| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

A Systemic Functional-Linguistics Analysis of the Saudi Official Tourism Website

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| **ABSTRACT**

Tourism promotional websites are considered a significant tool for attracting and persuading tourists. In this regard, this study attempts to investigate how Saudi Tourism Authority attracts sightseers through the use of verbal elements on its official website. Data will be collected from the Saudi official tourism website (www.visitsaudi.com). Within the website, there are three pages that will be analyzed, the 'About' page of three popular destinations in Saudi Arabia (Riyadh, Diriyah, and AlUla) sections. From a Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) perspective, Mood system analysis is used to analyze the verbal features of the selected data. The findings indicate that the Saudi official tourism website systematically employs linguistic features, especially Mood choice to attract sightseers. Interestingly, it was found that the Visit Saudi was realized in declarative and imperative clauses, with no interrogative clauses.

| **KEYWORDS**

Mood system, Saudi Arabia, Systemic functional linguistics, Tourism website

1. Introduction

The Saudi Vision 2030 has been viewed as a roadmap for Saudi social, cultural, and economic development (Hameed et al., 2020). Within vision 2030, tourism has emerged as one of the most important industries for the Kingdom to focus on developing as part of its strategy for socio-economic growth. With the advent of technology, many travelers plan and organize their trip online using different corporate, social media, and websites to book flights, ground transportation, lodging, tours, and transfers, as well as to learn more about the tourist resources and attractions of the destination (Xiang et al., 2015). Every country in the world tries to promote itself worldwide as a tourism destination to attract tourists by establishing tourism offices and creating tourism brands (Smith & Robinson, 2006). Saudi Arabia uses an online platform to brand Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination by developing an official website, namely, Visit Saudi (www.visitsaudi.com). The website was launched to attract and persuade sightseers all over the world. Consequently, this study aims to critically investigate how Saudi tourism attracts sightseers through its official website for selected destinations. Furthermore, the intention of the present study is to investigate how verbal elements on the Saudi official tourism website convey meaning in portraying the destinations.

2. Literature Review

The review of the literature focusses on: tourism in Saudi Arabia, discourse of tourism, tourism website and systemic functional linguistics framework.

2.1 Tourism in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is the largest country in Western Asia in terms of land area and it makes up the bulk of the Arabian Peninsula (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, n.d.). It is considered one of the, if not the most, predominant tourism destinations in the Middle East. In the past, tourism in Saudi Arabia was primarily centered around religious reasons; due to the presence of the two holiest cities in Islam, Mecca and Medina (Henderson, 2010). Millions of Muslims worldwide would visit these cities each year to perform Hajj or Umrah. Consequently, the focus of tourism was largely on religious sites and activities, with limited infrastructure and services for leisure tourism. However, in recent years, tourism in Saudi Arabia has expanded to embrace many changes. The government of Saudi Arabia has recognized the significance and potential of the tourism industry and considers it as one of the prime drivers of economic growth (Mir & Kulibi, 2023). In fact, Saudi Arabia has initiated a bold initiative to enhance the diversification of its economy, with tourism assuming a crucial position in this undertaking. As Khan (2017) mentioned, "The tourism sector has been earmarked by the government as a key driver for growth in the Kingdom's Vision 2030 economic diversification strategy" (p. 2). According to Hassan (2017), there have been plans for a tourism revolution to make Saudi Arabia a world-class travel destination, which is part of Saudi Vision 2030. In 2016, Saudi Arabia launched Vision 2030, which is "A bold and exciting plan that draws upon Saudi Arabia's rich history, heritage and culture, its strategic location and economic strength" (Saudi Vision 2030, n.d.). Vision 2030 emphasis on many areas, encompassing tourism, entertainment, education, and healthcare (Mir & Kulibi, 2023). Under Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia aims to increase the number of tourists to the country; furthermore, it seeks to increase its revenues (Abuhjeeleh, 2019). Vision 2030 seeks to preserve and promote Saudi Arabia's cultural heritage by showcasing historical sites, traditional arts, and cultural festivals. The plan also emphasizes the importance of sustainable tourism practices that aim to protect the environment and ensure the long-term viability of the tourism industry. Saudi Arabia has particularly focused on many cities, such as Riyadh, Diriyah, and AlUla. Moreover, it has developed a variety of destinations, tailored to the country's geographical and environmental diversity (Rafik, 2023), such as AlDiriyah and Al-Ula.

2.2 Discourse of Tourism

Tourism has become one of the most prevalent community discourses (Salim et al., 2018). According to Papen (2005), tourism discourse is "A set of expressions, words and behaviour as well as particular touristic structures and activities that describe a place and its inhabitants" (p. 79). MacChannel (1976) emphasized that the growth of tourism depends on how language is utilized to generate a tourist experience toward the destination. Indeed, numerous destinations are not inherently tourist destinations; rather, the language used has contributed to their perception (Santos et al., 2008). In a social context, Salim and Som (2018) suggested that discourse is crucial for comprehending societal responses and language. Consequently, tourism discourse plays a crucial role in the promotion of tourism by shaping the image of a destination. Within the realm of tourism discourse, Goshkheteliani and Kalandia (2022) demonstrated that like any other discourse, has a sender and an addressee. In contrast to other forms of discourse, the discourse of tourism not only involves communication between individuals who are not affiliated with a specific social group or linguistic community, but also diverse organizations within the tourism industry, including tourist companies and agencies, airline and railway ticket offices, guides and interpreter agencies, as well as service employees (Goshkheteliani & Kalandia, 2022). Koval et al. (2023) mentioned that "Tourism discourse is associated with other types of institutional discourse: historical, political, commercial, religious, legal, sports, arts, and many others, and such a complete character of the socio-economic phenomenon is associated mainly with the specific characteristics of the tourism sector, which consists mainly to cover all spheres of society within the framework of its functioning" (p. 220). They also noted that tourism discourse has a specific thematic focus (travel and leisure), a concentration on a particular destination, and a specific purpose. In other words, it is about informing the addressee about a specific tourism product, advertising to promote and support this product, and utilizing a specific set of language tools. According to Manca (2016), tourism discourse is highly persuasive. To achieve this, texts employ a network of interrelations, both verbal and visual elements, that are combined to fulfill tourists' expectations (Manca, 2016). As Koval et al. (2023) noted, the tourism discourse is almost identical to the advertising discourse. The tourism discourse, on the other hand, has "The advantage of the information function, the presentation of sufficiently complete information about the real potential reality, the dominance of cultural, historical, and popular science aspects, as well as universal national values in the presentation of information (Koval et al., 2023, p. 219).

2.3 Tourism Website

The advent of the Internet and web technologies has had a profound impact on the tourism sector (Huang & Yuan, 2017). Nowadays, the Internet, often via official websites, has emerged as the predominant medium through which visitors seek information (Lehto et al., 2006). Indeed, the Internet serves as a valuable marketing tool that facilitates the exchange of information between customers and service providers (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Further to this, Xiang et al. (2014) believed that the advent of the internet has facilitated suppliers in the tourism industry to connect efficiently and directly with customers. Regarding tourists, Salim et al. (2018) mentioned that "The most tourists prefer using online mediation to gain information about a particular tourist destination" (p. 336). With regard to the website, Salim et al. (2014) noted that websites are "The most efficient and effective forms of communication between tourism organisers and the potential tourists" (p. 1). Ismail et al. (2022) pointed out that numerous official tourism websites of various countries have made significant improvements to their information provision, updates, and web pages. Salim et al. (2018) mentioned that a "website can offer new and updated content, with well-arranged information and a well-designed layout" (p. 337). Huang and Yuan (2017) argued that "Users can use tourism websites to receive updated travel relative information and services, share personal experiences and form communities of exchange" (p. 460). The goal of the tourism website is to present the destinations in a positive and appealing manner (Salim et al., 2018). Cavia et al. (2014) suggested that an official tourism website serves as both a promotional tool and a communication channel for cities, regions, countries, and destinations. Moreover, Hallett and Kaplan-Weinger (2010) found that the official tourism websites have emerged as crucial tools for the promotion and advertisement of the local cultures, identities, uniqueness, and cuisines of the destinations.

2.4 Systemic Functional Linguistics

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a linguistic framework established by Halliday in the 1960s, which originated in the United Kingdom and later expanded to Australia (Almurashi, 2016). It views language as a social semiotic system, emphasizing its role in making sense of experiences and expressing relationships (Halliday, 2004). In other words, Halliday's notion of language as the foundation of social meaning primarily focuses on the strategies utilized during the interaction between producers and receivers in social events (Darong, 2022). Moreover, Gebhard and Accurso (2020) argued that SFL "Provides a social semiotic theory of meaning making, learning, and social change" (p. 1029). Further to this, Lim (2018) pointed out that SFL is considered a functional semantic approach to language that explores the usage of language in various contexts and understanding how language is formed as a system stems from the field of linguistics. Truthfully, in SFL, language is considered systemic because it is "A resource for making meaning, and meaning resides in systemic patterns of choice" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 23). Additionally, because language can be employed for a variety of metafunctions or moods of meaning, it is functional (Almushayqih, 2022). That is, language is considered both systemic and functional within the SFL framework. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) mentioned that SFL holds that language is not static, but rather undergoes constant evolution; consequently, it is described as a system to grasp its complexity. From the perspective of SFL, language, as a social semiotic resource, serves various functions in conveying meanings from a social perspective (Kanwal et al., 2021). Indeed, Halliday's SFL has had a global impact, influencing scholars in diverse fields of applied linguistics (Almurashi, 2016). In addition, Gebhard and Accurso (2020) suggested that SFL has extended its reach as a theoretical framework that influences various fields of applied linguistics, such as educational linguistics, multimodality studies, and critical discourse analysis. According to Harahap et al. (2024), "Systems Functional Linguistics (SFL) views language as a linguistic social process and treats language as a social semiotic system that represents sociocultural norms and values" (p. 34). Besides, Fahmi (2010) demonstrated that SFL is concerned with meaning and how language functions to generate meaning. According to Darong (2022) "The functions are realized respectively by register categories namely field, tenor, and mode" (p. 55). More specifically, these functions are presented as a unified function within the text, including speech (Halliday, 1985). In the view of systemic functional linguistic theory, Halliday introduced three meta-functions of language, which collectively encompass the interpretation of meaning in language. These metafunctions are ideational metafunction, which makes sense of our experience; the interpersonal metafunction, which realizes our social relationships; and the textual metafunction, which constructs coherent texts. Briefly, systemic functional linguistics (SFL) provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing language within its social context, encompassing its dynamic nature and diverse functions.

2.4.1 Interpersonal Metafunction

The interpersonal metafunction, which is one of this paper focuses, is concerned with "enacting our social relationship with other people" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 30). Halliday (1994) mentioned that the interpersonal metafunction reflects the role relationship between the speaker and hearer, or writer and reader, related with the situation. The interpersonal metafunction

'interacts' with the viewer (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Bloor et al. (2004) demonstrated that the language is utilized to facilitate our engagement in communicative interactions with others, to assume various roles, and to convey and understand feelings, attitude, and judgments. The interpersonal metafunction concentrates on the establishment and enactment of social relationships (Almushayqih, 2022). According to Almushayqih (2022), "The interpersonal metafunction of language manifests speaker's relationships with others or to issues, as well as their attitude and point of view" (p.13). Furthermore, Martin and White (2007) argued that interpersonal metafunction can be manifested as subjective presence of the speaker. That is, "How speakers enact their social relations, identities, and beliefs" (Almushayqih, 2022, p. 13). Halliday (2007) asserted that through the interpersonal metafunction, the speaker introduces himself into the situational context by attempting to influence the attitudes and conduct of others and by expressing his own judgments and attitudes. According to Butt et al. (1995), the interpersonal metafunction uses language to "Encode interaction and show how defensible we find our propositions" (p. 39). The interpersonal metafunction refers to the clause as an exchange in the system of Mood and modality. Specifically, these meanings are expressed in wording using Mood and modality systems.

2.4.1.1 *Mood.* According to Putri and Laila (2022), interpersonal meanings are realized in lexicogrammar through Mood system choices. There are two parts of Mood element, namely Subject and Finite. The Subject and the Finite are the two grammatical features that primarily convey interpersonal meanings; moreover, they are combined to form the Mood of the clause (Butt et al., 1995). Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) stated that the Subject is represented by a nominal group, and that the Finite element is a part of the verbal group. The Subject appears in the beginning of a sentence which can be any nominal group, such as a noun, pronoun, or even a clause itself. On the other hand, the Finite element is a verbal operator that expresses tense (e.g., is, has), lexical verb that are 'fused' into a single word, or modality (e.g., can, must) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). The remaining part of each clause, if any, is referred to as the Residue. The Residue contains of Predicator, Complement, and Adjunct. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), there are two types of Mood, which are indicative and imperative. Thompson and Muntigl (2008) illustrated that "Every independent clause chooses between imperative and indicative; within indicative, between declarative and interrogative; and within interrogative between polar (yes/no) and wh-interrogative" (p). The indicative is used to exchange the information (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Indeed, the indicative concentrates on the using of Subject and Finite in the sentence; moreover, it represents the type of sentence, whether declarative (statement) or interrogative (question). The interrogative sentence can be classified as either a yes/no or a WH-type (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). On the other hand, the imperative uses to express the commands or requests. Mood system is one of this paper concerns, which analyses the communicative exchange found in the Saudi official tourism website, specifically, in the 'About' pages of Riyadh, Diriyah, and AlUla sections.

3. Methodology

This section launches with a description of the research design and the associated data sources. It then elaborates on the data collection technique and selection criteria. Finally, the section concludes by outlining the procedure used for data analysis.

3.1 *Research Design*

The methodological approach adopted in this study was a qualitative descriptive approach; however, a quantitative overview of frequencies and percentages is included to support the analysis. Accordingly, this study employed a qualitative research design which is particularly well-suited to addressing the stated research objective.

3.2 *Data Source*

The data source for this study is the Saudi official tourism website of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Visit Saudi* (*www.visitsaudi.com*), which is administered by the Saudi Ministry of Tourism. The website, launched in September 2019, is designed to attract and persuade sightseers from around the world. The website was chosen since it aligns with Saudi Vision 2030, which emphasizes the advancement of the tourism sector. The selected data are verbal (linguistic) texts presented on the website. There are eight language versions available: Arabic, English, Chinese, German, Spanish, French, Japanese, and Russian. As the potential users are international tourists, the data were collected from the English-language version.

3.3 *Data Collection and Selection*

As previously mentioned, the data were collected from the Saudi official tourism website, Visit Saudi. The collection was conducted in June 2025. On the website, there are six menus: 'See & Do,' 'Plan Your Trip,' 'Travel Essentials,' 'Saudi Calendar,' 'Experiences,' and 'Saudi Map.' Under the 'See & Do' menu, the 'Destinations' submenu includes seven major cities—'Riyadh,' 'Jeddah,' 'Diriyah,' 'AlUla,' 'Makkah,' 'KAEC,' and 'Dammam.' Out of these destinations, only the 'Riyadh,' 'Diriyah,' and 'AlUla' sections were selected. Riyadh was included due to its rising significance, while Diriyah and AlUla were chosen for their value as cultural heritage sites and their potential as emerging tourist destinations. In sum, the data were gathered from three prominent Saudi destinations: 'Riyadh,' 'Diriyah,' and 'AlUla.' The verbal elements were extracted from the introductory 'About' sections of the destination pages for Riyadh, AlUla, and Diriyah.

3.4 Data Analysis

The study draws on the Mood system from Halliday's (2004) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework. In this approach, language choices and their variations are shaped by context, which is interpreted through three key dimensions: Field, Tenor, and Mode. This paper concentrates on Tenor, which refers to social interactions shaped by choices made within the Mood system. Guided by this framework, this paper examines how interpersonal meanings are constructed in the introductory 'About' sections of the 'Riyadh, AlUla, and Diriyah' destination pages, which serve as brief summaries that demonstrate the cultural, historical, and geographical features of each destination. As a whole, this section reflects the main identity of each destination, making it a suitable for examining the construction of national identity. In line with the study's linguistic focus, the use of the Mood system reveals how Saudi tourism discourse is constructed, as well as demonstrates how Visit Saudi establishes an interpersonal relationship with its readers. The Mood system focuses on the structure of clauses—specifically the Subject, Finite, and Mood types (e.g., declarative, interrogative, imperative)—to examine how writers and readers are positioned within interpersonal interactions. To identify Mood patterns in the data, each clause was analyzed based on its Mood type and Subject–Finite structure.

4. Results and Discussion

This section investigates and interprets the Mood choices used in the About pages for Riyadh, Diriyah, and AlUla on the *Visit Saudi* website, using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics as a framework.

Excerpt 1.

Riyadh combines ancient history with modern dynamism, offering a glimpse into Arabia's past and future.

Riyadh	*combines*	*ancient history with modern dynamism*	*offering*	*a glimpse*	*into Arabia's past and future*
Subject	Finite	Complement	Predicator	Complement	Adjunct
Mood		Residue			
Declarative					

Excerpt 2.

In Diriyah, you will be introduced to a distinct dimension of entertainment, which is the heart of a historical city that was established in 1446 AD.

In Diriyah	*you*	*will*	*be introduced*	*to a distinct dimension of entertainment*

Adjunct	Subject	Finite	Predicator	Complement
Residue	Mood			Residue
	Declarative Mood			

Excerpt 3.

Explore AlUla, Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO World Heritage Site, nestled in the northwest desert.

Explore	*AlUla, Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO World Heritage Site*	*nestled in the northwest desert*
Finite / Predicator	Complement	Adjunct
Mood	Residue	
Imperative Mood		

Across the three texts, 20 clauses were identified and analyzed. Of these, 11 clauses were realized in declarative Mood (55%), and 9 were realized in imperative Mood (45%), with no interrogative clauses. This study found that the distribution suggests the website is not purely informational nor purely promotional. Instead, it combines informative declaratives with directive imperatives, thereby adopting a dual role: an authoritative provider of information and an inviting guide encouraging specific actions.

The study investigated that the Riyadh, Diriyah, and AlUla texts differ in how they balance declarative and imperative Mood, and this balance reflects their distinct communicative purposes.In the *About* Riyadh section, the opening clause, for example, frames the city through a declarative statement (e.g., "Riyadh combines ancient history with modern dynamism, offering a glimpse into Arabia's past and future"). In terms of Mood, this is a straightforward declarative with "Riyadh" as Subject, realized in the present tense. Functionally, this positions the website as a knowledgeable narrator making factual claims about what Riyadh "is" and "does." Interpersonally, it establishes a relationship with the sightseers in which the website presents itself as an authority and constructs Riyadh as a city that naturally integrates past and present. Following this, the Riyadh text shifts toward imperative Mood, as in clauses beginning with verbs such as "Explore," "Experience," and "Try." These imperatives omit an explicit Subject but clearly imply "you" (the reader). These clauses enact proposals rather than propositions; they are offers of "goods-and-services" (e.g., experiences, activities, visits). As Halliday (1994) explains, "in the exchange of information, the clause is a proposition; in the exchange of goods-and-services, the clause is a proposal." (p. 69). The interpersonal meaning here shifts the reader from a passive role (recipient of information) to an active role (imagined as a tourist who follows suggested actions). The analysis revealed that the website is no longer just describing the city, it is gently directing the reader's imagined behavior in that city. The Diriyah text, by contrast, is characterized by a predominance of declarative clauses. A similar conclusion was reached by Isti'anah (2020), which found that the Indonesian tourism website was dominated by declarative mood functioning as statements. Her study indicated that using declarative sentences on the tourism website encouraged a sense of engagement, giving visitors the impression of being involved in the journey. The statements describing historical foundations, UNESCO recognition, and geographical location are all realized in declarative Mood. Even when the reader is explicitly mentioned (e.g., "you will be introduced to…"), the clause is still declarative. Notably, the website foregrounds a heritage narrative to establish Diriyah as a historically significant recognized site. The findings indicate that the website functions as an expert heritage guide for the readers. Furthermore, the study found that interpersonal effect is indirect, since attractiveness is constructed through declarative statements that emphasize authenticity, age, and international status rather than promotional claims. The *About* AlUla text shows the strongest use of imperatives. This result was consistent with findings from previous study Jabeen et al. (2022), which suggested that the 'Activities and Attractions' section of the Saudi official tourism website generally employs the imperative sentences. Their study found that imperatives persuade, convince, and influence the readers. The clauses beginning with "Explore," "Marvel," "Enjoy," "Experience," and "Stay" present a sequence of recommended or imagined actions for the reader. In interpersonal terms, this creates a highly experiential and promotional tone by foregrounding what tourists can *do* rather than what AlUla *is*. In fact, the imperatives function as persuasive strategies in promotional discourse.

The study revealed that AlUla is construed as a place to be actively discovered and enjoyed, and the reader is positioned as an adventure-seeking visitor who is expected to respond to these invitations. This study shows that combining Systemic Functional Linguistics with visual grammar is an effective way to explain how tourism websites build interpersonal meaning and national identity across modes. It also offers practical guidance for tourism marketers and web designers on how specific linguistic choices (declaratives/imperatives) and visual features (gaze, distance, modality) can be used strategically to attract and engage visitors. Finally, it demonstrates for Saudi policymakers that Visit Saudi successfully aligns national branding with Vision 2030 by weaving heritage, cultural tradition, and modernity into a single, coherent image of the country.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings indicate that the Saudi official tourism website systematically employs linguistic features, especially Mood choice to attract sightseers and shape interpersonal relationships. The investigation identified that Visit Saudi establishes an interpersonal relationship with its readers by strategically using both declarative and imperative clauses, with no interrogative clauses. Through declarative structures, the website provides information with confidence and authority, establishing itself as a knowledgeable guide. Meanwhile, the use of imperative clauses creates a sense of involvement and invites readers to participate in the experiences being promoted in the Visit Saudi. Alongside this, the study found that linguistic resources are employed to attract visitors by presenting Saudi Arabia as a natural, credible, desirable, and hospitable country, while also showing possible experiences within its destinations.

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