and broader follower base may create structural advantages in frame circulation that cannot be reduced to the quality of individual posts.

Research that operationalizes framing in nation branding and tourism communication has used both generic and issue-specific frames. Stepchenkova and Zhan (2013), for example, conducted a comparative content analysis of destination management organization (DMO) photography and user-generated images of Peru, coding visual frames such as landscape, cultural heritage, adventure, and urban modernity. Their findings showed systematic differences between official and user-generated representations: DMO content emphasized heritage and cultural authenticity, whereas user-generated content highlighted experiential and adventure-oriented frames. Similarly, Avraham and Ketter (2012) examine media strategies in times of crisis and identify the use of reversal framing, in which highly visible images of modernity, development, or spectacle are deployed to displace negative associations. In the Gulf context, the strategic emphasis on megaprojects, futuristic architecture, and international events can be understood as a

comparable visual framing practice that seeks to replace associations of oil dependence or political conservatism with images of transformation and global openness.

Tourism photography has also been shown to rely on recurring visual codes. Albers and James (1988) argue that official tourism images systematically privilege motifs such as the untouched landscape, the iconic landmark, and the welcoming local, which together produce a stylized projection of place. In a similar vein, Messaris and Abraham (2001) contend that visual communication can condense ideological meanings into symbolic and aesthetic forms that appear natural or unmediated. This makes visual framing especially significant in nation branding, where meaning is often conveyed through imagery rather than explicit political language.

To systematically analyze visual framing, these theoretical insights must be translated into measurable coding variables. Rose (2014) identifies three sites of visual meaning-making: the image itself, the conditions of its production, and the conditions of its reception. For content analysis purposes, the image itself is the primary site of analysis. It can be examined through compositional variables such as subject type, markers of human presence and identity, spatial organization, color palette, and camera angle. Hanmakyugh (2017) demonstrates that these compositional features can convey consistent connotative meanings: high-angle shots may suggest vulnerability or subordination, low-angle shots may suggest power or authority, close-up framing may indicate intimacy or humanization, and wide, establishing shots may signal grandeur or aspiration. In the present thesis, such variables serve as observable indicators of the visual frames used in official tourism content and inform the coding scheme presented in Chapter 3.

Because framing analysis involves interpretation, it must be conducted with methodological rigor, particularly with respect to intercoder reliability. Intercoder reliability refers to the degree to which independent coders applying the same coding scheme to the same material arrive at consistent results. In practice, acceptable intercoder reliability depends on the use of clearly operationalized categories that minimize interpretive ambiguity, and it is commonly assessed using measures such as Cohen's kappa or Krippendorff's alpha, both of which account for agreement due to chance.

Social Media Destination Branding: Why Instagram Matters

Instagram has become a key platform for destination branding because it is built for visual storytelling. Boyd (2010) explains that “affordances” are the features of a platform that make some types of communication easier and others harder. These features shape how people share and interpret content, but they do not determine behavior in and of themselves. On Instagram, the most important affordances for destination branding include a strong focus on images and short videos, an algorithm that curates what users see, the combination of visuals with captions, visible engagement signals (likes and comments), hashtags that help content get discovered, and location tags (geotags).

Prior destination branding and nation branding content analyses commonly operationalize recurring thematic emphases (e.g., culture/heritage, events, nature/landscapes, hospitality, food, sport, luxury, and future-oriented narratives) to examine how destinations and nations are framed through official communication (McCallum, 2025; Alsaaidi, 2020; Altamimi et al., 2023; Mele et al., 2021; Mele et al., 2023; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013; Zeineddine, 2017). Building on this tradition, the present thesis operationalizes a set of twelve thematic categories that capture

common tourism-branding and nation-branding cues visible in Gulf tourism communication; these themes are fully operationalized in Chapter 3.

Specifically, posts were coded into twelve thematic categories: Art, Culture, Events & Entertainment, Food, Luxury, Modernity, Nature, Patriotism, People & Hospitality, Religious, Sport, and Visionary.

Taken together, this literature suggests that official tourism communication foregrounds recurring thematic emphases that can be systematically identified through content analysis. To map how each country's official account prioritizes these themes, this thesis asks:

RQ1. Which themes are most and least prevalent in Kuwait's and Saudi Arabia's official tourism Instagram accounts?

- **RQ1a.** Which themes are most and least prevalent in @VisitKuwait?
- **RQ1b.** Which themes are most and least prevalent in @VisitSaudi.Ar?
- **RQ1c.** How do theme distributions differ between @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar?

Instagram's communicative architecture is defined above all by visual primacy. Unlike text-centered platforms, Instagram places images and short-form videos, also known as reels, at the center of meaning-making. At the same time, captions often function as interpretive support rather than as the primary content. This structural feature increases the significance of visual framing in nation-branding communication. Compositional decisions in official tourism imagery, such as color, camera angle, subject selection, and spatial arrangement, are not merely supplementary to the text but central to how meaning is conveyed. Highfield and Leaver (2016)

describe this as an Instagrammatic logic, in which aesthetic choices are systematically shaped to maximize engagement within Instagram's attention environment.

Captions can also play an important framing role through what Barthes (1977) describes as anchorage: textual cues that guide viewers toward preferred interpretations of otherwise polysemous images. Hashtag indexing extends this function by placing individual posts within broader thematic networks, thereby increasing discoverability and strengthening narrative cohesion. Together, captions and hashtags form the textual component of a multimodal framing system in which visual and textual elements interact to produce and reinforce identity claims.

Instagram's algorithmic curation introduces an additional layer of platform logic that directly affects institutional communication. Highfield and Leaver (2016) note that Instagram's feed-ranking system tends to prioritize content that generates rapid and sustained engagement, thereby increasing the visibility of already high-performing posts and creating feedback loops that can reinforce certain frames over others. In this sense, the platform does not simply distribute state-generated content passively; it also shapes which identity narratives become more visible and which remain peripheral. This introduces an important dimension of platform agency that official account managers must navigate strategically.

Instagram's communicative environment also allows for observing audience response through visible engagement indicators such as likes and comments. Marwick (2015) argues that activity within the attention economy can function as a proxy for resonance and relevance. At the same time, such metrics must be interpreted cautiously. Bot activity may artificially inflate engagement, paid promotion can increase visibility independent of organic resonance, and differences in follower size may make raw engagement counts misleading (Ferrara et al., 2016).

In this thesis, likes and comments are treated as exploratory indicators of visible resonance rather than direct measures of persuasion or attitudinal change, and cross-account interpretation is made cautiously, given differences in follower base.

Because Instagram makes audience response visible through likes and comments, the next step is to examine how engagement varies across themes within each account and how those patterns compare across countries. Accordingly:

RQ2. How does engagement vary across themes in @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar?

- **RQ2a.** How do likes vary across themes in @VisitKuwait?
- **RQ2b.** How do likes vary across themes in @VisitSaudi.Ar?
- **RQ2c.** How do comments vary across themes in @VisitKuwait?
- **RQ2d.** How do comments vary across themes in @VisitSaudi.Ar?
- **RQ2e.** How do theme–engagement patterns compare between @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar?

Instagram’s grid-based profile format also creates cumulative narrative effects that extend beyond individual posts. Rather than functioning as isolated content units, posts become part of a curated visual archive in which repeated thematic emphasis can reinforce frame salience, or what Entman (1993) describes as the sustained foregrounding of particular interpretive schemas across communicative texts. Over time, the repeated use of heritage imagery, luxury tourism visuals, or urban modernization narratives can stabilize a particular interpretive frame, making it the dominant way in which a destination is represented. This cumulative dimension is especially

important for nation branding because it allows states to construct relatively coherent narratives of national identity through sustained visual consistency.

In addition to themes, Instagram content is delivered through different post formats that may shape visibility and interaction. The thesis therefore, examines whether engagement varies by format within each account and across accounts:

RQ3. How does engagement vary across post formats in @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar?

- **RQ3a.** How do likes vary across post formats in @VisitKuwait?
- **RQ3b.** How do likes vary across post formats in @VisitSaudi.Ar?
- **RQ3c.** How do comments vary across post formats in @VisitKuwait?
- **RQ3d.** How do comments vary across post formats in @VisitSaudi.Ar?
- **RQ3e.** How do format–engagement patterns compare between @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar?

The close relationship between Instagram’s affordances and the communicative needs of destination branding helps explain why it has become a widely used platform in official tourism communication across Arab Gulf states. The comparative coding of destination management organization imagery by Stepchenkova and Zhan (2013) provides a clear methodological precedent for the present thesis. This research builds on that precedent by incorporating engagement metrics as an additional layer of analysis and by placing the comparison within a theoretically grounded most-similar systems design.

Gulf Context and Case Rationale: Kuwait and Saudi Arabia

Economic transformation in the Gulf region has been rapid and sustained, encouraging states to adopt increasingly ambitious branding strategies. A combination of geopolitical pressures, international scrutiny, relatively small citizen populations, oil-based economic structures, and accelerated modernization has made international image management especially important for attracting investment, tourism, and diplomatic goodwill (Ali & Abdalla, 2025). In this context, soft power, which Nye (2004) defines as the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion, is particularly valuable for states whose geopolitical influence depends more on international legitimacy, economic partnerships, and reputational capital than on military power alone. Both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have therefore invested significantly in tourism branding as part of broader soft power and image-management strategies (El Amine, 2023).

At the same time, the Gulf context is shaped by a set of image-management challenges that complicate nation-branding efforts. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait continue to face international criticism in areas such as human rights, political governance, and social freedoms, creating potential gaps between the national image projected through official tourism communication and the interpretations held by foreign audiences (Cooper et al., 2009). As Aronczyk (2013) and Van Ham (2002) suggest, nation branding can function as a strategic response to this credibility gap by foregrounding internationally legible values—such as hospitality, cultural richness, and modernization—while reducing the visibility of more politically sensitive aspects of national identity. In this sense, official tourism communication does not simply promote destinations; it

also constructs a commercially and reputationally viable narrative space that can partially redirect attention away from more contested dimensions of the state's image.

Comparative Case Selection: A Most-Similar Systems Design

The selection of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia as comparative cases is guided by a most-similar systems design, as outlined by Przeworski and Teune (1970), which seeks to maximize structural similarities across cases to isolate the factor of interest better. In this thesis, the strategic orientation of nation branding is treated as a plausible explanation for variation in framing patterns. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia share a dense set of structural similarities: both are Arab Gulf states operating within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) framework, both use Arabic as an official language, both identify Islam as the state religion, and both operate within broadly comparable cultural and social environments. In addition, hydrocarbon-based economies share the following: they both pursue diversification strategies, position tourism as part of those strategies, and use the same platform environment to communicate with broadly similar international audiences. These shared conditions reduce contextual noise and create a controlled comparative setting in which differences in framing can be interpreted more plausibly as strategic choice than as broad structural divergence.

At the same time, the two cases differ meaningfully in their strategic orientation and institutional capacity, which makes the comparison analytically valuable. One of the most visible and internationally oriented nation-branding initiatives in the contemporary Gulf is Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, launched in 2016 under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Within this framework, the Saudi Tourism Authority has developed an integrated campaign ecosystem in which megaprojects (such as NEOM, AIUla, and the Red Sea Project), large-scale international

events (such as Riyadh Season), and high-intensity digital storytelling are coordinated within a relatively centralized institutional structure. This communication model is characterized by high output, strong visual ambition, and a relatively consistent narrative centered on transformation, modernization, and global openness (AlSahli et al., 2025). In this sense, Saudi Arabia's strategy may be expected to encourage framing patterns that emphasize modernity, transformation, and future-oriented aspiration.

Kuwait's Vision 2035, also referred to as New Kuwait, reflects a different strategic orientation. Rather than centering its national image on spectacle or large-scale transformation, Vision 2035 places greater emphasis on governance quality, institutional development, financial-sector growth, regional cooperation, and humanitarian engagement (Sarie & Ismail, 2021). This orientation aligns more closely with dimensions of Anholt's (2007) competitive identity framework, such as governance, investment, and cultural heritage, rather than with the tourism-and-spectacle emphasis that appears more central in the Saudi case. At the same time, the gap between Kuwait's modernization ambitions and the uneven pace of economic diversification may create communication pressures that encourage greater emphasis on frames of heritage authenticity, institutional credibility, and cultural continuity, frames that may be more sustainable in external communication than highly visible claims of transformational change (Arman et al., 2022).

Language also matters in this comparison. Al-Rawi (2017) shows that Arabic-language social media communication in Arab Gulf states often foregrounds religious and cultural identity markers in ways that reflect specific audience assumptions and identity priorities. This suggests that language choice is itself a framing decision. For this reason, the present thesis focuses

specifically on the Arabic-language official tourism accounts to examine how Kuwait and Saudi Arabia construct and communicate their national identities through tourism-oriented digital media. This scope is recognized as an important boundary of the thesis, and future research comparing Arabic and English language content could provide a fuller account of digital nation-branding practices in the Gulf.

National Development Visions and Branding Infrastructure

Saudi Arabia's tourism-branding infrastructure operates on a large scale and within a relatively centralized institutional framework. The Saudi Tourism Authority is supported by substantial resources and a coordinated communication strategy that includes the promotion of megaprojects, international event marketing, influencer partnerships, and digital content production. This level of institutional coordination supports high-volume, visually ambitious, and relatively consistent tourism-oriented digital communication. Structurally, such capacity can provide an advantage in developing frame dominance, or the sustained ability to make a preferred interpretive frame the default lens through which a country is viewed by external audiences (Sheafer & Gabay, 2009).

Kuwait's tourism-branding infrastructure, by contrast, operates on a smaller scale and reflects a different strategic emphasis. Compared with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait's branding communication appears less centralized and less globally amplified, suggesting lower institutional investment in tourism branding and a different relationship between tourism promotion and national image construction. Rather than positioning tourism as the primary vehicle of national reinvention, Kuwait's official communication appears to place tourism within a broader identity narrative that emphasizes governance, diplomacy, and regional stability. These

differences in institutional capacity and strategic orientation are analytically important because, within a comparison where broader contextual conditions remain relatively similar, they help explain why framing patterns may vary across the two cases.

Research Gap, Thesis Contribution, and Link to the Research Questions

The literature reviewed in this chapter points to a central conclusion: nation branding is a strategic process through which states construct, project, and manage identity claims in competitive international environments. These identity claims are communicated through practices shaped by soft power, mediated representation, and narrative framing. In the digital context, official social media platforms have become particularly visible spaces where such identity claims are presented, repeated, and made publicly accessible.

Within this framework, official tourism Instagram accounts can be understood as state-managed communication spaces where broader nation-branding objectives are translated into recurring thematic and visual patterns. Drawing on nation branding scholarship, soft power, and framing theory, this thesis treats Instagram posts as communicative units through which national identity is selectively emphasized and visually performed. In this context, themes and post formats are not neutral features of content; rather, they function as observable indicators of how national image is constructed and promoted.

The literature also highlights the importance of platform-specific communication. Instagram's visual emphasis, multimodal structure, and visible engagement metrics make it particularly significant for destination branding and digital nation branding. At the same time, existing studies have not sufficiently examined how official tourism Instagram accounts in the Gulf use recurring themes and content formats to project national identity, nor have they

adequately compared how such content performs across different national cases using Arabic language material.

This thesis addresses that gap in three ways. First, it offers a comparative analysis of two Arab Gulf countries cases—Kuwait and Saudi Arabia—whose shared regional context but differing branding strategies make them analytically meaningful for comparison. Second, it applies framing theory to examine how recurring themes in official tourism content reflect broader nation-branding priorities. Third, it uses likes and comments as platform-visible indicators of relative resonance to assess which themes and post formats attract greater engagement.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter explains the methodological design used to answer the thesis research questions. It outlines the research approach, identifies the population and sample, describes the data collection and coding procedures, presents the coding scheme and its operationalization, reports the intercoder reliability process and results, and clarifies the analytical strategy used to interpret the findings.

Research Design

This thesis employed a comparative quantitative content analysis to examine how official tourism Instagram accounts in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia communicated national identity through tourism-oriented social media content. According to Krippendorff (2004) and Neuendorf (2017), content analysis is a research methodology that enables replicable and valid inferences from texts to the settings in which they are applied, making it especially suitable for systematic cross-case comparison of mediated communication. The design focused on quantitative description—theme frequencies, format distributions, and engagement patterns measured through likes and comments—interpreted through the conceptual lens of framing theory and nation-branding scholarship. This approach was appropriate because the thesis aimed not only to identify observable content patterns across the two accounts, but also to situate those patterns within the broader strategic identity-building context of official Gulf tourism communication.

The comparative logic of the thesis was based on the analytical value of examining two official tourism accounts—@VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar—within a shared regional context. The comparative design followed the most-similar systems logic developed by Przeworski and Teune (1970) and discussed in Chapter 2. Both accounts operate in the Arab Gulf

states, operate within comparable cultural and institutional environments, and function as official tourism-facing digital platforms. At the same time, they reflect different national visions, nation-branding strategies, and levels of institutional communication capacity. This made the comparison productive for identifying how framing patterns vary across two cases that are broadly similar but differ in strategic orientation.

The individual Instagram post served as the unit of analysis. Each post was treated as a single coded case and analyzed according to its dominant theme, post format, account source, and visible engagement (likes and comments).

Population and Sampling

The population for the thesis consisted of posts published on the official tourism Instagram accounts @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar. To create a manageable, comparable dataset, the thesis used purposive, chronological sampling. A total of 150 posts per account were collected by working backward from October 31, 2025, until the target sample size was reached for each account. The final sample comprised the most recent 150 qualifying posts from each account, yielding a total of $N = 300$ posts.

The two accounts differed substantially in posting frequency, which directly affected the temporal span of the collection window. @VisitSaudi.Ar posted more frequently: 150 qualifying posts were reached within a shorter time window, spanning back to approximately August 30, 2025. @VisitKuwait posted less frequently: reaching 150 qualifying posts required a longer collection window, spanning back to approximately December 30, 2024. Both windows ended on October 31, 2025. This difference reflects real variation in institutional communication capacity between the two accounts and is itself an analytically relevant finding.

A sample of 150 posts per account was sufficient to identify recurring distributional patterns across the twelve thematic categories while remaining manageable for manual double-coding and reliability testing. This sample size is consistent with established precedent in comparable Instagram content analysis studies: McCallum (2025) analyzed 200 posts per account in a closely parallel comparative study, while prior destination image studies have used samples ranging from 100 to 400 posts per account (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013; Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015).

Posts were included in the sample if they were published on the official account (@VisitKuwait or @VisitSaudi.Ar), appeared on the account's main feed, fell within the backward chronological collection window used to reach the target sample size, and were publicly visible at the time of data collection. Posts were excluded if they did not appear on the main feed or appeared only in Instagram Stories, Highlights, or the separate Reels tab without appearing on the main feed.

The decision to include only posts visible on the main feed was methodologically important. Instagram allows users to publish Reels that appear only in the Reels tab and not on the main profile feed. Restricting the sample to the main feed ensured that all sampled content belonged to the same visible and comparable presentation space across both accounts, maintaining consistency in how content was collected, viewed, and coded.

Data Collection Procedures

Posts were collected manually from each account in reverse chronological order, beginning from October 31, 2025, until 150 qualifying main-feed posts were reached for each account. Manual collection was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to verify post

visibility, format, and account placement directly, rather than relying on automated extraction that might not reflect how content was actually presented on the platform at the time of collection.

For each post, the dataset recorded: screenshot of post, account name, post URL, post format, dominant theme, language of caption, visible likes count, visible comments count, and optional coder notes. These variables were entered into a structured coding spreadsheet to support systematic coding and later cross-account comparison.

To support coding consistency, screenshots of all posts were captured and maintained throughout the coding process. This ensured that both coders worked from stable visual records rather than repeatedly revisiting live content that could subsequently be edited, deleted, or display changing engagement values. Maintaining a stable visual record was particularly important for resolving disagreements during the reliability process.

Coding Scheme and Variables

The coding scheme used in this thesis was developed deductively from multiple prior studies in destination image and nation branding content analysis. The primary methodological precedent was Stepchenkova and Zhan (2013), whose comparative visual content analysis of destination marketing organization (DMO) and user-generated photography identified recurring destination image categories—including natural landscapes, cultural heritage, people, food, and outdoor activities—through a systematic codebook with defined categories and formal reliability testing. This was supplemented by McCallum (2025), whose comparative Instagram content analysis of @ExploreCanada and @VisitTheUSA provided a direct precedent for comparing two official national tourism accounts on the same platform, and from whose thematic emphases —

nature, patriotism, cultural events, and people—several categories were adapted. Gulf-specific categories—Religious, Luxury, Modernity, Visionary, and Sport—were added based on Alsaaidi (2020), Zeineddine (2017), Al-Tamimi et al. (2023), and Brannagan and Giulianotti (2018), whose work on Gulf nation branding identified these as structurally significant identity dimensions. The resulting twelve-category scheme was refined through pilot coding on a subset of @VisitKuwait posts prior to finalization.

The thematic categories used in the thesis were: Art, Culture, Events & Entertainment, Food, Luxury, Modernity, Nature, Patriotism, People & Hospitality, Religious, Sport, and Visionary. The full operational definition for each thematic category is presented in Table 1 below, and these definitions were applied consistently across both accounts throughout the coding and reliability assessment process.

Table 1. Thematic Coding Categories and Operational Definitions

Theme	Operational Definition
Art	Posts foregrounding visual arts, artistic installations, exhibitions, creative architecture, design aesthetics, art galleries, or nationally distinctive aesthetic production.
Culture	Posts showcasing local customs, traditions, craftsmanship, cultural activities, folk practices, or expressions of collective cultural identity.
Events & Entertainment	Festivals, concerts, cultural events, national celebrations, seasonal activities, entertainment spectacles, or organised leisure experiences.
Food	Posts featuring cuisine, dining experiences, food culture, culinary traditions, gastronomy, or food-related heritage.
Luxury	Imagery of high-end experiences, upscale hospitality, premium tourism products, elite leisure, luxury retail, or aspirational lifestyle branding.
Modernity	Posts symbolizing technological advancement, infrastructure development, innovation, futuristic architecture, smart city narratives, or modernization themes.
Nature	Landscapes, natural scenery, beaches, deserts, parks, wildlife, ecological attractions, or scenic beauty.
Patriotism	Symbols of national unity, pride, flag imagery, leadership references, historical memory, national day content, or independence narratives.
People & Hospitality	Representations of friendliness, warmth, welcoming attitudes, social generosity, guest-host dynamics, inclusive imagery, or human connection.
Religious	Posts related to Islamic cultural practices, mosque architecture, religious events, spiritual imagery, or faith-based heritage.
Sport	Sports events, physical activities, sporting diplomacy, athletic achievement, or content tied to Gulf sports identity and mega-event hosting.
Visionary	Strategic future-oriented narratives, national development plans, long-term national goals, innovation visions, or aspirational nation-building messages.

Each post was coded for one dominant theme. The theme was treated as a mutually exclusive variable, meaning each post could have only one primary theme. The thematic categories were designed to capture the primary promotional identity claim of each post rather than all identifiable content elements.

Each theme category was supported by a formal operational definition designed to reduce ambiguity during coding. Several themes can plausibly overlap in tourism content—particularly categories such as Culture and Art or Modernity and Visionary—and clear definitions were essential to manage this. To manage overlap, the thesis applied a tie-break rule. When a post appeared to fit more than one theme, the coder assigned the theme that was most visually and narratively central to the post's primary promotional message. When visual and textual cues pointed in different directions, visual emphasis guided the coding decision. This approach follows Geise and Baden (2015), who demonstrated that visual framing cues function as primary meaning-makers in image-dominant media, and is consistent with Instagram's fundamentally visual architecture, in which images or videos constitute the primary communicative unit while captions serve a secondary, clarifying function (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). In practice, the large majority of posts presented aligned visual and textual cues.

Each post was also coded for post format. Format was treated as a mutually exclusive variable with three categories: Photo, Carousel, and Reel. This variable was included because the third research question focused on differences in engagement across post formats.

The thesis used likes and comments as the primary visible engagement measures, recorded at the time of data collection. These were treated as platform-visible indicators of relative audience resonance. Shares were not included because Instagram does not display share

counts consistently across posts and account configurations, limiting the capture of reliable, comparable data (Meta, 2023).

Follower-Base Difference and Comparability

A major structural difference between the two accounts was the size of their followers. At the time of data collection, @VisitKuwait had approximately 82,800 followers, while @VisitSaudi.Ar had approximately 324,000 followers. This gap has direct implications for interpreting engagement because raw like counts are partly a function of potential audience exposure.

This thesis reports raw likes recorded on the platform at the time of collection rather than normalizing them (e.g., likes per 1,000 followers). The decision to retain raw likes was made to preserve the metric in its most visible and meaningful form within Instagram's interface, and to avoid introducing assumptions about exposure that cannot be directly observed (e.g., algorithmic reach, paid promotion, and non-follower impressions). However, because follower counts differ substantially across the two accounts, raw-like comparisons between @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar should be interpreted as descriptive indicators of visible engagement rather than equivalent measures of audience response.

Accordingly, the analysis pursues both within-account and cross-account comparisons. Within-account comparisons—identifying which themes or formats receive higher or lower engagement relative to each account's own baseline—offer the most internally valid basis for pattern interpretation. Cross-account comparisons are also reported, as they are central to the comparative aims of the thesis, but are interpreted with appropriate caution given the follower-base difference.

Intercoder Reliability

Because dominant theme coding involved interpretive judgment, intercoder reliability was assessed to establish coding consistency. Two coders participated in the reliability assessment: the primary researcher and one trained secondary coder who was provided with the codebook and completed a pilot coding session prior to independent coding. Intercoder reliability was assessed specifically for the dominant theme variable, which was the only variable in the dataset requiring interpretive judgment. All other variables (format, account source, likes, comments) were either factual or directly observable and did not require reliability testing.

Agreement was calculated as the percentage of posts on which the two coders assigned identical theme codes. Krippendorff's alpha (α) was used as the primary reliability statistic because it is appropriate for nominal-level data and accounts for chance agreement (Krippendorff, 2004; Lombard et al., 2002). The threshold for acceptable reliability was set at $\alpha \geq .70$, in accordance with the standard recommended by Lombard et al. (2002). The reliability sample consisted of all posts from both accounts on which independent coding was completed. Across the combined reliability subsample of 300 posts, the two coders agreed on 267 posts (89.0%), yielding an overall Krippendorff's alpha of $\alpha = .857$. This result exceeds the $\alpha \geq .70$ threshold and indicates an acceptable level of intercoder reliability for the dominant theme variable. Disagreements were subsequently reviewed and resolved through discussion and consensus before final codes were entered into the dataset for analysis.

Data Analysis Plan

All coded data were entered into Microsoft Excel for analysis. The data analysis plan closely aligns with the three research questions and relies on both descriptive and inferential

statistics. For inferential analyses, four thematic categories were excluded due to insufficient frequency: Food ($n = 7$), Luxury ($n = 1$), Modernity ($n = 1$), and Religious ($n = 1$), each appearing six or fewer times across the combined dataset. Retaining these categories in statistical tests would have produced unstable estimates and violated the assumptions underlying chi-square and ANOVA procedures. Their exclusion yielded an analytical sample of $N = 290$ posts for all inferential analyses. These four categories are retained in the descriptive frequency tables to document the full range of content choices made by each account. In addition to descriptive statistics, inferential analyses were conducted using JASP statistical software. These included a chi-square test of independence to assess whether theme distribution differed significantly between accounts, independent samples t-tests to compare overall engagement levels across accounts, one-way ANOVAs to test whether likes and comments differed significantly across thematic categories and post formats, and two-way ANOVAs to test for interaction effects between theme and account, and between format and account.

To answer RQ1 (theme prevalence), the thesis calculated the frequency and percentage of each theme within each account, addressing RQ1a (@VisitKuwait) and RQ1b (@VisitSaudi.Ar) separately. This enabled both within-account pattern identification and direct cross-account comparison of thematic emphasis. Frequency-based analysis was especially useful for identifying which identity claims were most visibly prioritized in each account's tourism communication, and for assessing whether the two accounts converged on similar themes or diverged in their national identity framing. To address RQ1c (cross-account theme distribution), a chi-square test of independence was conducted on the filtered analytical sample ($N = 290$), with Cramér's V reported as the measure of effect size.

To answer RQ2 (theme-based engagement), the thesis proceeded through five sub-questions. RQ2a and RQ2b examined how average likes varied across themes in @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar respectively, while RQ2c and RQ2d examined how average comments varied across themes in each account. For RQ2e (cross-account comparison), three inferential tests were conducted. First, an independent samples t-test was used to establish whether the two accounts differed in their overall engagement levels, with account as the grouping variable. Second, one-way ANOVAs were conducted on the $N = 290$ filtered sample, with theme as the independent variable, to test whether average likes and comments differed significantly across thematic categories. Third, a two-way ANOVA was conducted to test for an interaction effect between theme and account on engagement, assessing whether the theme–engagement relationship differed between the two accounts.

To answer RQ3 (format-based engagement), the thesis followed a parallel structure. RQ3a and RQ3b examined how average likes varied across formats (Photo, Carousel, and Reel) in @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar respectively. RQ3c and RQ3d examined how average comments varied across formats in each account. For RQ3e (cross-account format comparison), one-way ANOVAs were conducted with format as the independent variable to test whether average likes and comments differed significantly across the three formats. When the ANOVA yielded a significant result, post hoc Tukey HSD comparisons were conducted to identify which specific format pairs differed significantly. A two-way ANOVA was also conducted to test for a Format $\times$ Account interaction effect on likes and comments.

As noted above, four thematic categories (Food, Luxury, Modernity, and Religious) were excluded from inferential analyses due to insufficient frequency ($n \leq 6$). These categories are

retained in descriptive tables to document the full range of content choices made by each account, but their small sample sizes make them unsuitable for chi-square and ANOVA procedures. For the remaining eight thematic categories included in inferential analyses, mean engagement values for categories with relatively small sample sizes were interpreted with appropriate caution, as means based on fewer posts are more volatile and provide a less stable basis for comparison.

Ethical Considerations

The thesis analyzed publicly available content from institutional Instagram accounts. It did not involve private data, direct user interaction, or intervention in platform activity. The analysis focused on official organizational communication produced by national tourism institutions rather than by private individuals, thereby keeping ethical risk low.

Methodological Limitations

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. First, the thesis focused on only two official tourism Instagram accounts, which limits the generalizability of the findings beyond these cases. Second, it included only content visible on the main feed at the time of collection, meaning Stories, Highlights, and non-feed Reels were not analyzed.

Third, the thesis used likes and comments as visible platform indicators of resonance rather than as measures of persuasion or attitudinal change. Likes indicate visibility and surface-level interaction but do not directly reveal audience interpretation, agreement, or long-term image effects. Fourth, the thesis relied on manual coding, which involved interpretive judgment even when reliability procedures were applied. Although the intercoder reliability results met the accepted threshold, coding decisions in framing-oriented content analysis still require human

interpretation.

Fifth, the substantial follower-base difference between the two accounts limited the direct comparability of raw engagement counts across cases. While within-account comparisons remained highly useful, cross-account engagement comparisons required greater interpretive caution. Finally, the sample was limited to the most recent 150 qualifying main-feed posts from each account as of October 31, 2025, meaning the results reflect a defined sampling window rather than the full historical archive of either account.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explained the methodological design used to examine the framing of official tourism Instagram content in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. It established the comparative quantitative content analysis approach, identified the prior studies from which the coding scheme was derived, presented full operational definitions for all twelve thematic categories, defined the sampling strategy and data collection procedures, reported the intercoder reliability results ($\alpha = .857$), and outlined the analytical plan for addressing all three research questions. The analytical plan encompasses both descriptive statistics and inferential tests, including chi-square, independent samples t-test, one-way ANOVA, two-way ANOVA, and Tukey HSD post-hoc comparisons, all conducted using JASP statistical software on a filtered analytical sample of $N = 290$ posts. Together, these procedures provide the methodological foundation for the presentation of findings in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings organized by research question. The dataset comprises 300 coded Instagram posts—150 from @VisitKuwait and 150 from @VisitSaudi.Ar. Four low-frequency thematic categories (Food, Luxury, Modernity, and Religious, each with $n \leq 6$) were excluded from inferential analyses, yielding an analytical sample of $N = 290$ posts. All statistical analyses were conducted using JASP. The chapter is organized into three main sections corresponding to the three research questions. Within each section, sub-questions are addressed in order. Interpretation of what these patterns mean for nation branding is reserved for Chapter 5.

Research Question 1: Theme Prevalence

RQ1 asked which themes are most and least prevalent in the official tourism Instagram accounts of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. This question is addressed through three sub-questions: theme prevalence within each account separately (RQ1a and RQ1b), followed by a statistical comparison of the two distributions (RQ1c).

RQ1a. Which themes are most and least prevalent in @VisitKuwait?

Of the 150 posts sampled from @VisitKuwait, Events and Entertainment was by far the dominant content category, accounting for 70 posts (46.7%), which is nearly half of the account's entire output. No other single theme came close to that level of representation. The next four themes clustered within a narrow range: People & Hospitality appeared in 14 posts (9.3%), Culture in 13 (8.7%), Visionary in 13 (8.7%), Patriotism in 11 (7.3%), and Sport in 11 (7.3%). Art was present in 8 posts (5.3%) and Nature in 7 (4.7%), making these the least represented of the retained themes. At the very bottom of the distribution, Food, Luxury, and Religious each appeared in only one post (0.7% each), and Modernity did not appear at all. These four low-

frequency themes were excluded from inferential analyses. In summary, @VisitKuwait's content was heavily concentrated in event-driven programming, with identity-related themes such as Patriotism, Visionary, and People & Hospitality forming a meaningful but secondary presence.

RQ1b. Which themes are most and least prevalent in @VisitSaudi.Ar?

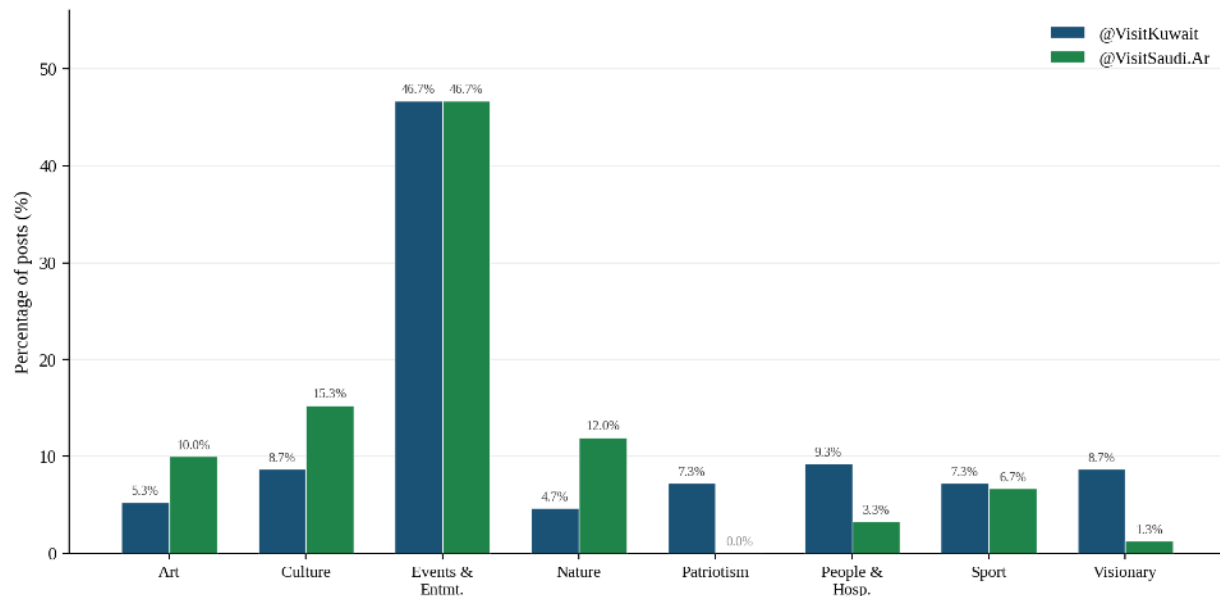
Across the 150 posts sampled from @VisitSaudi.Ar, Events and Entertainment was equally dominant, also accounting for 70 posts (46.7%). Beyond this shared peak, the pattern diverged substantially from @VisitKuwait. Culture appeared in 23 posts (15.3%), Nature in 18 (12.0%) and Art in 15 (10.0%). Sport appeared in 10 posts (6.7%), Food in 6 (4.0%), People & Hospitality in only 5 (3.3%), and Visionary in just 2 (1.3%). Patriotism, Luxury, and Religious did not appear in the @VisitSaudi.Ar dataset at all. Food and the three zero-count themes were excluded from inferential analyses, leaving an analytical sample of 143 posts. The overall picture is that @VisitSaudi.Ar, beyond its event-focused content, invests most heavily in destination-specific content, rather than the identity and aspirational themes that characterize @VisitKuwait. Full frequency data for both accounts are presented in Table 2 and visualized in Figure 2.

Table 2. Theme Frequency by Account and Combined Sample

Theme	@VisitKuwait n (%)	@VisitSaudi.Ar n (%)	Combined n (%)
Art	8 (5.3%)	15 (10.0%)	23 (7.9%)
Culture	13 (8.7%)	23 (15.3%)	36 (12.4%)
Events & Entertainment	70 (46.7%)	70 (46.7%)	140 (48.3%)
Food*	1 (0.7%)	6 (4.0%)	7 (2.4%)
Luxury*	1 (0.7%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.3%)
Modernity*	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.7%)	1 (0.3%)
Nature	7 (4.7%)	18 (12.0%)	25 (8.6%)
Patriotism	11 (7.3%)	0 (0.0%)	11 (3.8%)
People & Hospitality	14 (9.3%)	5 (3.3%)	19 (6.6%)
Religious*	1 (0.7%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.3%)
Sport	11 (7.3%)	10 (6.7%)	21 (7.2%)
Visionary	13 (8.7%)	2 (1.3%)	15 (5.2%)

Note. N = 150 per account. Combined N = 300. Themes marked with an asterisk (*) were excluded from inferential analyses due to $n \leq 6$.

Figure 2. Theme Distribution by Account



Note. Four low-frequency themes excluded. Patriotism did not appear in the @VisitSaudi.Ar dataset.

RQ1c. How do theme distributions differ between @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar?

Chi-Square Test of Independence

A chi-square test of independence was conducted on the filtered analytical sample ($N = 290$) to determine whether the two accounts distributed their content significantly differently across the eight retained thematic categories. The test was statistically significant, $\chi^2(7, N = 290) = 33.08$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .338$, indicating a moderate and meaningful divergence in content strategy. While both accounts devoted approximately 47% of posts to Events and Entertainment, they diverged substantially in their remaining content. @VisitKuwait placed greater proportional emphasis on Patriotism (7.3% vs. 0.0%), Visionary content (8.7% vs. 1.3%), and People & Hospitality (9.3% vs. 3.3%). @VisitSaudi.Ar devoted substantially more attention

to Nature (12.0% vs. 4.7%), Culture (15.3% vs. 8.7%), and Art (10.0% vs. 5.3%). The most striking single finding is that Patriotism was entirely absent from @VisitSaudi.Ar while ranking fifth in @VisitKuwait. These differences confirm that despite sharing the same dominant content category, the two accounts pursue meaningfully different strategies in how they frame their national identities.

Research Question 2: Theme-Based Engagement

RQ2 asked how engagement varies across themes in @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar. The question is addressed through five sub-questions. RQ2a and RQ2b examine how likes vary across themes within each account separately. RQ2c and RQ2d examine how comments vary across themes within each account. RQ2e then brings the two accounts together, first comparing their overall engagement levels using an independent samples t-test, and then testing whether theme predicts engagement and whether that pattern differs between the two accounts using one-way and two-way ANOVAs.

RQ2a. How do likes vary across themes in @VisitKuwait?

Within @VisitKuwait, the variation in average likes across themes is substantial and reveals a clear pattern: human-centered and identity-driven content consistently outperforms event-driven content in audience engagement, despite the latter dominating in posting volume. People & Hospitality generated the highest average likes by a considerable margin ($M = 769.79$, $SD = 1013.43$), which is more than three times the average for Events and Entertainment. Nature followed at $M = 608.43$ ($SD = 581.36$) and Patriotism at $M = 585.09$ ($SD = 535.06$). Sport ($M = 465.91$, $SD = 347.27$) and Visionary ($M = 458.69$, $SD = 503.07$) also substantially outperformed Events and Entertainment. Events and Entertainment itself, despite representing 46.7% of all

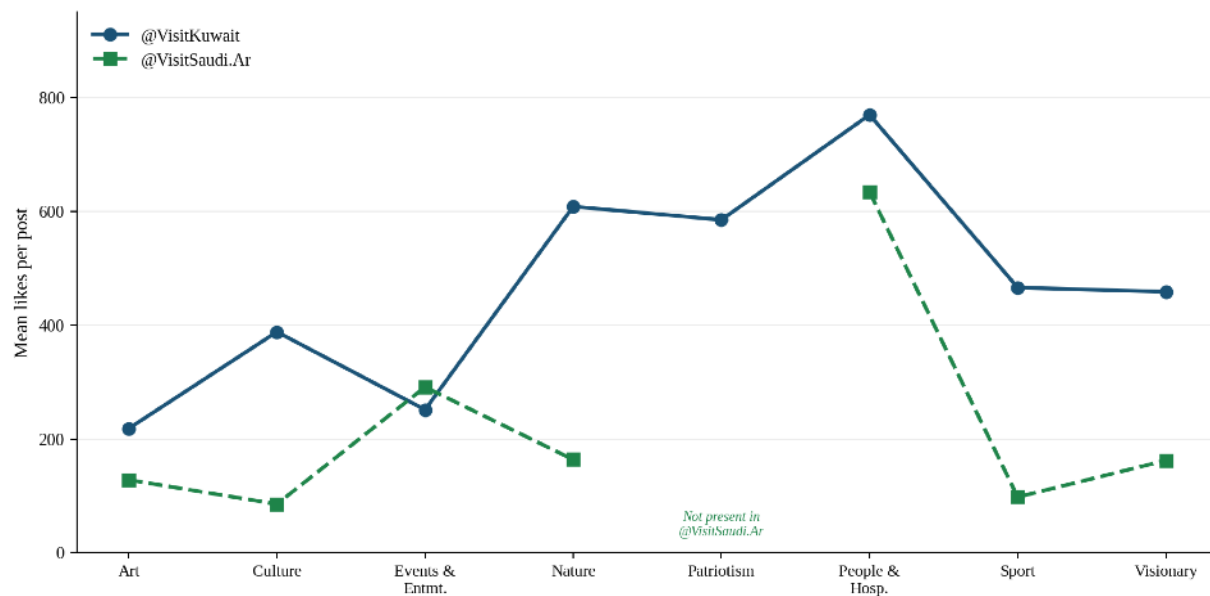
@VisitKuwait posts, generated an average of only 251.24 likes per post—lower than five of the seven other retained themes. Culture ($M = 388.08$, $SD = 255.02$) and Art ($M = 218.13$, $SD = 198.23$) were the two lowest-performing themes in this account.

RQ2b. How do likes vary across themes in @VisitSaudi.Ar?

Within @VisitSaudi.Ar, People & Hospitality again generated the highest average likes ($M = 634.20$, $SD = 868.14$), despite appearing in only 5 of the 143 retained posts. Events and Entertainment ranked second ($M = 291.04$, $SD = 790.96$), followed by Nature ($M = 163.44$, $SD = 137.55$) and Visionary ($M = 162.00$, $SD = 162.63$). The lowest-performing themes were Culture ($M = 85.17$, $SD = 43.15$), Sport ($M = 97.60$, $SD = 149.36$), and Art ($M = 127.80$, $SD = 305.55$). This is particularly notable because Culture, Nature, and Art are @VisitSaudi.Ar's three most frequently posted non-event themes, yet they generate relatively modest like-based engagement. Likes by theme for both accounts are presented in Table 3 and visualized in Figure 3.

Table 3. Mean Likes Per Post by Theme and Account (N = 290)

Theme	@VisitKuwait		@VisitSaudi.Ar	
	%	M (SD)	%	M (SD)
Art	5.4	218.13 (198.23)	10.5	127.80 (305.55)
Culture	8.8	388.08 (255.02)	16.1	85.17 (43.15)
Events & Entertainment	47.6	251.24 (308.13)	49.0	291.04 (790.96)
Nature	4.8	608.43 (581.36)	12.6	163.44 (137.55)
Patriotism	7.5	585.09 (535.06)	—	—
People & Hospitality	9.5	769.79 (1013.43)	3.5	634.20 (868.14)
Sport	7.5	465.91 (347.27)	7.0	97.60 (149.36)
Visionary	8.8	458.69 (503.07)	1.4	162.00 (162.63)

Figure 3. Mean Likes by Theme and Account

RQ2c. How do comments vary across themes in @VisitKuwait?

Comment-based engagement within @VisitKuwait broadly mirrors the likes pattern, though with less dramatic differentiation across themes. People & Hospitality again ranked first, generating an average of 35.36 comments per post (SD = 54.13). Nature followed at $M = 22.29$ (SD = 18.30) and Visionary at $M = 17.77$ (SD = 20.51). Sport ($M = 16.91$, SD = 19.83), Patriotism ($M = 11.36$, SD = 12.28), and Culture ($M = 10.15$, SD = 8.77) showed moderate comment levels. Events and Entertainment generated a relatively low average of 6.07 comments per post (SD = 10.81) despite its dominant posting share, reinforcing the pattern that event-driven content underperforms in engagement relative to its production volume. Art generated the fewest average comments ($M = 4.50$, SD = 3.74).

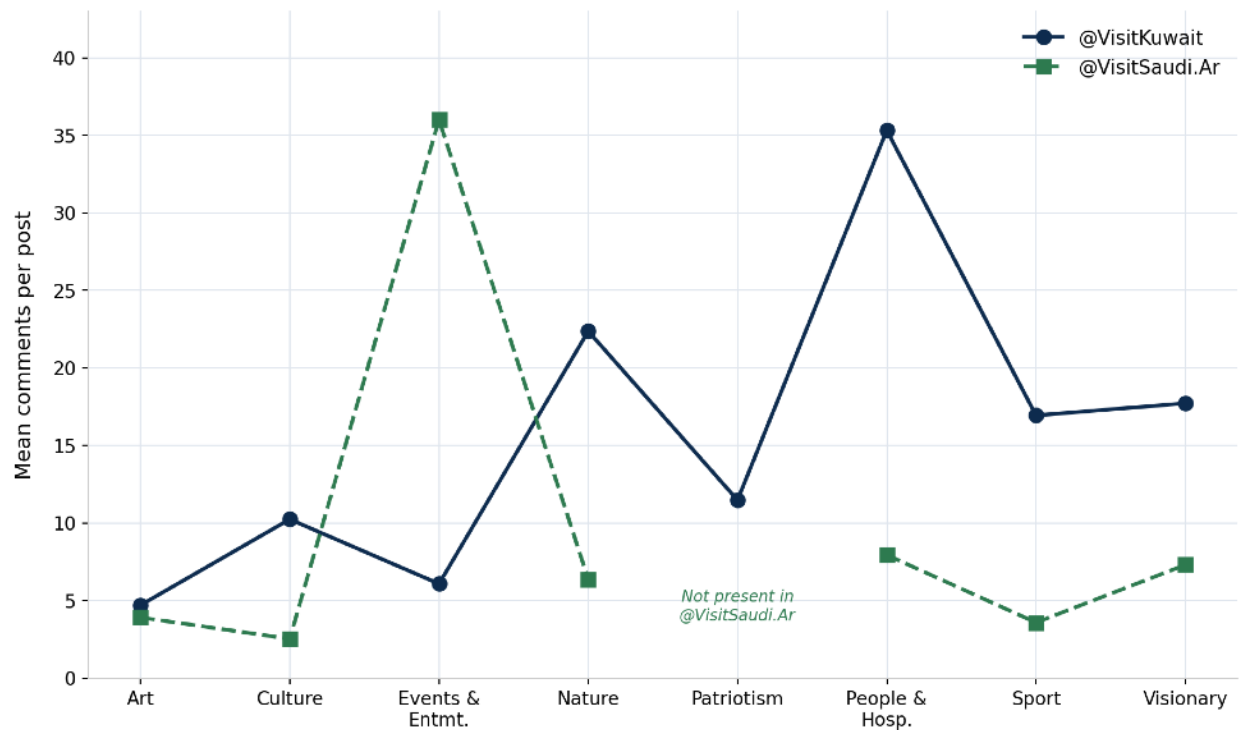
RQ2d. How do comments vary across themes in @VisitSaudi.Ar?

Comment patterns within @VisitSaudi.Ar require careful interpretation because they are dominated by a single outlier-driven value. Events and Entertainment registered the highest average comment count at $M = 35.99$ per post, but this figure comes with a standard deviation of 259.12—nearly eight times the mean—indicating that a very small number of posts attracted exceptionally large comment volumes while the vast majority generated far fewer. This outlier-driven average should not be read as a consistent or replicable pattern. Setting that anomaly aside, all remaining themes show substantially lower and more stable comment levels: People & Hospitality averaged 8.00 comments (SD = 8.22), Visionary 7.50 (SD = 10.61), Nature 6.33 (SD = 11.16), Art 3.73 (SD = 6.17), Sport 3.50 (SD = 4.99), and Culture 2.52 (SD = 2.23). Comment descriptives for both accounts are in Table 4 and visualized in Figure 4 .

Table 4. Mean Comments Per Post by Theme and Account (N = 290)

Theme	@VisitKuwait		@VisitSaudi.Ar	
	%	M (SD)	%	M (SD)
Art	5.4	4.50 (3.74)	10.5	3.73 (6.17)
Culture	8.8	10.15 (8.77)	16.1	2.52 (2.23)
Events & Entertainment	47.6	6.07 (10.81)	49.0	35.99 (259.12)
Nature	4.8	22.29 (18.30)	12.6	6.33 (11.16)
Patriotism	7.5	11.36 (12.28)	—	—
People & Hospitality	9.5	35.36 (54.13)	3.5	8.00 (8.22)
Sport	7.5	16.91 (19.83)	7.0	3.50 (4.99)
Visionary	8.8	17.77 (20.51)	1.4	7.50 (10.61)

Figure 4. Mean Comments by Theme and Account



RQ2e. How do theme-engagement patterns compare between the two accounts?

RQ2e brings the two accounts together to examine how their engagement patterns compare. It proceeds in three steps, each addressed by a separate statistical test: first an independent samples t-test comparing overall engagement levels, then one-way ANOVAs testing whether theme predicts engagement in the combined sample, and finally two-way ANOVAs testing whether those theme-engagement patterns differ between the two accounts.

Independent Samples t-test: Overall Engagement Comparison

An independent samples t-test was conducted to establish whether the two accounts differ in their overall engagement levels. Levene's test for equality of variances was non-significant for both likes ($F = 0.535$, $p = .465$) and comments ($F = 1.732$, $p = .189$), confirming the assumption of equal variances was met.

@VisitKuwait posts received significantly more likes on average ($M = 387.33$, $SD = 486.61$) than @VisitSaudi.Ar posts ($M = 221.41$, $SD = 593.69$), $t(288) = 2.606$, $p = .010$. This is notable given that @VisitSaudi.Ar has a substantially larger follower base—@VisitSaudi.Ar had approximately 324,000 followers, while @VisitKuwait had approximately 82,800 followers. The finding therefore suggests that @VisitKuwait content generated stronger visible audience response per post despite its smaller follower pool. For comments, no significant difference was found ($M = 12.15$, $SD = 22.16$ for @VisitKuwait vs. $M = 19.84$, $SD = 181.39$ for @VisitSaudi.Ar), $t(288) = -0.510$, $p = .610$. The very high standard deviation in @VisitSaudi.Ar comments reflects the outlier-driven variance discussed in RQ2d. Results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Account-Level Engagement: Independent Samples t-test Results

Variable	@VisitKuwait	@VisitSaudi.Ar	t(288)	p
	M (SD)	M (SD)		
Likes	387.33 (486.61)	221.41 (593.69)	2.606	.010
Comments	12.15 (22.16)	19.84 (181.39)	-0.510	.610

One-Way ANOVA: Likes by Theme

A one-way ANOVA tested whether average likes differed significantly across the eight retained thematic categories in the combined analytical sample (N = 290). The result was statistically significant, $F(7, 282) = 2.815$, $p = .008$, confirming that theme is a meaningful predictor of like-based engagement. Across the combined sample, mean likes per theme ranged from $M = 159.2$ (Art, $SD = 271.8$) to $M = 734.1$ (People & Hospitality, $SD = 955.5$), with Patriotism ($M = 585.1$), Visionary ($M = 419.1$), Sport ($M = 290.5$), Nature ($M = 288.0$), Events and Entertainment ($M = 271.1$), and Culture ($M = 194.6$) falling between those extremes. Results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. One-Way ANOVA: Likes by Theme

Source	df	F	p
Theme	7	2.815	.008

One-Way ANOVA: Comments by Theme

A parallel one-way ANOVA tested whether average comments differed significantly

across themes. The result was not significant, $F(7, 282) = 0.131$, $p = .996$, indicating that theme does not predict comment-based engagement. Regardless of what either account posts thematically, comment counts remain statistically indistinguishable across themes. Across the combined sample, mean comments ranged from $M = 4.0$ (Art, $SD = 5.4$) to $M = 28.2$ (People & Hospitality, $SD = 47.8$), though the wide variability in several theme categories—particularly Events and Entertainment ($SD = 183.3$)—makes these means unreliable as central tendency estimates for comments. Results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. One-Way ANOVA: Comments by Theme

Source	df	F	p
Theme	7	0.131	.996

Two-Way ANOVA: Likes by Theme and Account

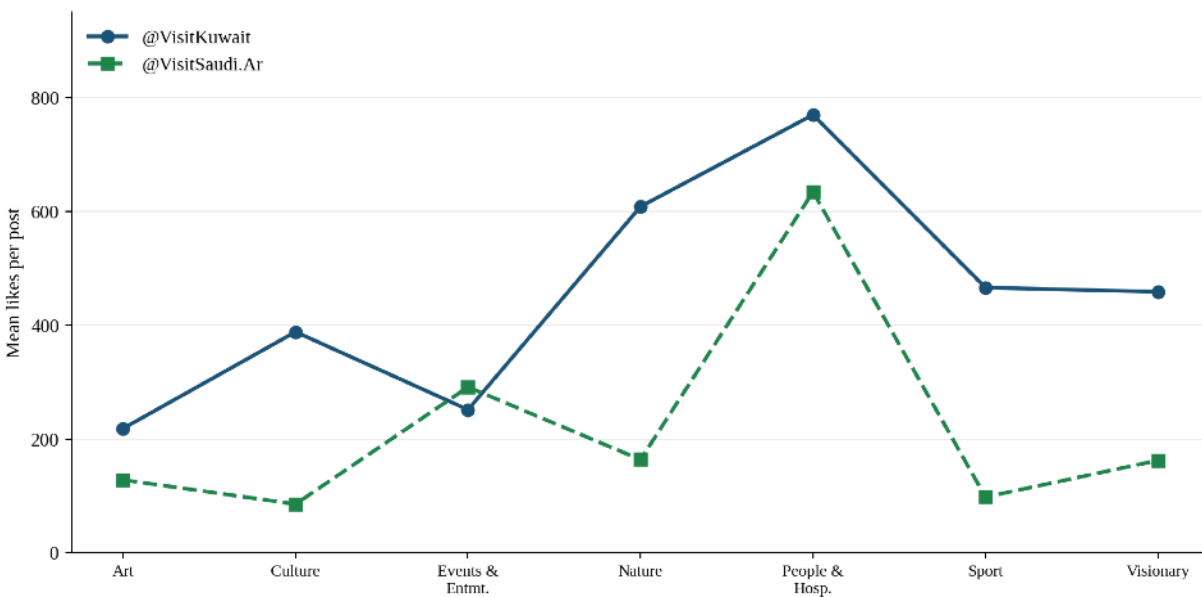
A two-way ANOVA with Theme and Account as independent variables tested whether the theme–engagement relationship for likes differed between the two accounts. The main effect of Theme on likes remained significant, $F(7, 275) = 2.843$, $p = .007$, consistent with the one-way result. The main effect of Account was not significant, $F(1, 275) = 2.518$, $p = .114$, and the Theme by Account interaction was also not significant, $F(6, 275) = 1.216$, $p = .298$. The non-significant interaction is a key finding: it indicates that both accounts show a broadly similar pattern of thematic engagement. People & Hospitality drives the strongest like-based engagement and Events and Entertainment underperforms relative to its posting volume in both accounts. This consistency across two institutionally and culturally distinct accounts suggests the

theme–engagement pattern may reflect something general about how Instagram audiences respond to tourism content, rather than something specific to either country. Results are in Table 8 and visualized in Figure 5.

Table 8. Two-Way ANOVA: Likes by Theme and Account

Source	df	F	p
Theme	7	2.843	.007
Account	1	2.518	.114
Theme × Account	6	1.216	.298

Figure 5. Two-Way ANOVA: Likes by Theme and Account



Two-Way ANOVA: Comments by Theme and Account

A parallel two-way ANOVA examined whether the theme–engagement relationship for

comments differed between the two accounts. No significant effects were found: Theme $F(7, 275) = 0.128, p = .996$; Account $F(1, 275) = 0.460, p = .498$; Theme $\times$ Account interaction $F(6, 275) = 0.284, p = .944$. This confirms that theme does not predict comment-based engagement in either account, and that this null result is consistent across both accounts. Results are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Two-Way ANOVA: Comments by Theme and Account

Source	df	F	p
Theme	7	0.128	.996
Account	1	0.460	.498
Theme $\times$ Account	6	0.284	.944

Research Question 3: Format-Based Engagement

RQ3 asked how engagement varies across post formats—Photo, Carousel, and Reel—in @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar. Before reporting engagement by format, it is necessary to describe how formats are distributed across the two accounts, as the format mix differs substantially between them and provides important context for interpreting the engagement findings. Four sub-questions then examine likes and comments separately within each account (RQ3a through RQ3d), followed by inferential cross-account comparisons (RQ3e).

Within @VisitKuwait, Reels are the dominant format, accounting for 68 of the 147 retained posts (46.3%). Photos and Carousels are used at broadly similar rates—40 posts (27.2%) and 39 posts (26.5%) respectively. @VisitSaudi.Ar presents a different strategy: Photos dominate

at 83 posts (58.0%), while Carousels account for 31 posts (21.7%) and Reels for just 29 posts (20.3%). In other words, @VisitKuwait is a Reel-first account while @VisitSaudi.Ar is a Photo-first account. This divergence makes the engagement comparison that follows particularly instructive. Format distribution is presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Post Format Distribution by Account (N = 290)

Format	@VisitKuwait n (%)	@VisitSaudi.Ar n (%)	Combined n (%)
Photo	40 (27.2%)	83 (58.0%)	123 (42.4%)
Carousel	39 (26.5%)	31 (21.7%)	70 (24.1%)
Reel	68 (46.3%)	29 (20.3%)	97 (33.4%)

RQ3a. How do likes vary across formats in @VisitKuwait?

Within @VisitKuwait, Reels generated the highest average likes ($M = 439.7$, $SD = 572.7$), followed by Carousels ($M = 388.7$, $SD = 410.1$) and Photos ($M = 296.9$, $SD = 382.2$). Reels and Carousels performed at broadly similar levels and both outperformed Photos, though the large standard deviations across all three formats reflect considerable variability in individual post performance. Notably, Carousels performed comparably to Reels within @VisitKuwait, while Photos generated the lowest average likes of the three formats in this account.

RQ3b. How do likes vary across formats in @VisitSaudi.Ar?

Within @VisitSaudi.Ar, Reels generated the highest average likes by a substantial margin ($M = 548.0$, $SD = 1078.4$), despite being the least-used format in the account. Photos ($M =$

149.7, SD = 386.2) and Carousels (M = 107.9, SD = 211.1) performed at considerably lower and broadly comparable levels. The high standard deviation for @VisitSaudi.Ar Reels indicates considerable variability, but the mean is substantially above the other formats. The descriptive data therefore suggest that @VisitSaudi.Ar's Photo-dominant content strategy may be leaving engagement potential unrealized—its Reels outperform its Photos in average likes by more than 3.6 to 1. Likes by format for both accounts are presented in Table 11.

Table 11. Mean Likes Per Post by Format and Account (N = 290)

Format	@VisitKuwait		@VisitSaudi.Ar	
	%	M (SD)	%	M (SD)
Photo	27.2	296.9 (382.2)	58.0	149.7 (386.2)
Carousel	26.5	388.7 (410.1)	21.7	107.9 (211.1)
Reel	46.3	439.7 (572.7)	20.3	548.0 (1078.4)

RQ3c. How do comments vary across formats in @VisitKuwait?

Comment variation by format within @VisitKuwait is more modest than the like variation. Reels generated the highest average comments (M = 15.59, SD = 29.15), followed by Carousels (M = 10.59, SD = 14.10) and Photos (M = 7.83, SD = 11.96). All three formats produced relatively low and similar comment averages. The direction of the ordering mirrors the likes pattern—Reels, then Carousels, then Photos—but the differences are small and the inferential tests in RQ3e confirm they are not statistically significant.

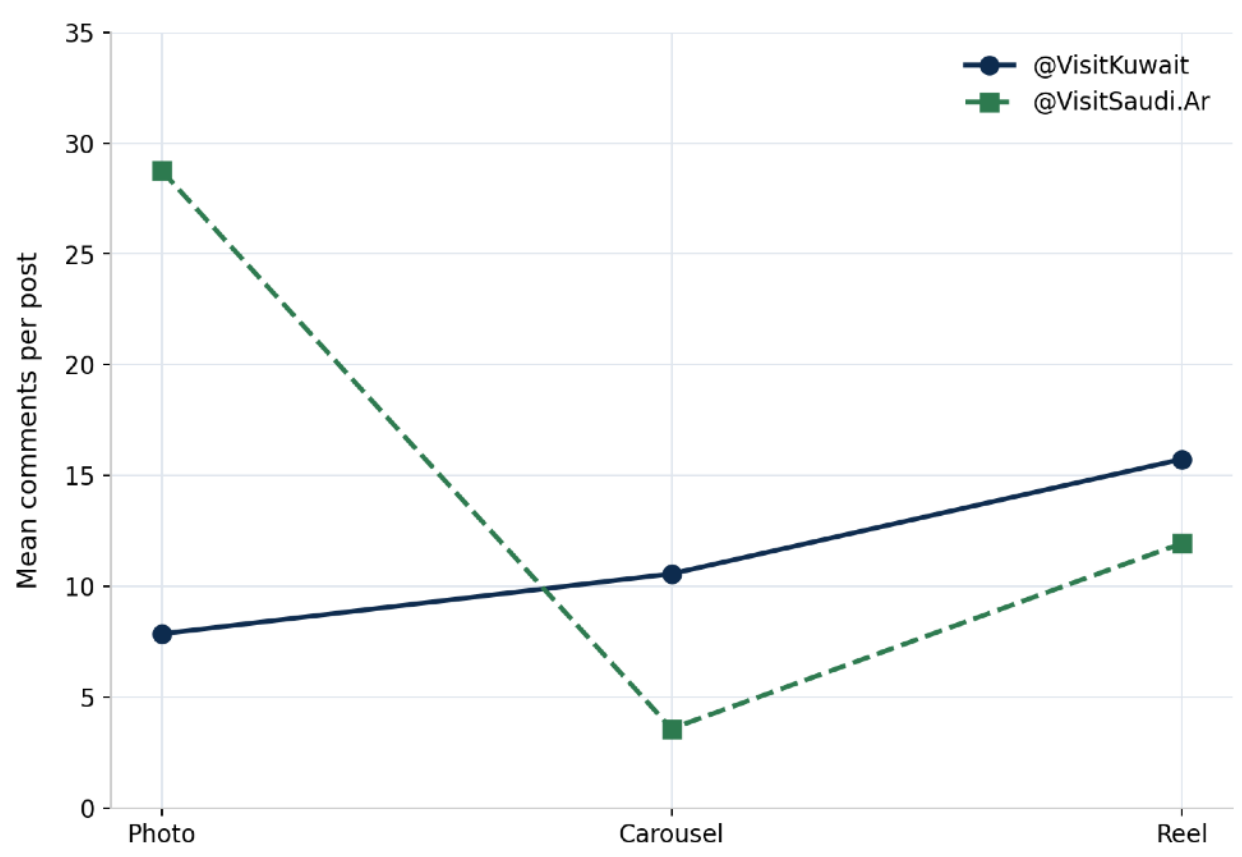
RQ3d. How do comments vary across formats in @VisitSaudi.Ar?

Within @VisitSaudi.Ar, Photos showed the highest average comments ($M = 28.76$, $SD = 238.04$). As with the Events and Entertainment outlier discussed in RQ2d, this figure is heavily influenced by a small number of posts with exceptionally large comment volumes—the standard deviation of 238.04 dwarfs the mean, making it an unreliable central tendency estimate. Reels averaged 11.86 comments per post ($SD = 17.51$) and Carousels 3.42 ($SD = 4.84$), with these two formats showing more typical and comparable distributions. Comment descriptives by format are in Table 12 and visualized in Figure 6.

Table 12. Mean Comments Per Post by Format and Account (N = 290)

Format	@VisitKuwait		@VisitSaudi.Ar	
	%	M (SD)	%	M (SD)
Photo	27.2	7.83 (11.96)	58.0	28.76 (238.04)
Carousel	26.5	10.59 (14.10)	21.7	3.42 (4.84)
Reel	46.3	15.59 (29.15)	20.3	11.86 (17.51)

Figure 6. Mean Comments by Format and Account



RQ3e. How do format-engagement patterns compare between the two accounts?

RQ3e brings the two accounts together to examine whether format predicts engagement and whether those patterns differ between accounts. This sub-question proceeds test by test, from the one-way ANOVAs on the combined sample through to the two-way cross-account comparison.

One-Way ANOVA: Likes by Format

A one-way ANOVA tested whether average likes differed significantly across the three post formats in the combined analytical sample ($N = 290$). Across the combined sample, mean likes were: Photo $M = 197.6$ ($SD = 389.5$, $n = 123$), Carousel $M = 264.4$ ($SD = 363.0$, $n = 70$),

and Reel $M = 472.1$ ($SD = 755.3$, $n = 97$). The ANOVA was statistically significant, $F(2, 287) = 7.391$, $p < .001$, confirming that format is a meaningful predictor of like-based engagement. Results are in Table 13.

Table 13. One-Way ANOVA: Likes by Format

Source	df	F	p
Format	2	7.391	< .001

Post Hoc Tukey HSD Comparisons: Likes by Format

Post hoc Tukey HSD comparisons identified which specific format pairs accounted for the significant ANOVA result. Reels generated significantly more likes than both Photos (mean difference = 274.51, $SE = 72.75$, $t(287) = -3.773$, $p < .001$) and Carousels (mean difference = 207.73, $SE = 84.02$, $t(287) = -2.472$, $p = .037$). The difference between Carousels and Photos was not statistically significant (mean difference = 66.78, $SE = 80.21$, $t(287) = 0.833$, $p = .683$), indicating that Photos and Carousels perform similarly and that the Reel advantage is the primary driver of the overall ANOVA result. Results are presented in Table 14.

Table 14. Post Hoc Tukey HSD Comparisons: Likes by Format

Comparison	Mean Difference	SE	df	t	p
Carousel vs. Photo	66.78	80.21	287	0.833	.683
Carousel vs. Reel	-207.73	84.02	287	-2.472	.037
Photo vs. Reel	-274.51	72.75	287	-3.773	< .001

One-Way ANOVA: Comments by Format

A one-way ANOVA tested whether average comments differed across formats. The result was not significant, $F(2, 287) = 0.295$, $p = .745$, confirming that format does not predict comment-based engagement. Post hoc comparisons likewise returned non-significant results for all three pairings: Carousel vs. Photo (mean difference = -14.54 , $p = .730$), Carousel vs. Reel (mean difference = -7.06 , $p = .935$), and Photo vs. Reel (mean difference = 7.48 , $p = .904$). Results are presented in Table 15.

Table 15. One-Way ANOVA: Comments by Format

Source	df	F	p
Format	2	0.295	.745

Two-Way ANOVA: Likes by Format and Account

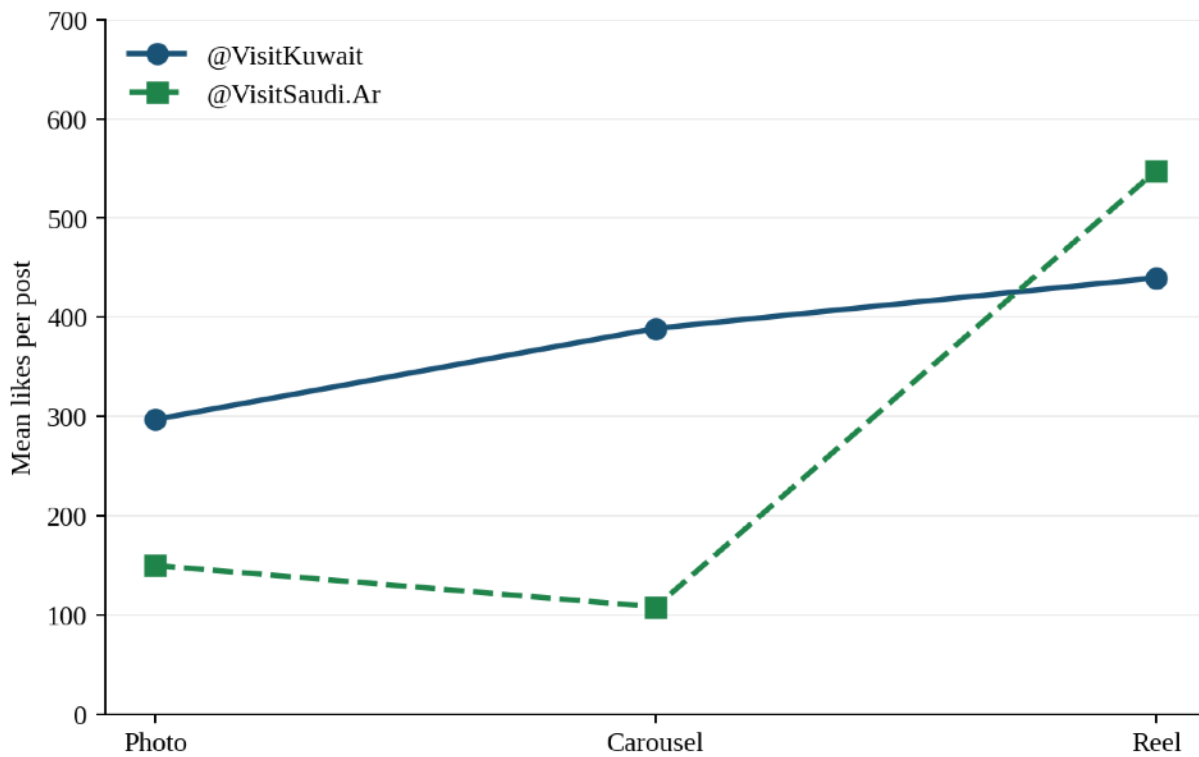
A two-way ANOVA with Format and Account as independent variables tested whether the format–engagement relationship for likes differed between the two accounts. The main effect of Format remained significant, $F(2, 284) = 6.758$, $p = .001$, while the main effect of Account was not significant, $F(1, 284) = 2.512$, $p = .114$. The Format $\times$ Account interaction approached but did not reach statistical significance, $F(2, 284) = 2.669$, $p = .071$. The p-value of .071 is close enough to the conventional threshold to suggest a possible account-specific difference in how the Reel advantage manifests across the two accounts—a pattern the current sample size may be insufficient to detect with confidence. Future research with a larger sample would be well-positioned to test whether this interaction reaches significance. Results are in Table 16 and

visualized in Figure 7.

Table 16. Two-Way ANOVA: Likes by Format and Account

Source	df	F	p
Format	2	6.758	.001
Account	1	2.512	.114
Format $\times$ Account	2	2.669	.071

Figure 7. Two-Way ANOVA: Likes by Format and Account



Two-Way ANOVA: Comments by Format and Account

A parallel two-way ANOVA examined whether the format–engagement relationship for

comments differed between the two accounts. No significant effects were found: Format $F(2, 284) = 0.161, p = .851$; Account $F(1, 284) = 0.042, p = .838$; Format $\times$ Account interaction $F(2, 284) = 0.328, p = .720$. This confirms that format does not predict comment-based engagement, and that this null result holds consistently across both accounts. Results are presented in Table 17.

Table 17. Two-Way ANOVA: Comments by Format and Account

Source	df	F	p
Format	2	0.161	.851
Account	1	0.042	.838
Format $\times$ Account	2	0.328	.720

Summary of Findings

This chapter has reported the findings across three research questions and 13 sub-questions. Several consistent and statistically supported patterns emerged.

On theme prevalence (RQ1), both accounts devoted approximately 47% of their posts to Events and Entertainment but diverged substantially in their remaining content. @VisitKuwait emphasized Patriotism, Visionary, and People & Hospitality, while @VisitSaudi.Ar emphasized Nature, Culture, and Art. The chi-square test confirmed this difference was significant, $\chi^2(7, N = 290) = 33.08, p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .338$.

On theme-based engagement (RQ2), @VisitKuwait generated significantly higher average likes per post than @VisitSaudi.Ar despite its smaller follower base, $t(288) = 2.606, p =$

.010; comment counts did not differ significantly, $t(288) = -0.510$, $p = .610$. Within both accounts, People & Hospitality generated the highest average likes (@VisitKuwait: $M = 769.79$; @VisitSaudi.Ar: $M = 634.20$), while Events and Entertainment underperformed in likes relative to its posting frequency. The one-way ANOVA confirmed theme significantly predicted like-based engagement, $F(7, 282) = 2.815$, $p = .008$. The non-significant Theme $\times$ Account interaction, $F(6, 275) = 1.216$, $p = .298$, indicates this theme–engagement pattern is broadly consistent across both accounts. Theme did not significantly predict comment-based engagement in any analysis.

On format-based engagement (RQ3), Reels outperformed Photos and Carousels in average likes in both accounts—@VisitKuwait Reels averaged 439.7 likes compared to 296.9 for Photos, and @VisitSaudi.Ar Reels averaged 548.0 compared to 149.7 for Photos. The one-way ANOVA confirmed a significant format effect on likes, $F(2, 287) = 7.391$, $p < .001$, with Tukey HSD tests identifying Reels as the driver—generating significantly more likes than both Photos ($p < .001$) and Carousels ($p = .037$), while the Carousel–Photo difference was not significant ($p = .683$). Format did not predict comment-based engagement in any analysis. These findings are discussed in relation to framing theory and nation branding and in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter interprets the findings reported in Chapter 4 in relation to the theoretical frameworks, prior literature, and comparative context established in previous chapters. It proceeds in five sections. The first three address each research question in turn, situating the empirical patterns within the nation branding, framing theory, and digital communication literature. The fourth draws practical implications for Kuwait's tourism communication strategy. The fifth reflects on the thesis's theoretical and methodological contributions.

Thematic Framing as Strategic Identity Construction (RQ1)

The first research question asked which themes were most and least prevalent in each account's official tourism Instagram content. The results indicate that the two accounts, @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar dedicated approximately half of their posting to Events and Entertainment, which is indicative of event-driven communication becoming the default mechanism of official tourism promotion in the Gulf, which is in line with increasing investments in mega-events, cultural programming, and large-scale entertainment, as the mechanism of building the national image (AlSahli et al., 2025; Altamimi et al., 2023). However beneath this shared surface, a chi-square test of independence revealed that the two accounts differed significantly in how they distributed content across thematic categories, $\chi^2(7, N = 290) = 33.08, p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .338$, which is a moderate effect size indicating that thematic emphasis is not arbitrary but reflects meaningfully different strategic orientations between the two accounts.

These differences in distributional dimensions are important when examined from the framing theory perspective. Entman's (1993) foundational argument holds that framing involves

selectively emphasizing certain aspects of reality while marginalizing others. What each account chooses to foreground—and what it omits—constitutes its primary communicative identity claim. In this sense, the thematic profile of each account functions as its dominant national frame: the recurring, institutionally produced version of the nation, consistently made visible to international audiences.

The fact that @VisitKuwait placed a comparatively greater focus on Patriotism (7.3% vs. 0.0%), Visionary content (8.7% vs. 1.3%), and People and Hospitality (9.3% vs. 3.3%) suggests that the account uses a framing strategy that revolves around national identity, aspiration, and human warmth. It is especially noticeable that there is no Patriotism content on the @VisitSaudi.Ar account. Instead of proudly pronouncing national pride per se, the image presented by Saudi Arabia seems to allow its destinations, events, and cultural assets to do the reputational work, which is also in keeping with the point by Anholt (2007) that competitive identity works best when it is manifested through concrete deliverables, as opposed to being proclaimed by the symbolic statement. The stronger use of patriotic framing by Kuwait could be indicative of another communicative predicament: a low-visibility country might be required to establish a more overt national presence before it can move on to demonstrating national excellence.

The disproportional value of Nature (12.0% vs. 4.7%), Culture (15.3% vs. 8.7%), and Art (10.0% vs. 5.3%) in Saudi Arabia reflects the Saudi Tourism Authority's documented strategy of positioning the Kingdom's natural and heritage assets as globally distinctive tourism products (AlSahli et al., 2025). This is also in line with what Avraham and Ketter (2012) term reversal framing, the tactical use of powerful images of landscape, heritage, and modernity to crowd out

existing negative associations. In the case of Saudi Arabia, whose global reputation has been shaped over the years by associations with religious conservatism and political controversy, foregrounding the country's spectacular scenery and cultural heritage is a calculated effort to reframe the dominant international narrative. The focus on Art further endorses this reading. Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in promoting itself as a new global cultural destination, and this institutional desire can be traced in the high rate of art-related content.

The heavy framing of Visionary, for example, references the national development of the future, Kuwait Vision 2035, and long-term aspirations, which are coherent with the other strategic narratives of New Kuwait vision, which focuses on the institutional change, Kuwait economy diversification, and the quality of governance (Sarie & Ismail, 2021). It is, however, noteworthy that @VisitKuwait's Nature content percentage (4.7%) is relatively low compared to @VisitSaudi.Ar's (12.0%). Even though Kuwait has a coastline, desert, and ecological resources that can be harnessed for tourism, these are not sufficiently reflected in the account's content mix. This absence may reflect a deliberate decision by the account to focus more on cultural and identity-based frames than destination-specific frames at this point in international brand development.

Taken together, the thematic profiles of the two accounts suggest two distinct framing approaches. @VisitSaudi.Ar employs the destination-led framing model to position particular places, cultural assets, and natural environments as the major components of national identity. While @VisitKuwait's framing model is nation-led, it foregrounds identity, aspiration, and human connection as the most important communicative registers. These two methods can be theoretically justified within the framework of competitive identity proposed by Anholt (2007)

and the broader nation branding literature, which recognizes that states may pursue legitimately different framing strategies depending on their international visibility, institutional capacity, and communication objectives (Browning & de Oliveira, 2017).

What is particularly useful about reading these two strategies through both frameworks together is that framing theory explains the how, and nation branding explains the why. Entman (1993) tells us that Kuwait's emphasis on Patriotism, Visionary, and People content is a set of deliberate framing choices. Each post is a decision about which version of Kuwait to make visible. Anholt (2007) tells us why those choices matter beyond Instagram: they are Kuwait's attempt to occupy a distinct and recognizable position in the global reputation marketplace. Saudi Arabia's destination-led approach works the same way—Entman explains the mechanism, Anholt explains the competitive purpose behind it. Neither framework alone is sufficient to account for what the data shows. Together, they reveal that what appears to be a content strategy is actually a nation branding strategy enacted one post at a time.

What Is Not Said: The Strategic Logic of Absent Frames

The thematic distribution data raise a question beyond what either account foregrounds: what do they systematically avoid showing? Entman's (1993) argument that omissions carry analytical weight equal to inclusions applies with particular force here. Three near-complete absence themes can be highlighted in the broader Gulf context: Luxury, Modernity, and Religious content.

Religious content was present in only one post from @VisitKuwait and none from @VisitSaudi.Ar across the entire dataset of 300 posts. This is conspicuous to two openly Islamic states, especially Saudi Arabia, home to Mecca and Medina. A generous reading might call it an

oversight. A more analytically careful one suggests it is deliberate. Both states appear to have made a strategic choice to keep religion off their official tourism accounts: religious framing, however resonant with domestic audiences, risks reinforcing precisely the associations—conservatism, restriction, inaccessibility—that their tourism branding is working to overcome (Cooper & Momani, 2009).

Luxury content was virtually absent, with only a single post in the entire dataset. This is harder to explain, as the Gulf's international reputation for premium hospitality and high-end experiences rests primarily on Dubai and Abu Dhabi, where high-end represents more than 46 percent of the hotel supply in the Gulf (Statista, 2023) and is ingrained in the perception of the Gulf as a destination (Mastercard Economics Institute, 2023). Neither Kuwait nor Saudi Arabia appears to be using this regional association as the basis for their official Instagram communication. It remains unclear from the data whether this is a strategic choice not to imbue Arabic-language content with elitist overtones, a shortcoming in content planning, or merely a coincidence between the target audiences of these accounts and the luxury market. One would like to investigate whether the English-language versions of the accounts make different decisions.

Modernity content was barely present, one post from @VisitSaudi.Ar and none from @VisitKuwait. This can be explained at least partially in the case of Saudi Arabia. The sheer volume of international media generated independently by NEOM may suggest that the modernization narrative does not require the support of the tourism account (AlSahli et al., 2025); the account can be devoted to more immediately helpful experiences and destinations that could interest potential visitors. In the case of Kuwait, the lack is more difficult to justify. The

institutional modernization and economic transformation are outlined as the main national objectives in Kuwait Vision 2035 (Sarie & Ismail, 2021). However, none of that is transferred into the tourism Instagram account. Whether this reflects a deliberate decision to keep the two communication streams separate—Vision 2035 messaging for governance audiences, tourism content for visitors—is a reasonable hypothesis. However, it leaves an obvious framing opportunity unused.

The Calendar Problem: When Events Crowd Out the Destination

Approximately half of the total production of both accounts is under Events and Entertainment. That number is worth examining closely. Once an official tourism account devotes a significant share of its content to concerts, sporting events, and seasonal festivals, it ceases to serve as a portrait of a destination and becomes a calendar. The impression someone visiting Kuwait without any information about the country would get is that it has a busy events calendar. They would know very little about Kuwait as a destination: its Gulf coastline, its Diwaniya culture (a traditional social gathering), the Mubarakiya market, the pearl diving tradition, the Failaka Island, the food culture, the architecture, daily life of Kuwaitis, etc. None of that stands at any significant frequency. The narrative states that Kuwait is a place where things happen. It is much less effective at making the case that Kuwait is a place worth knowing.

According to Entman (1993), frames stipulate the unspoken conditions by which a subject is judged. The content about events positions the Kuwaiti tourism product as time-limited and occasion-specific: visit the country during a season, an event, or a festival. A destination-led content mix reframes the proposition: come because Kuwait itself is worth experiencing. The weaker nation branding tool is the first framing, as the content has an inherent expiry date. Posts

of events become aged after the event ends. Destination content, by contrast, compounds over time: every post adds to a visual archive of the country, continuously building international awareness. Anholt (2007) makes a similar observation at a more general level, noting that long-lasting national reputations are constructed through uninterrupted, multidimensional identity discourses rather than promotional periods based on specific events. The event-intensive approach of Saudi Arabia is more justifiable, simply because Riyadh Season, the Formula One Grand Prix in Jeddah, international boxing, Mixed Martial Arts, and other mega-events are well-known globally and generate their own media coverage without the involvement of the tourism account (AlSahli et al., 2025). They bear an internationally recognizable brand. Kuwait's events do not yet carry the same international recognition. The event-related content on the unfamiliar destination will probably be well received by Gulf-region audiences who already have the cultural background to interpret it. However, it does comparatively little for international audiences who have no frame of reference for Kuwaiti cultural programming.

Research on communication within destination management organizations supports this concern. According to McCallum (2025), the content of both Instagram accounts, namely @ExploreCanada and @VisitTheUSA, blended Nature, People, and Culture to offer a more multidimensional look at each destination. The same idea was discovered by Stepchenkova and Zhan (2013), who found that effective destination marketing organization communication builds a stratified destination identity rather than focusing on a specific content type. The broader literature on destination image consistently concludes that the thematic diversity in official tourism content generates more robust and enduring national images than single-category strategies. By that standard, both accounts have meaningful room to grow.

Nation-Level Engagement and the Follower Paradox

Prior to examining engagement at the theme and format levels, the independent samples t-test revealed a finding that warrants attention on its own: @VisitKuwait posts generated significantly higher average likes per post than @VisitSaudi.Ar posts ($M = 387.33$ vs. $M = 221.41$), $t(288) = 2.606$, $p = .010$, despite the Saudi account's substantially larger follower base—approximately 324,000 followers compared to @VisitKuwait's 82,800 at the time of data collection. This reversal of the expected engagement advantage is a theoretically meaningful finding that cannot be explained solely by content volume or institutional size.

One such interpretation is that the content from @VisitKuwait appeals more to its current audience, and therefore, the ratio of visible engagement per post among its followers increases. It corresponds to the argument presented by Marwick (2015), according to which the decision to participate in the attention economy is dictated not only by the size of the audience but also by the perceived relevance and emotional prominence of the content within a particular community. The comparatively more intense focus by Kuwait on patriotism, people, and future-oriented storytelling could have a greater impact among its audience, mainly based in the Gulf region—an audience that can relate to the content more, is more likely to react more favorably to material that confirms that they share a common national identity.

Another and related interpretation is based on the framework of frame dominance proposed by Sheafer and Gabay (2009), which states that structural advantages, such as greater institutional reach (e.g., more followers), do not necessarily result in engagement—the broader audience of @VisitSaudi.Ar could have a greater number of passive followers or foreign visitors whose forms of engagement are not equivalent to those of an active national or regional

community. The lack of a notable difference in the number of comments at the national level ($p = .610$) is another indication that the advantage of engaging with the post by @VisitKuwait is more a visible form of approval than active, discursive feedback.

These results also carry a methodological warning, recognized in the analytical design. Since raw account engagement numbers were not adjusted for follower count, cross-account differences can be seen as descriptions of visible resonance rather than a single set of indicators of audience reach or persuasive power. The observation that the @VisitKuwait account has more raw likes than the account with more followers, @VisitSaudi.Ar, is suggestive. However, the mechanisms linking content quality and audience size do not allow for a conclusion based solely on the available data.

From a theoretical standpoint, this finding sits at the intersection of both frameworks in a meaningful way. Framing theory would predict that content resonance—not audience size—determines engagement, because frames that connect with a specific community's values and identity will outperform frames that do not, regardless of how many people are watching. Anholt (2007) adds another dimension to this finding with his competitive identity framework, which argues that national reputations are not built through size or resources alone, but through the quality and consistency of the identity being projected. Kuwait's per-post engagement advantage, despite its smaller platform presence, suggests that its framing choices are landing—that audiences are responding to the identity Kuwait is putting forward. The follower paradox, in this light, is not just a statistical quirk. It is a sign that thoughtful framing can close the gap that institutional disadvantage creates.

These nation-level patterns provide an important baseline against which theme and format engagement findings should be interpreted. If @VisitKuwait is already outperforming @VisitSaudi.Ar at the aggregate level despite its smaller audience, the question becomes: which specific content choices are driving that advantage, and can they be identified with sufficient precision to be strategically actionable? The analyses reported under RQ2 and RQ3 below address precisely this question.

Theme, Engagement and the Resonance of Hospitality (RQ2)

The second research question asked how engagement varied across themes within each account's official tourism Instagram content. The central argument this section develops is that what an account chooses to post most frequently is not necessarily what its audience responds to most strongly—and that this gap between production volume and engagement performance has direct strategic implications for both accounts. The analyses below move from within-account descriptive patterns to cross-account inferential comparisons, examining likes and comments separately to account for their distinct behavioral logics. The key inferential finding is that theme significantly predicted like-based engagement, $F(7, 282) = 2.815, p = .008$, but not comment-based engagement, $F(7, 282) = 0.131, p = .996$. Moreover, the Theme $\times$ Account interaction was not significant, $F(6, 275) = 1.216, p = .298$, indicating that the relationship between thematic content and audience engagement follows a broadly similar pattern across both accounts—a finding that strengthens the generalizability of the conclusions drawn below.

The most striking finding at the theme level is the consistent dominance of People and Hospitality in generating like-based engagement. In the aggregate sample, the People and Hospitality theme registered the highest average likes ($M = 734.11$), which was far higher than

the other themes, such as Patriotism ($M = 585.09$) and Visionary ($M = 419.07$). This pattern held across both accounts: for @VisitKuwait, the highest average likes were in the People and Hospitality category ($M = 769.79$), and for @VisitSaudi.Ar, the same category ranked first ($M = 634.20$). This is theoretically important because the same finding has been made in two accounts with different thematic profiles and different bases of followers.

This finding concurs with studies of social media interaction and visual framing that have repeatedly found human presence and interpersonal warmth as among the most engagement-generative content types (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Marwick, 2015). When it comes to nation branding, it concurs with the arguments presented by Anholt (2007) that the People dimension of competitive identity, which is the supposed warmth, friendliness, and hospitality of a nation's people, is one of the strongest and most persistent sources of reputational capital. In the case of tourism in particular, the tourist gaze theory, as proposed by Urry (1990), holds that audiences are attracted to images that humanize tourism destinations, thereby creating tourism sites as spaces of welcome and belonging rather than spaces of spectacle or monuments. Content featuring local people, guest-host interactions, and expressions of social warmth appears to activate precisely this response.

The rather low engagement with Events & Entertainment content is also instructive. Although this theme accounted for 46.7% of the total posts on both accounts, the average engagement was middling ($M = 271.14$), ranking it fifth among the eight themes retained. This observation has significant strategic consequences, since it implies that the majority of the content produced does not elicit the largest audience response. It implies that both accounts are allocating excessive communicative resources to content categories that fail to deliver the same

level of engagement and underinvesting in content categories, especially People and Hospitality, which have much better resonance with their audiences.

The same finding is also in line with the literature on framing in general. As Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) established, human-interest frames consistently elicit more substantive audience responses than institutional or event-based frames, and this seems to hold for official tourism Instagram communication. According to Van Gorp (2007), the constructionist view, the content of People and Hospitality can arouse culturally embedded warmth, generosity, and belonging schema, which are more profound and resonant than event-oriented content. The implication for both accounts is that rebalancing content toward People and Hospitality, without completely cutting event-based content, could make significant inroads into audience engagement and make the country's brand more impactful overall.

Furthermore, there is a high level of engagement with Patriotism content on the @VisitKuwait account ($M = 585.09$), which warrants further examination. In the @VisitSaudi.Ar content mix, there was no mention of Patriotism, so it could not be directly compared. In the case of @VisitKuwait, it ranked third in average likes. This implies that the patriotic content resonates strongly with @VisitKuwait's existing audience. From a framing perspective, the Patriotism posts function as identity frames, invoking schemas of national pride, collective memory, and belonging that elicit strong affective responses among in-group audiences (Entman, 1993; Van Gorp, 2007). The strategic risk facing Kuwait is that although patriotic content resonates powerfully within the existing follower community, it is likely less persuasive for international audiences who lack cultural landmarks to help them decipher the symbolism of the Kuwaiti message.

Beyond the pattern of like-based engagement, the consistency of null results for comment-based engagement across all theme-level analyses also warrants explicit discussion. The two-way ANOVA for comments by theme and account yielded no significant effects: Theme $F(7, 275) = 0.128, p = .996$; Account $F(1, 275) = 0.460, p = .498$; Theme $\times$ Account interaction $F(6, 275) = 0.284, p = .944$. This pattern—consistent across both one-way and two-way analyses—suggests that comment-based engagement on official tourism Instagram accounts is not driven by content type, but rather by other dynamics that fall outside the scope of this thesis, such as caption length and framing, call-to-action strategies, the timing of posts, or community-specific norms around active participation (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). This distinction between passive engagement (likes) and active engagement (comments) is theoretically meaningful. Different engagement metrics reflect qualitatively distinct relational orientations: likes signal ambient, low-effort affiliation, while comments signal deliberate, effortful participation (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; Muntinga et al., 2011). The fact that theme systematically predicts the former but not the latter suggests that thematic framing shapes the emotional register of content—its capacity to generate approval and resonance—without necessarily triggering the conversational impulse that drives commenting behavior. For both accounts, this implies that the strategic value of theme selection lies primarily in its capacity to build visible audience affinity, rather than to stimulate dialogue.

Post Format, Platform Logic, and the Reel Advantage (RQ3)

The third research question asked how engagement varied across post formats. The one-way ANOVA established format was a significant predictor of like-based engagement, $F(2, 287) = 7.391, p < .001$, and Tukey HSD post-hoc tests indicated that Reels received significantly more

likes than Photos (mean difference = 274.51, $p < .001$) and Carousels (mean difference = 207.73, $p = .037$), but there was no significant difference between Photos and Carousels. The format engagement relationship can be explained in terms of Instagram's platform architecture and the communicative affordances of video content in particular.

The Reel engagement advantage aligns with Instagram's algorithmic promotion of video content, which has grown over the years since the platform shifted in 2021 to emphasize short-form video in response to TikTok competition (Meta, 2023). Regarding affordances, the communicative experience of Reels is more interactive and participatory than that of a single image, with movement, sound, music, and editing that make the content more engaging with every unit of viewing time. Video is especially strong in terms of destination branding since it may portray the experiential aspect of a destination, including its sounds, rhythms, and atmosphere, which can be expressed in a way that is impossible in the case of a still image (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). A picture of the sandstone structures of Al-Ula conveys visual splendor; a video of the same structures at sunset, including the surrounding sound and film framing, creates an experiential welcome.

Examining engagement by format within each account separately reveals an important asymmetry. Within @VisitKuwait, Reels generated an average of 439.7 likes per post compared to 296.9 for Photos and 388.7 for Carousels. Within @VisitSaudi.Ar, the Reel advantage was even more pronounced: Reels averaged 548.0 likes per post, compared to 149.7 for Photos and 107.9 for Carousels—a ratio of more than 3.6 to 1 between the account's least-used and highest-performing format. This finding is particularly consequential for @VisitSaudi.Ar, whose content strategy is dominated by static photography (58.0% of posts). The data suggest that the Saudi

account is systematically underutilizing its highest-engagement format while overproducing its lowest. This is consistent with Highfield & Leaver (2016) argument that video content affords a qualitatively richer experiential representation of destinations—one that static imagery structurally cannot replicate. From a framing perspective, Reels allow official tourism accounts to stage national identity as lived experience rather than static spectacle, activating what Urry (1990) describes as the experiential dimension of the tourist gaze. The strategic implication is clear: for @VisitSaudi.Ar, increasing Reel production does not require abandoning its high-quality visual aesthetic, but rather translating that aesthetic into the video format that the platform currently rewards.

The Tukey HSD results also clarify an important nuance: the significant format effect on likes was driven specifically by the Reel advantage over both Photos (mean difference = 274.51, $p < .001$) and Carousels (mean difference = 207.73, $p = .037$), while the difference between Carousels and Photos was not statistically significant (mean difference = 66.78, $p = .683$). This means the engagement advantage does not belong to multi-image or interactive formats broadly, but to video specifically. Carousels, despite offering more content per post than single images, did not outperform Photos in generating likes. This finding aligns with the platform-logic argument advanced by Highfield and Leaver (2016), who note that Instagram's algorithmic architecture privileges content that generates sustained viewing time—a metric that short-form video satisfies far more effectively than carousel swiping behavior. It also supports the broader literature on social media engagement, which consistently identifies video as the dominant engagement driver across major platforms (Huertas & Marine-Roig, 2015). For destination management organizations, the practical takeaway is straightforward: the format investment that

most reliably translates into visible audience engagement is Reels, not incremental additions to photo-based content.

These within-account patterns clarify why the format distribution difference between the two accounts matters strategically. The fact that the most frequent format used by @VisitKuwait (46.3% of posts) was Reels, and by @VisitSaudi.Ar (58.0% of posts) was Photos, is hence a strategic difference. The format strategy of @VisitKuwait, despite having a smaller follower base and fewer institutional resources, is more consistent with Instagram's current engagement logic. The fact that @VisitSaudi.Ar continues to rely on static photography while producing visually sophisticated content may limit its per-post engagement potential in the current platform environment. This is especially interesting, given that the Format $\times$ Account interaction was not significant ($p = .071$), suggesting an account-specific difference in format effectiveness that should be considered in a future study with larger samples.

The lack of a significant effect of format on comment-based engagement ($p = .745$) indicates that format does not significantly influence active audience participation dynamics, but only visible approval (in the form of likes). This distinction between passive and active interaction aligns with Marwick's (2015) characterization of Instagram interaction as primarily operating in an attention economy, where more visible measures of approval are the norm rather than dialogue. It also supports the view that likes and comments reflect varying levels of audience response. To illustrate, likes and comments exhibit distinct levels of affective resonance and active engagement, respectively, and may therefore be more susceptible to content context, caption framing, and community dynamics than the format itself.

The two-way ANOVA for comments by format and account confirmed that this null result holds consistently across both accounts: Format $F(2, 284) = 0.161, p = .851$; Account $F(1, 284) = 0.042, p = .838$; Format $\times$ Account interaction $F(2, 284) = 0.328, p = .720$. The non-significant interaction is particularly noteworthy: it indicates that neither account benefits from any format in terms of comment generation, and that this pattern is consistent regardless of whether the account is Reel-first (@VisitKuwait) or Photo-first (@VisitSaudi.Ar). This reinforces the argument that comment-based engagement operates according to a different logic than like-based engagement, one that is not responsive to the visual and temporal affordances of different post formats. Taken together with the null theme-level results for comments, these findings suggest that comment-driven audience participation on official Gulf tourism accounts may be shaped more by relational and contextual factors—such as community familiarity, content novelty, or direct audience address—than by the structural properties of either thematic content or post format (Muntinga et al., 2011).

Strategic Implications for Kuwait's Tourism Communication

The thesis results indicate several pragmatic orientations in the official communication of tourism in Kuwait. The following is not a wishlist based on generic best practices, but rather a list of findings based on particular trends identified in the data.

First, and best justified by the data: a shift in the content mix towards People and Hospitality, and away from Events and Entertainment. People and Hospitality had the highest average engagement of any subject on @VisitKuwait ($M = 769.79$ likes per post), yet accounted for only 9.3% of the total posts. Events and Entertainment had an average of 251.24 likes per post, but its output was 46.7%. The most engaging content on the account is not the most

produced, and the difference is massive. Shifting People and Hospitality and reducing Events and Entertainment would better align content investment with demonstrated audience response. It would also start resolving the calendar issue: more People, Nature, Culture, and place-based narratives would mean the narrative would start talking about Kuwait as a country and vacation spot to learn about, not merely a place with an active season.

Second, invest in destination-specific content developed around Kuwait's underrepresented assets. The coastline, Diwaniya culture, Mubarakiya market, heritage, Failaka Island, Islamic architecture, the food landscape, the luxurious lifestyle, and the local brands are all real, distinctive assets that are rarely featured in the account. Unlike event content, destination content does not run out but leaves a permanent visual impression of a country that grows in value over time (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). Kuwait is not short of content to create. What it has not had, according to this information, is a content strategy that focuses on storytelling rather than promotional programming.

Third, invest more in Reels. The existing format mix of @VisitKuwait (Reels 46.3%) is already more consistent with Instagram's engagement algorithms than the Photo-based format of @VisitSaudi.Ar's Instagram account. The engagement numbers prove that this is already paying off: Reels exceeded Photos by almost 275 likes per post, on average. Using that format advantage to People and Hospitality and destination storytelling would combine the two most successful dimensions identified in the current thesis.

Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

In addition to the empirical discoveries, the thesis contributes to the nation branding, framing theory, and digital communication literatures.

Perhaps the most important theoretical contribution of this study is what the findings reveal about how framing theory and nation branding actually work together in practice. The two frameworks are often discussed alongside each other in the literature, but this study provides empirical evidence of how they connect at the level of individual content decisions.

Three findings stand out in this regard. First, the follower paradox—Kuwait generating more likes per post than Saudi Arabia despite having four times fewer followers—shows that smart framing choices can compensate for institutional disadvantage in the nation branding competition. In other words, framing quality can outperform scale. Second, People and Hospitality generated the highest engagement in both accounts, and not by coincidence, but because it directly activates what Anholt calls the People dimension of competitive identity. The warmth, friendliness, and hospitality of a nation's people is one of its most powerful branding tools. These findings show that when countries actually frame their content around people, audiences respond. Third, Religious, Luxury, and Modernity content was almost entirely absent from both accounts. This was not accidental. Both countries appear to be making a conscious choice to keep certain associations away from their tourism image. This finding brings Entman's framing theory and nation branding together in a concrete way: the brand is shaped not only by what each country chooses to show, but equally by what it chooses to hide.

The thesis, methodologically, generates a validated 12-category thematic codebook tailored to Gulf tourism Instagram content, the first of its kind in that regional and platform context. Combining general tourism themes of communication (McCallum, 2025; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013) with Gulf-related identity dimensions (Alsaaidi, 2020; Altamimi et al., 2023; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018; Zeineddine, 2017), the codebook demonstrated satisfactory

intercoder reliability ($\alpha = .857$) concerning 300 coded posts. It can be adapted and built upon by future researchers exploring the aspects of nation branding of Arab Gulf states, Gulf tourism communication, or Arabic-language institutional social media.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the results of Chapter 4 were interpreted in terms of the theoretical and contextual backgrounds. As discussed, the thematic divergence between @VisitKuwait and @VisitSaudi.Ar reflects meaningfully distinct nation branding strategies—a nation-led framing model in Kuwait's case, foregrounding identity, aspiration, and human warmth, and a destination-led model in Saudi Arabia's case, foregrounding specific places, cultural assets, and natural environments—with different implications for international audience reach. @VisitKuwait outperformed @VisitSaudi.Ar in per-post likes despite having a substantially smaller follower base, a finding that challenges straightforward assumptions about the relationship between institutional scale and communicative impact.

Stable leadership of the People and Hospitality content in both accounts in terms of engagement creation, along with the low performance of the Events and Entertainment in comparison with their posting frequency, indicates a frequency-resonance gap with direct content strategy implications. Lastly, the opportunity for Reel engagement indicates the correspondence of the video format to Instagram's existing platform logic and a format strategy difference between the two accounts, which can be considered strategically significant. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis and discusses methodological limitations and future research directions.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis examined how Kuwait and Saudi Arabia frame national identity through their official tourism Instagram accounts, analyzing 300 posts across three research questions: which themes were most and least prevalent in each account's content, how engagement varied across themes, and how engagement varied across post formats. Events and Entertainment were the overriding content categories across the two accounts, but they differed substantially in the distribution of the rest of their content. Beyond that shared dominance, @VisitKuwait invested more in People & Hospitality (9.3%), Visionary (8.7%), and Culture (8.7%) content, while @VisitSaudi.Ar emphasized Culture (15.3%), Nature (12.0%), and Art (10.0%).

These distributional differences were statistically significant, $\chi^2(7, N = 290) = 33.08, p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .338$. Despite having a substantially smaller follower base—approximately 82,800 compared to @VisitSaudi.Ar's 324,000—@VisitKuwait generated significantly higher average likes per post, $t(288) = 2.606, p = .010$, suggesting that institutional scale does not necessarily determine communicative reach (Marwick, 2015; Sheaffer & Gabay, 2009). The most engaging content was People & Hospitality, which ranked highest in both accounts yet was among the least produced content types, in contrast to Events and Entertainment, which led in posting volume but underperformed in engagement. Reels outperformed Photos and Carousels in like-based engagement, $F(2, 287) = 7.391, p < .001$, and @VisitKuwait's Reel-first content strategy proved more consistent with Instagram's algorithmic promotion of short-form video than the Photo-dominant approach used by @VisitSaudi.Ar (Meta, 2023).

Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

Theoretically, the study builds on Entman's (1993) framing theory. However, it considers absent frames—the near-complete absence of Religious, Luxury, and Modernity content in both accounts—as analytically significant results rather than non-findings, empirically operationalizing the argument by Aronczyk (2013) that nation branding is a process of managing the identity associations that are deliberately avoided as much as those that are actively promoted. Methodologically, the study produces the first validated 12-category Gulf-specific thematic codebook for Instagram content analysis ($\alpha = .857$), which may be used by future researchers examining Gulf nations' nation branding and Arabic-language institutional social media. It also employs a most-similar systems comparative design (Przeworski & Teune, 1970) that can serve as a template for future comparative digital communication research in the region.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study analyzed only Arabic-language Instagram accounts, meaning the findings may not be representative of how either country addresses non-Arabic-speaking international audiences; English-language accounts may reflect different framing priorities. Second, manual coding involves interpretive judgment even when reliability procedures are applied (Krippendorff, 2004; Lombard et al., 2002), and despite meeting the accepted reliability threshold ($\alpha = .857$), some degree of coder subjectivity remains. Third, the sample comprised 150 posts per account drawn from the most recent qualifying main-feed content, excluding Instagram Stories, Highlights, and non-feed Reels; this means content published outside the main feed was not analyzed. Fourth, subgroup sample sizes for some

thematic categories were small, which may have reduced statistical power in engagement analyses for those themes.

Directions for Future Research

Several directions for future research emerge from this thesis. The comparison could be extended to other official tourism Instagram accounts across the Arab Gulf region to test whether the patterns identified here generalize beyond Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Comparing Arabic and English-language accounts within each country would reveal whether framing strategies differ by target audience. Future work could also incorporate audience reception data through surveys or interviews with followers to determine whether the framing patterns identified here produce the intended destination image effects—an important distinction, as the image a country projects and the image visitors actually receive can differ substantially (Avraham & Ketter, 2012; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). Finally, analysis of user-generated content—including travel vlogs, tourist Instagram posts, and visitor reviews—would offer a ground-level perspective on Kuwait’s destination image that official accounts alone cannot provide, enabling a direct comparison between the image Kuwait projects and the image international visitors actually receive.

Concluding Remarks

Kuwait is a country with a culture, history, and a story to tell. This study has provided the first systematic empirical study of how that story is currently being told on Instagram—and where the telling falls short. Whether the gap between what @VisitKuwait posts and what its audience responds to most strongly can be strategically closed is a question that policymakers, tourism communicators, and future researchers are now better equipped to address.

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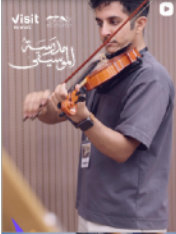
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Appendix A - Codebook

POST	LINK	FORMAT	THEME	LANGAUGE	LIKES	COMMENTS
	https://www.instagram.com/p/DQW-p8XDIUC/?hl=en	Reel	Art	Arabic	123	3
	https://www.instagram.com/p/DQWs2nsDKvK/?hl=en&img_index=1	Carousel	Sport	Arabic	550	16
	https://www.instagram.com/p/DQUkrSTDM6E/?hl=en&img_index=1	Carousel	Events & Entertainment	Arabic	99	1
	https://www.instagram.com/p/DQRrKKODEtX/?hl=en&img_index=1	Carousel	Events & Entertainment	Arabic	301	1
	https://www.instagram.com/p/DQRe1WPjQU/?hl=en	Photo	Art	Arabic	61	0
	https://www.instagram.com/p/DQRHMPUjDc5/?hl=en	Reel	Culture	Arabic	453	14
	https://www.instagram.com/p/DQO9E7hDLN/?hl=en	Photo	Nature	Arabic	70	3