

**POLITECNICO DI TORINO**

**Master's Degree in Territorial, Urban and Landscape Planning**



**Crafting the Future: Pioneering Urban  
Branding and Development in Neom's  
Visionary, Line City Project, Saudi Arabia**

**Supervisor(s):  
Prof. Magda Bolzoni  
Prof. Mario Artuso**

**Candidate: Mahboubeh Touri**

**Academic Year 2023/2024**

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgment</b> .....	5
<b>Abstract</b> .....	6
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	7
Research goals and questions.....	8
Structure of the thesis.....	9
<b>2. Research Methodology</b> .....	10
2-1- Introduction.....	10
2-2- Methodology.....	10
2-3- Expected challenges and limitations.....	13
<b>3. Urban Planning of Neom project, Saudi Arabia</b> .....	14
3-1- Introduction of the NEOM project.....	14
3-2- What is the NEOM project.....	16
3-3- Administration of NEOM and institutions.....	18
3-4- Stakeholders of NEOM.....	18
3-5- Main vision and aim.....	19
3-6- Location of NEOM.....	20
3-7- The role models of NEOM.....	22
3-8- Climate of NEOM.....	22
3-9- Natural resources in NEOM.....	23
3-10- Risk management of the NEOM project.....	23
3-11- Economic Situation of NEOM.....	25
3-12- Technical details and infrastructure.....	26
3-13- Project Components.....	26
3-13-1- The Line.....	26
3-13-2- Oxagon.....	32
3-13-3- Trojena.....	33
3-13-4- Sindalah.....	34
<b>4. Urban Branding: Scientific debates and Literature Review</b> .....	36
4-1- Introduction.....	36
4-2- City image.....	36
4-3- Smart City.....	38
4-4- Urban branding.....	39
4-4-1- A short history of Branding.....	42
4-4-2- The objectives of urban branding.....	43
4-4-3- Themes and indicators of urban branding.....	44
4-6- Case studies of cities in the Middle East.....	49
<b>5. Urban Branding in NEOM: Scientific study</b> .....	57

5-1- Introduction.....	57
5-2- NEOM image branding.....	57
5-3- NEOM Target Groups.....	59
<b>6. Empirical Analysis in NEOM project, the city of the Line.....</b>	<b>61</b>
6-1- Introduction.....	61
6-2- Analysis of Photos.....	62
6-2-1- Visual Semiotics Analysis.....	74
6-3- Document Analysis.....	75
6-3-1- Themes and indicators of the Line’s Branding.....	75
6-3-2- Comparative Analysis of Middle Eastern Cities and The Line in NEOM.....	77
6-3-3- Media Perspectives on The Line Project: Support and Critiques.....	78
6-4- Analysis of interviews.....	81
<b>7. Conclusions.....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>88</b>

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 1</b>	Strategic geographical location of NEOM	21
<b>Figure 2</b>	Location of NEOM	21
<b>Figure 3</b>	A satellite image shows part of Neom has been built - including a golf course and a helipad	22
<b>Figure 4</b>	Location of the Line (source: NEOM	27
<b>Figure 5</b>	Four distinctive ecologies of the Line	27
<b>Figure 6</b>	The Location of the Line	28
<b>Figure 7</b>	The Line	28
<b>Figure 8</b>	Commuting in the Line	29
<b>Figure 9</b>	AI in the Line	29
<b>Figure 10</b>	The Line	30
<b>Figure 11</b>	The Red Sea side of NEOM’s, The Line starts with a luxury yacht port	30
<b>Figure 12</b>	The Line	31
<b>Figure 13</b>	The Line	31
<b>Figure 14</b>	Satellite image of the construction site of the line	32

<b>Figure 15</b>	Oxagon	33
<b>Figure 16</b>	Trojena	33
<b>Figure 17</b>	Trojena	34
<b>Figure 18</b>	Sindalah	34
<b>Figure 19</b>	The brand identity of Dubai	50
<b>Figure 20</b>	The brand identity of Abu Dhabi	52
<b>Figure 21</b>	The new future	58
<b>Figure 22</b>	Website of the NEOM	59
<b>Figure 23</b>	The Line	62
<b>Figure 24</b>	The Line	62
<b>Figure 25</b>	The Line	63
<b>Figure 26</b>	The Line	64
<b>Figure 27</b>	The Line	65
<b>Figure 28</b>	The Line	65
<b>Figure 29</b>	The Red Sea side of NEOM's, The Line starts with a luxury yacht port	66
<b>Figure 30</b>	The Line	67
<b>Figure 31</b>	The Line	68
<b>Figure 32</b>	The Line	69
<b>Figure 33</b>	The Line	70
<b>Figure 34</b>	The Line	70
<b>Figure 35</b>	The Line	71
<b>Figure 36</b>	The Line	72
<b>Figure 37</b>	The Line	73

## List of Tables

<b>Table 1</b>	Matching SDG and NEOM Region objectives	20
<b>Table 2</b>	Types of research about City Branding	40
<b>Table 3</b>	Themes and indicators of a city branding	48
<b>Table 4</b>	Themes and indicators of the Line's branding	76

## **Acknowledgment**

Completing this master's thesis has been an incredible journey, and I am filled with gratitude for everyone who supported me along the way. I owe my deepest thanks to my thesis supervisors, Professor Mario Artuso and Professor Magda Bolzoni. Their unwavering support, insightful guidance, and endless patience have been the backbone of my research. Without their mentorship, this work would not have been possible. I am also profoundly grateful to the faculty members of the Department of Regional & Urban Studies and Planning (DIST) at Politecnico di Torino. Their expertise and dedication have enriched my knowledge and provided a solid foundation for my academic pursuits.

To my family and friends, your constant encouragement and belief in me have been my greatest source of strength. Your support has carried me through the most challenging times, and I am forever thankful for your presence in my life. Lastly, I want to acknowledge everyone who contributed to my academic journey, whether mentioned here or not. Every bit of support, no matter how small, has been instrumental in my growth and success.

This thesis represents a challenging yet rewarding chapter in my life. I am deeply humbled and grateful for all the collective efforts that brought this work to fruition. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

**Thank you**  
**Mahboubeh Touri**

## **Abstract**

In an era marked by rapid technological advancements and globalization, cities are increasingly vying for prominence as attractive tourist destinations, workplaces, and culturally rich locales. This competition necessitates continuous urban evolution and strategic promotional efforts. This thesis investigates the intricate dynamics of planning and branding urban mega projects, with a focus on the ambitious "Line" city project within the Neom region. The study aims to understand how cities balance visionary ambitions with practical realities, integrating development strategies, urban branding, and pragmatic considerations.

City branding is pivotal in crafting an appealing image for tourists and investors while strengthening local identity. However, managing a city's image is complex, requiring a nuanced understanding for effective implementation. This research delves into the challenges faced by urban mega projects in aligning ambitious goals with environmental sustainability, social impact, and authentic urban development and through an analysis of visual representations and marketing strategies, identifies potential discrepancies between projected images and actual outcomes, highlighting their implications.

Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines qualitative analyses of interviews and visual content with a critical review of existing literature. This methodology offers a comprehensive understanding of the successes and challenges in urban mega project development and branding and addresses critical questions on balancing development strategies, urban branding, and practical realities, offering a nuanced perspective on the contemporary challenges of urban mega projects.

# 1 • Introduction

In recent years, cities have been exploring new methods to promote themselves. Rapid technological advancements and the transition from local to global environments have compelled cities to compete with one another to become appealing tourist destinations, desirable workplaces, culturally vibrant places, and more (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Modern cities must constantly evolve. To achieve this, they develop strategies to support, market, and advertise themselves in the global market (Riza et al., 2012).

City branding has as its objective to create an appealing image for tourists and investors, as well as strengthen local identity of local residents. These goals are achieved through the management and communication of the city's image. However, the city's image is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that needs to be conceptualized for its proper management.

City branding has attracted significant academic attention over the years, with numerous articles highlighting its challenges and consequences, as well as offering theoretical frameworks for its application in shaping urban environments (Kavaratzis, 2004, 2008). City branding is not a standalone concept; it works in conjunction with various other factors. Articles often emphasize that city branding is shaped by multiple decision-makers throughout the process, typically within political and organizational spheres. This involvement highlights some of the issues inherent in the concept. A major argument among academics is that city branding aims to attract investment, gain a competitive edge among cities, develop urban economies, and improve quality of life (Braun, 2012).

While city branding is implemented, the city's image is often shaped by a limited number of stakeholders whose motives are primarily financially driven. Concerns for authenticity, diversity, and democratic policies usually take a backseat, becoming secondary or tertiary considerations. While significant attention is given to the political and organizational aspects of city branding management, two other important areas deserve focus. The first is the perspective of unpolitical and independent users, ideally driven by free speech and participation. This encompasses the voices of actual citizens and the journalism that shapes and reflects their opinions on the outcomes of city branding. The second area is the physical environment, where the image takes root in the physical structures and developments produced according to city branding strategies (Sager, 2011).

City branding strategies may vary, but the contemporary goal remains consistent: to create a competitive edge that outshines other cities (Sager, 2011; Kavaratzis, 2004). The rise of gentrified and upscale residential districts with advanced living conditions and exclusive access is often seen as a consequence of multiple factors working together, with city branding being one of them (Sager, 2011). "Another form of physical development that goes hand in hand within most city branding strategies for maximizing promotion opportunities since the beginning of the 20th century are megaprojects" (Bergman, 2023: 7). Notable examples



include the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. These megaprojects can take various forms, such as large shopping malls, redevelopment of extensive areas, or major transport projects. In the academic world, these projects are often notorious for being high-risk, low-reward gambles (Bruzelius et al., 2002; Flyvbjerg, 2004, 2014, 2017).

Lastly, these megaprojects offer an aesthetic image through either beautiful architecture or a 'grand' symbolic landmark, enhancing promotion and global attraction (Flyvbjerg, 2017). Despite the inherent risks, megaprojects continue to attract cities, often diverting attention from more urgent issues. City branding strategies are frequently used to justify the initiation of these projects, prompting a discussion that warrants more attention and research within the academic world to explore the correlation between city branding and the pursuit of megaprojects.

## **Research goals and questions**

The research aimed to dissect the city branding processes within the unique context of "The Line" city in the NEOM region, by identifying and understanding various urban branding strategies. City branding is a multifaceted endeavor that must encapsulate a city's intrinsic values, distinctive characteristics, and future aspirations, all while being deeply rooted in its original identity. In this context, a successful city brand emerges not from superficial embellishments but from a distinctive, authentic, and unique identity. Therefore, the primary goal of the research was to explore how "The Line" has attempted to establish its brand identity and the effectiveness of these efforts in relation to social, cultural, and economic dimensions.

### **Research Question**

**How are the ongoing urban branding efforts for "The Line" in the NEOM region conceptualized to balance its ambitious vision with practical feasibility, authenticity, and sustainability, considering the environmental and social challenges that remain to be fully addressed during its development?**

### **Objectives of the Research**

1. **Identify Urban Branding Strategies:** The research sought to identify and analyze the different urban branding strategies employed by "The Line." This involved an examination of promotional materials, official documents, and visual representations used to project the city's image.
2. **Understand the Authenticity and Uniqueness:** One of the primary objectives was to determine how "The Line" encapsulates its fundamental values and unique characteristics. This entailed a critical analysis of the city's branding narrative to distinguish between genuine identity and marketing spectacle.
3. **Investigate the Aspirational vs. Realistic Goals:** The research aimed to scrutinize the ambitious goals presented in the city's promotional materials against the practical

realities of urban development. This involved a critical evaluation of the feasibility and authenticity of the portrayed vision.

4. **Observe Environmental and Social Sustainability:** Given the grand vision of "The Line" as a sustainable and human-centric city, the research aimed to study the project's environmental and social sustainability. This included analyzing potential impacts and challenges associated with such an ambitious development.

## Structure of the thesis

The structure of this thesis is meticulously designed to provide a comprehensive exploration of the dynamics in planning and branding urban mega projects, particularly focusing on the city of "The Line" within the Neom region. The introductory chapter sets the stage by discussing the imperative for cities to promote themselves amidst technological advancements and globalization. It emphasizes the significance of city branding in creating appealing images for tourists, investors, and residents, and outlines the primary aim of the thesis—to understand how cities balance visionary ambitions with practical realities in their development endeavors.

The research methodology chapter (2) explains the qualitative research methods employed in the thesis. It highlights the necessity for a qualitative research strategy to study, analyze, and interpret language use from various sources, detailing the application of document analysis and literature reviews. The chapter also addresses the challenges and limitations faced during the research process, ensuring a transparent methodological framework. In the chapter (3) on urban planning of Neom, the context of the Neom region and its components, especially "The Line," is thoroughly discussed.

The literature review chapter (4) introduces the concept of city branding, drawing on scholarly definitions and examining the main debates, perspectives, and connections within the academic discourse. It positions the research within the broader academic context, exploring various approaches and contrasting viewpoints that have shaped the understanding of city branding. The chapter (5) on urban branding in Neom delves into the specifics of the urban branding efforts for "The Line." It discusses how branding strategies are implemented in the context of the Neom project, analyzing the marketing approaches and visual representations used to promote the city.

The empirical analysis chapter (6) involves a comprehensive examination of the data collected, including visual analysis of photos and videos, coding and analysis of interview transcripts, and document analysis. This chapter aims to uncover insights into the urban branding and development strategies of mega projects like "The Line," providing an understanding of the complexities and implications of such large-scale urban developments. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the findings of the research, offering insights into the successes and challenges in urban mega project development and branding.

# 2 • Research Methodology

## 2-1- Introduction

The following chapter will explain the methods that are applied for the thesis. Moreover, the final part of this chapter sets out the challenges and limitations. This thesis is recognized as a qualitative study, which necessitates a research strategy suited for examining, analyzing, and interpreting language from various sources. To achieve this, text analytical methods must be applied, making the use of document analysis and literature reviews essential (Bergman, 2023). This chapter outlines the research methods employed to address the research questions of this thesis. The research questions are:

- How has the city succeeded in balancing development strategies, urban branding, and practical realities in its projects?
- How do urban mega projects like Neom balance visionary ambitions with practical realities, especially regarding environmental sustainability, social impact, and urban development?

To answer these questions, a qualitative research strategy was adopted. Qualitative research methods such as observation, interviewing, focus groups, and text analysis are employed to understand the perspectives and views of different actors. This approach is suitable for studying, analyzing, and interpreting language use from various sources, facilitating a deeper understanding of complex phenomena and the representations, narratives, and even contrasting viewpoints surrounding a particular issue or context. The primary methods chosen for this research include document analysis, qualitative interviews with experts, and a visual-semiotic analysis of photos related to the Line project. These methods allow for a comprehensive exploration of the diverse representations and narratives associated with the project.

## 2-2- Methodology

Document analysis was conducted to provide a comprehensive background and understanding of the existing knowledge and debates surrounding urban branding, development strategies, and mega projects like Neom. Additionally, qualitative interviews with experts were conducted to gain insights into the practical realities, challenges, and implications of urban mega projects. A visual-semiotic approach was used to analyze photos of the Line project.

Document analysis is a qualitative research method that examines primary and secondary documents, including texts, images, audio recordings, videos, and online content (Bryman,

2016; Patel & Davidson, 2019). The documents serve as a valuable source of information that prepares perspectives, values, experiences, and even behaviors of individuals, groups, and organizations. Once collected, the interpretative skills become crucial to ascertain the meaning of the material (Bryman, 2016). The documents used in this thesis come from various sources, all deemed relevant for the empirical analysis. The types of materials analyzed include:

**Academic Papers and Research Studies:** These were sourced from reputable academic databases and university libraries. The focus was on works related to urban branding, development strategies, and mega projects. These sources provided theoretical frameworks, previous findings, and scholarly discussions that informed the research.

**Books and Theses:** Key texts on urban planning, branding, and case studies of similar mega projects were consulted. These works offered comprehensive insights that were crucial for understanding the broader context of the Line project.

**Videos on YouTube:** Expert discussions and presentations about the Line project were reviewed. These videos included lectures and interviews with urban planners, architects, and other relevant stakeholders. They provided diverse perspectives and current debates surrounding the project.

**Photos and Videos from the Official Neom Website:** Visual materials from the official Neom website were analyzed using visual-semiotic analysis. These included promotional videos, architectural renderings, and project updates, which helped in understanding the projected image and branding efforts of the Line.

**Press Data from Websites and Media Outlets:** Articles and reports from established news websites and media outlets were reviewed. These sources captured public perceptions, media portrayals, and ongoing discourse about the Line project. The analysis included both supportive and critical viewpoints, reflecting the varied public and media reactions.

These materials were selected based on their relevance, credibility, and contribution to the research questions. By sourcing information from academic databases, official websites, and reputable online platforms, the research ensured the accuracy and reliability of the data. The diverse range of materials allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the perspectives, representations, and narratives surrounding the Line project.

The Visual Semiotic method involves examining the visual elements and signs in the images to understand how they contribute to the overall branding and perception of the project. This analysis helps uncover the messages conveyed through visual representations, complementing the findings from document analysis and interviews.

Visual semiotics, a subset of semiotics that emerged in the 1990s, builds upon Ferdinand de Saussure's General Linguistics. It explores how signs are integral to social life. Unlike semiotics, which focuses on signs and symbols in general, visual semiotics specifically examines those that are visible. In visual semiotics, the meaning of a sign isn't inherent but rather constructed through interpretation (Pratiwi et.al, 2022).

Codes play a crucial role in semiotic analysis. For instance, the analysis of traffic lights exemplifies a code. Codes can be understood as systems that organize signs. Similar to other systems, according to structuralism, codes are governed by rules accepted by the community using that particular code (Kılıç & Sarıkartal, 2016). “The study of codes emphasizes the social dimension of communication” (Kılıç & Sarıkartal, 2016: 4). “Almost any aspect of our social life which is conventional or governed by rules consented to by members of society, can therefore be called coded” (Fiske, 1990: 64).

Specifically, interviews were also applied to collect data in this study. The research design for this thesis is based on a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights from experts in the field of urban branding and development. This method was selected to allow for a comprehensive exploration of the complex and multifaceted nature of urban branding strategies, particularly in the context of the Line in the Neom region. The participants chosen for this study include a diverse group of academic experts and practitioners who possess extensive knowledge and experience in urban branding, urbanism, and city development. The selection of these individuals was based on their relevant expertise, their potential to provide valuable insights into the branding strategies and development processes of the Line, and their accessibility. A total of four semi-structured interviews were conducted, following the document analysis phase. These interviews were carried out over a period of several weeks, each lasting between 30 minutes to 1 hour.

In qualitative research we organize the raw data into conceptual categories and create themes or concepts. Instead of being a clerical task of data management, qualitative coding is an integral part of data analysis. Codes are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes usually are attached to “chunks” of varying size—words, phrases, sentences or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting. There are three types of coding and in this thesis to analyze the interviews, "Open Coding" was used. Open coding is a foundational method in qualitative research for identifying, categorizing, and conceptualizing the primary themes and patterns emerging from qualitative data, such as interview transcripts. This process involves several key steps:

Transcription and Familiarization, first, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. This provided a written record that facilitated a detailed analysis. Familiarization with the data involved reading and re-reading the transcripts to gain an in-depth understanding of the content.

In the next phase, initial Coding, open coding is performed by examining the transcripts line by line. Each segment of text that conveyed a distinct idea or concept was assigned a descriptive code. This process is data-driven, meaning that codes were derived directly from the data without preconceived categories. After coding the entire dataset, the codes are reviewed to identify patterns and relationships between them. Similar codes were grouped together to form categories, which represent broader themes or concepts. The process continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning no new themes or categories emerged from the data. This ensured a comprehensive understanding of the key themes

related to urban branding and the development of the Line in Neom. The final step involved interpreting the themes in the context of the research questions and theoretical framework. This stage aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of the interview data, linking the findings to existing literature and theories on urban branding and development.

### **2-3- Expected challenges and limitations**

Despite careful considerations in the research methodology, several challenges and limitations were encountered throughout the research process. One notable limitation arises from the unique nature of the NEOM case, characterized by its distinct brand and city context. As a result, the generalizability of the study's findings may be constrained by the specificity of the NEOM project. Additionally, limitations stemmed from practical constraints, including financial and time constraints, which restricted the inclusion of diverse socio-economic groups in the research. Furthermore, difficulties were encountered in accessing comprehensive data and technical information about NEOM and the Line project, as well as urban planning maps. This lack of transparency about the project posed challenges in conducting thorough analyses and in-depth investigations. Moreover, certain interviewees, particularly those directly involved with the NEOM project, were not readily accessible, hindering the collection of diverse perspectives and insights.

# 3 • Urban Planning of NEOM project, Saudi Arabia

## 3-1- Introduction of the NEOM project

In this chapter, the context of the case study Neom region and its components specially The Line will be discussed.

In the oil-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula and many Muslim countries, there is a growing trend of constructing lavish planned cities from scratch. With adequate financial resources from oil revenues, these states can undertake large-scale investment projects and have government structures that facilitate urban mega-developments. Building new planned cities is a strategy to boost economic growth, instill national pride, communicate ideology, and project a modern image globally. For Saudi Arabia, creating new cities has been seen by the ruling elite as crucial for their survival. After World War II, the king recognized the difficulties of establishing lasting political structures based on nomadism and shifting allegiances. This is evident in the rapid urbanization of Saudi Arabia; In 1950, urban dwellers comprised just 10 percent of the population, but by 1985, this figure had surged to 75 percent. Furthermore, there is a continual increase in oil and gas consumption in Saudi Arabia, and studies estimating that the country could become an oil importer by 2030. Beyond economic growth and job creation, new cities in Saudi Arabia, especially after the Arab Spring, may also serve to prevent political and social unrest among a population eager for change (Moser et al., 2015).

Cities can be seen as a means for countries to showcase their wealth, power, and modernity to both national and international audiences. According to Yasser Elsheshtawy, cities are increasingly becoming the centers of global economic interactions, replacing nation-states in this role. Due to this growing importance and autonomy, there is a widespread perception that cities need to be marketed as products. The development of cities is often branded for a global audience, with a focus on attracting elite international tourists by creating iconic landmarks. This drive for impressive urban symbols often occurs without considering democratic processes (Moser et al., 2015).

Saudi Arabia, with its rich cultural heritage, has recently embarked on a journey towards sustainable economic development through social transformations. This journey is influenced by the rapid rise of the conservative state during the latter half of the twentieth century. Currently, almost 85% of the 34 million population lives in urban areas, a significant change from the 1970s when about 54% of the 5.8 million Saudis were rural residents (Aboneama, 2021). “Taking into consideration the predominantly desert landscapes of Saudi Arabia and suboptimal urban planning, high urban growth rates put a strain on the local economy, logistics, and infrastructure. Coupled with the preference for private vehicles as the primary

mode of transportation, the increasing reliance on oil products creates a bottleneck for policymakers and engineers seeking to implement sustainable solutions to the problem” (Elkhateeb et.al, 2021: 1). Without socio-economic strategies to boost resilience against dwindling natural resources, uncontrolled growth of population centers will intensify reliance on fossil fuels. Additionally, the Arabian Peninsula's limited arable land and scarce freshwater reserves complicate the situation further (Alqahtany & Aravindakshan, 2020).

One such solution is the NEOM project, an integral component of Saudi Vision 2030 which is expected to diversify Saudi Arabia’s economy by helping to attain social, economic, and environmental sustainability (Elkhateeb et.al, 2021: 1). NEOM, a planned \$500 billion megacity in the Tabuk Province, is marketed as a futuristic, sustainable city that will feature various innovative technologies, such as green hydrogen plants, solar-powered desalination facilities, and urban air mobility systems (Ansari et.al, 2022). The project has drawn significant partners and investors eager to test and implement renewable energy technologies. It is being developed as a model for sustainable and economically viable planned cities (Elkhateeb et.al, 2021). The NEOM project offers Saudi Arabia a chance to reshape its image and contribute to building a sustainable future. However, its success depends on overcoming economic hurdles and attracting more investment.

Therefore, Prince Mohammad bin Salman's ambitious vision for Saudi Arabia necessitates breaking away from decades of reliance on fossil fuels (Hassan, 2020). In line with this objective, the government has committed \$500 billion to the NEOM project to create a pioneering hub for sustainable urban development (Nihal, 2022). Initially announced in 2017 with the involvement of foreign investors, the project has expanded to include various components like The Line, The Oxagon, and other initiatives.

The planned city of NEOM in Saudi Arabia presents a major opportunity for the country to advance sustainable urban development and broaden its economic base. This initiative has the potential to drive social and technological advancements within Saudi Arabia (Algumzi, 2022). Seeking to move beyond its reputation as a nation reliant on fossil fuels, Saudi Arabia aims to lead the global fight against climate change. However, international observers remain skeptical about NEOM's ambitious goals, given the mixed outcomes of similar sustainable city projects in the past (Aly, 2019).

“The story of NEOM city starts to be narrated by experts, journalists, and even by the regular people when the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced the launch of NEOM, on the sidelines of a three-day conference named “Future Investment Initiative”, that took place in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on Tuesday, 24 October 2017. The Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Deputy Prime Minister and Chairman of the Public Investment Fund (PIF) announced the launch of NEOM to be in his vision a short gateway to the future, or in other words, a destination for dreamers of the future. Such a future the Prince dreams is like nothing on earth, where the new way of life, strategic trading location, picturesque nature and beautiful weather, innovation, technology, and livability are at its core. Saudis are branding NEOM city as a place for dreamers, confirming that it is not for conventional people or



conventional companies, but it is designated for those who want to create a new place in the world” (Attia et al., 2019: 36).

*“I tell people those who cannot dream should not negotiate with us or come to NEOM. Welcome to the dreamers who can come to the new world. With those words the prince ended his speech in the conference. NEOM’s name is constructed from two parts: the first part has three letters from the Greek prefix neo meaning “new”, the second part is the letter M that represents the word “Mostaqbal” an Arabic word meaning future”* (Attia et al, 2019: 36).

### **3-2- What is the NEOM project?**

Saudi Arabia is undergoing economic diversification through its emergence as a global technological hub. Spearheaded by its 'Vision 2030' initiative, the country is pursuing its most ambitious and expansive transformation plan to date. Central to this transformation is the focus on investing in and developing artificial intelligence (AI), which is being integrated into the new mega-city, NEOM (Hassan, 2020). “NEOM is a new city in the North-Western of Saudi Arabia by the Red Sea and includes territory from Jordan and Egypt as well. The government of Saudi Arabia wants to build it from scratch towards a new challenge 2030 vision for a new kind of tomorrow and a new blueprint for sustainable life on a scale that has never been experienced before” (Fallatah, 2019: 5).

NEOM is envisioned as an ultra-modern city being developed in Tabuk, Saudi Arabia, with connections extending into Egypt and Jordan. The initiative, introduced at the Future Investment Initiative Conference in Riyadh, aims to reduce the nation’s dependence on non-renewable energy sources like oil. NEOM is designed to incorporate the latest technological advancements, outstripping current capabilities, and will feature a unique governance structure with its own legal and regulatory framework. The city is planned to operate entirely on renewable energy, drawing comparisons to nations like Norway and Iceland, which rely heavily on renewable energy grids. Additionally, NEOM is expected to pioneer 100% green transportation solutions, setting new standards for urban sustainability and innovation (Alkeaid, 2018).

The developers of NEOM envision it as a new frontier for a wide array of development opportunities, positioning it as a global center for trade, innovation, and knowledge. They aim to attract the global creative class, offering them a chance to shape NEOM's future. The vision includes a promise of a new life surrounded by pristine natural landscapes, within an independent economic zone that features its own distinct laws, tax structures, and regulations, free from traditional restrictions. Cutting-edge advancements in transportation, agriculture, healthcare, the Internet of Things, and digital connectivity are expected to contribute to a unique and modern lifestyle for NEOM's residents (Attia et al, 2019).

Derived from a fusion of Greek and Arabic roots, the name NEOM symbolizes a 'new future' envisioned for global communities. Initially unveiled in late 2017 as an ambitious sustainability initiative, NEOM appeared dormant for over three years as stakeholders navigated the early planning phases (Aboneama, 2021). While the COVID-19 pandemic diverted global focus from ambitious megaprojects, interest in NEOM was reignited with the

unveiling of The Line and The Oxagon in 2021. Due to limited available information about these planned cities, speculation has been rife based on the official NEOM website and press releases. Nonetheless, Prince Mohammed bin Salman has confirmed the allocation of 26,500 square kilometers in the northwestern Tabuk Province for NEOM and its associated developments (Scheck et.al, 2019). Located in a geographically varied region along the Red Sea coast, NEOM stands to leverage renewable resources while maintaining access to the strategically important Suez Canal trade route. Its prime position along international transportation and trade routes offers opportunities for tourism, commerce, and technological advancement (Nihal, 2022).

According to press releases and official promotional materials, the NEOM project's uniqueness goes beyond its size and futuristic design. Most of the available information focuses on two planned cities known as The Line and The Oxagon. The Line will consist of a series of urban oases connected by an ultra-high-speed transportation system, promising travel times of just 20 minutes between populated hubs (Nihal, 2022). The city's design aims to provide living conditions unlike anywhere else on Earth. Meanwhile, The Oxagon is envisioned as a coastal center for commerce and industry, linked to The Line and the newly built Neom Bay Airport (Oxagon, 2021).

To fulfill the sustainable objectives outlined in Saudi Vision 2030, as articulated by the Saudi government, NEOM must serve as a testing site for cutting-edge technological solutions. Specifically, achieving net-zero carbon emissions entails transitioning to renewable energy sources, necessitating the installation of offshore wind turbines and solar power facilities (Yusuf & Abdulmohsen, 2023). Thanks to the establishment of a \$186 million solar panel factory in Tabuk and the region's abundant sunshine, NEOM aims to achieve energy independence from fossil fuels (Yusuf & Abdulmohsen, 2023). Addressing the challenge of freshwater scarcity is planned through solar-powered desalination plants, including one developed in partnership with Solar Water Plc (Wray, 2021).

Furthermore, NEOM developers have targeted 2026 to inaugurate the world's largest electrolysis plant, aimed at producing green hydrogen for local use and export (Arab News, 2021). With plans to eliminate petroleum-powered vehicles, NEOM will rely on sustainable transportation options, including an urban air mobility system developed in collaboration with Volocopter (Cabral, 2021). The widespread adoption of artificial intelligence and robotics represents a crucial advancement in sustainable urban development, where robots will replace humans in labor-intensive and low-skilled tasks (The World Bank, 2021). To ensure seamless connectivity among residents and systems, NEOM plans to establish 'digital air,' a free 5G internet network supported by satellites and high-speed fiber-optic cables. Neom Tech & Digital Company has also proposed building a \$500 million colocation data center with three facilities, powered by 36 MW of renewable energy from nearby plants (Yusuf & Abdulmohsen, 2023).

### **3-3- Administration of NEOM and institutions**

Neom, a futuristic mega-city project in Saudi Arabia, is managed by the Neom Company, which operates as a closed joint-stock company. The institutional and administrative body of Neom includes a governance structure led by a Board of Directors, with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman serving as the Chairman. The management structure is organized into various divisions, each focusing on specific aspects such as technology, energy, mobility, and urban development. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) oversees day-to-day operations, while the executive team comprises experts and leaders from diverse industries to drive innovation and strategic initiatives. The organizational framework emphasizes a collaborative approach, integrating international expertise to realize Neom's ambitious vision of creating a sustainable and technologically advanced urban environment (NEOM Official Website).

### **3-4- Stakeholders of NEOM**

In October 2017, five of the world's richest men gathered in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, to announce their grand vision. Among them was Stephen A. Schwarzman, who used the word 'muscles' to describe the influential supporters lending credibility to NEOM (Attia et al, 2019).

“1. The Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman; who is the chair of the special Authority to oversee NEOM.

2. Masayoshi Son, chairman and CEO of the SoftBank Group Corp. of Japan; the Japanese head of a \$100bn Vision Fund.

3. Stephen A. Schwartzman, chairman, and co-founder of the Blackstone Group; the private-equity giant.

4. Marc Raibert, CEO of Boston Dynamics;

5. Klaus Kleinfeld, former chairman and CEO of Arconic Alcoa Inc., and Siemens AG.; NEOM's chief executive who was appointed to lead the project development” (Attia et al, 2019: 38-39).

In addition to business giants, senior managers from major global firms and high-ranking Saudi officials attended the conference. The project will be owned by the Public Investment Fund, with the Saudi government and international technology firms contributing to the development of NEOM. The kingdom's sovereign wealth fund is financing the project. Notably, the SoftBank Group and Vision Fund have entered into an agreement to purchase a significant stake in the Saudi Electricity Company, which will supply energy to the city. These financial and economic measures are crucial for the successful launch of the new mega-city (Attia et al, 2019).

### **3-5- Main vision and aim**

#### **3-5-1- Saudi Arabia vision 2030**

It is a strategic plan designed to reduce Saudi Arabia's reliance on oil, diversify its economy, and enhance public service sectors, including health, education, infrastructure, recreation, and tourism (Line Vision Website, [thelinevision.com](http://thelinevision.com)). The Vision 2030 outlines various goals and initiatives in order to transform the country's economy and make it more sustainable and resilient. The Vision is built around three themes: 1- a vibrant society 2- a thriving economy 3- an ambitious nation. This first theme is vital to achieving the Vision and a strong foundation for economic prosperity. In the second theme, A vibrant economy fosters inclusive opportunities by aligning its education system with market needs and cultivating economic prospects for entrepreneurs, small enterprises, and large corporations alike (Vision 2030 of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, [www.vision2030.gov.sa](http://www.vision2030.gov.sa)). The third theme is built on an effective, transparent, accountable, enabling and high-performing government. This Vision will be the point of reference for future decisions, so that all future projects are aligned to its content (Vision 2030 of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, [www.vision2030.gov.sa](http://www.vision2030.gov.sa)). The Line, a part of the NEOM project, is a key initiative under Vision 2030. It represents an ambitious urban development plan that aims to create a sustainable, technologically advanced city that redefines urban living and sets new standards for the future.

#### **3-5-2- NEOM and SDG Vision 2030**

The NEOM Region initiative is driven by a vision of sustainable development for the coming decades, aligning with the global agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals have garnered significant attention from various international bodies, such as UN-Water, UNESCO, FAO, UN-Environment, WHO, UNECE, among others, addressing global developmental challenges. The United Nations adopted these 17 SDGs in 2015, aiming to achieve them by 2030 (Al Saud, 2020).

The SDG framework offers a blueprint for a sustainable future, addressing goals spanning health, education, poverty, climate change, water, oceans, forests and urban settlements. Achieving these goals at a national level requires a unified approach across all sectors. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) and organizational actions aligned with SDGs are crucial for effective implementation (Al Saud, 2020). Integrating SDGs aligns with the vision of NEOM Region development, making it a valuable tool for strategic initiatives in this global economic hub. However, the applicability of SDGs must be clearly defined. To effectively incorporate SDGs into NEOM Region's strategic vision, each of the 17 goals should be closely aligned with the region's specific objectives (Al Saud, 2020). This can be demonstrated below in Table 1.

SDGs	Major objective	NEOM objective
Goal 1	No poverty	Sustainable production and secured food supply
Goal 2	Zero hunger	
Goal 3	Good health and well-being	Healthy and safe community
Goal 4	Quality education	Educated society with literacy
Goal 5	Gender equality	Empower women involvement
Goal 6	Clean water and sanitation	Securing pure water supply
Goal 7	Affordable and clean energy	Providing green energy
Goal 8	Decent work and economic growth	Providing job opportunities and acceptable income
Goal 9	Industry, innovation and infrastructure	Industrial and innovation zone par excellence
Goal 10	Reduced inequality	Harmonizing society towards equality
Goal 11	Sustainable cities and communities	Smart zone with sustainable visions
Goal 12	Responsible consumption and production	Society with self-sufficiency
Goal 13	Climate action	Adopting adaptation and mitigation measures
Goal 14	Life below water	Reserving the marine systems
Goal 15	Life on land	Reserving the terrestrial systems
Goal 16	Peace and justice strong institutions	Global zone where people from different entities meet
Goal 17	Partnerships to achieve the goal	NEOM will be a partner and pilot area for SDGs

Table 1. Matching SDG and NEOM Region objectives (Al Saud, 2020: 7-8)

### 3-6- Location of NEOM

Located in the far northwest of Saudi Arabia, the project spans land within the borders of Egypt and Jordan, covering a total area of 26,500 km<sup>2</sup> and extending 460 km along the Red Sea coast. Aligned with the ambitious Vision 2030, the project seeks to transform the Kingdom into a leading global model in various aspects of life by focusing on the acquisition of value chains in industries and technology (Fallatah, 2019).

The project is backed by a \$500 billion Saudi public investment fund, along with local and international investors. Established in January 2019, NEOM is responsible for the development and oversight of the region, operating as a joint-stock company with fully paid-up capital, owned by the Public Investment Fund. The company will develop new cities and complete infrastructure for the region, including a port, an airport network, industrial zones, creative arts support centers, and innovation centers to support the business sector, while also developing targeted economic sectors. In October 2018, the project's chief engineer, Eng. Nazmi Al Nasr, announced that the first airport in NEOM would be operational before the end of 2018, with weekly flights starting in early 2019. This airport is one of several planned for the project (Fallatah, 2019).



Figure 1. Strategic geographical location of NEOM



Figure 2. Location of NEOM



Figure 3. Part of NEOM has been built - including a golf course and a helipad (source: www.bbc.com)

### **3-7- The Role Models of NEOM**

Supporters of NEOM are highly optimistic, viewing it as a bold initiative poised to revolutionize Saudi Arabia. However, skeptics point to past failures such as desert industrial cities aimed at Gulf and Kingdom reconstruction. The concept of creating segregated zones with relaxed regulations and appealing lifestyles to stimulate economic growth and diversification is not entirely new for Saudi Arabia. Examples include the Saudi Aramco Compound in Dhahran, designed as an American-style suburb, and the gender-inclusive community at King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), where foreigners experience freedoms like driving and dressing as they do in their home countries (Frag, 2019). King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC) in Rabigh, once touted as the world's next major economic hub, aimed for a population of two million but currently houses significantly fewer permanent residents, around five thousand, according to reports by Capital Economics (Shahine et al., 2017).

### **3-8- Climate of NEOM**

NEOM features a climate with hot summers and mild winters, characterized by low annual rainfall, averaging just over 35 mm, primarily in the autumn. During this season, cold fronts interact with the warm waters of the Red Sea, leading to heavy rain and thunderstorms. Predominantly, the winds blow from the north to northwest throughout the year, with occasional strong eastern winds in winter reaching speeds up to 60 km/h. Generally, NEOM experiences stable weather for most of the year, with few significant weather events, although autumn can bring strong storms. In contrast to the typical hot climate of Gulf states, NEOM benefits from a more temperate climate in northwest Saudi Arabia, with temperatures about 10 degrees Celsius cooler. Its location near mountain heights overlooking the Red Sea, influenced by maritime currents, contributes to this milder climate. Spanning over 26,000 square kilometers, NEOM boasts stunning natural beauty with high mountains reaching up to 2,500 meters and extensive beaches ideal for marine sports. The area is rich in marine

biodiversity, offering opportunities to enjoy coral reefs, rare fish, and various water sports in a picturesque setting (Fallatah, 2019).

### **3-9- Natural Resources in NEOM**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia boasts abundant natural resources, with NEOM recognized as one of the prime locations in the Middle East. This area is rich in mineral resources, gas, and oil, with the potential to extract two hundred thousand barrels of oil from this site, along with significant gas deposits (Attia et al, 2019). Mr. Masayoshi Son, chairman and CEO of the SoftBank Group Corp of Japan and an investor in NEOM, highlighted the Kingdom's abundant natural resources beyond just oil and gas. He noted the region's constant solar energy (20 MJ/m<sup>2</sup>) and average wind speeds of 10.3 m/s, which make it possible for NEOM to be powered entirely by renewable energy sources (Attia et al, 2019). These resources will support the development of renewable energy projects and help NEOM meet high sustainability standards. Additionally, silicon will be extracted from the vast Saudi desert sand to manufacture solar panels for electricity generation. By harnessing sand and sunlight, which were once considered challenges, NEOM's partners are seizing a remarkable opportunity to create a new, net zero carbon city (Attia et al, 2019).

### **3-10- Risk Management of the NEOM Project**

The NEOM project introduces unprecedented infrastructural solutions, but it is accompanied by significant risks. Many of Mohammed bin Salman's ambitious goals have not been fully realized in previous large-scale urban projects. Key challenges in planning and risk management for NEOM include accommodating a population of 9 million residents, developing a 170-km-long underground transportation system, integrating drones and robots into urban infrastructure, achieving 100% reliance on renewable energy sources for the city, among others (Nereim, 2022; Nihal, 2022). While some of these objectives have been partially achieved on a smaller scale elsewhere, they must now be fully realized within the ambitious timeline set for the NEOM project (Farag, 2019). Moreover, the project aims to include unique developments that will necessitate further research and substantial investments from both local and international stakeholders (Algumzi, 2022). For instance, the development of AI-powered robots and smart systems for subsequent implementation within an urban megaproject is a largely untested area that requires further research (Yusuf & Abdulmohsen, 2023).

According to available data, the ambitious goal of relying entirely on renewable energy sources appears feasible with the assistance of existing technologies and proposed investments (Nihal, 2022). Furthermore, the deployment of solar power plants and other renewable energy projects linked to this objective poses minimal sustainability risks, given the favorable conditions found in the surrounding desert (Al Sayed et.al, 2022). Regional carbon neutrality is expected to be achievable with the support of wind and solar plants, bolstered by large-scale battery energy storage systems that optimize energy production (Arab News, 2022). On the other hand, On the contrary, the linear layout of the 170-kilometer city creates a barrier for local wildlife. The mirrored walls of unconventional skyscrapers will



further intensify this environmental impact. Additional sustainability risks include artificial moon, sand illumination systems, and cloud-seeding solutions. NEOM's long-term goals also involve expanding Red Sea trade, which poses a significant risk to marine flora and fauna (Al Saud, 2020).

The other area of concern involves the potential economic risks linked to NEOM, as megaprojects often encounter substantial funding and financial challenges (Yusuf & Abdulmohsen, 2023). Specifically, the projected initial investment of \$500 billion cannot be fully funded by Saudi Arabia and other stakeholders within the relatively short time frame allocated for NEOM's completion (Nereim, 2022). Hence, securing foreign direct investments hinges on establishing favorable social and economic conditions. While external factors like the COVID-19 pandemic have spurred changes in urban environments, establishing enduring connections with foreign investors is crucial for the project's long-term viability (Al Sayed et.al, 2022; Kareem, 2021). In other words, the Saudi government faces a branding challenge that can be tackled by addressing the concerns and risks raised by international observers. Besides facilitating foreign direct investments (FDIs), cultivating a positive national image is vital for attracting expatriate professionals and retaining the workforce needed to successfully execute and sustain the project (Alfalih & Hadj, 2020).

The primary risk components for the NEOM project can be summarized as follows (Yusuf & Abdulmohsen, 2023):

- **Construction risks:** The NEOM project entails the implementation of groundbreaking infrastructural solutions, which come with considerable risks, particularly in terms of planning and coordinating the construction process. These risks have the potential to affect both the project's completion timeline and its overall costs (Yusuf & Abdulmohsen, 2023).
- **Contract-related risks:** The NEOM project includes numerous stakeholders, necessitating careful management of contractual risks to prevent possible gaps, renegotiations, and conflicts (Yusuf & Abdulmohsen, 2023).
- **Design risks:** These risks are especially critical during the planning stages of the NEOM project. They can influence the sustainability and self-sufficiency of the development, impacting key areas such as transportation, healthcare, and infrastructure (Yusuf & Abdulmohsen, 2023).
- **Operational risks:** These risks are associated with the functioning and upkeep of the NEOM project. They can significantly affect the project's economic outcomes due to external influences, poor quality standards, or a lack of financial sustainability (Yusuf & Abdulmohsen, 2023).
- **Economic risks:** This category covers threats stemming from both internal and external influences, such as investment levels, financial strategies, profitability, and debt management, which could affect the NEOM project's viability in both the short and long term. With the initial projected investment cost at \$500 billion, there is a possibility that Saudi Arabia and its partners may not fully cover this amount within the designated time frame. Consequently,

attracting foreign direct investments is essential to meet the project's goals and ensure its success (Yusuf & Abdulmohsen, 2023).

- **Technology-related risks:** The implementation of advanced technological solutions, including those for tracking and managing personal data and integrating drones and robots into urban infrastructure, is a crucial aspect of the NEOM project. These innovations can give rise to numerous security and privacy concerns (Yusuf & Abdulmohsen, 2023).
- **Environmental and sustainability risks:** Large-scale projects like NEOM can profoundly alter ecosystems, potentially causing irreversible damage to local flora and fauna through pollution, displacement, emissions, and other environmental impacts. Although achieving 100% reliance on renewable energy sources might be possible with existing technologies and planned investments, the city's linear design and the use of mirror-walled skyscrapers could disrupt local wildlife habitats. Additionally, NEOM's long-term aim to increase Red Sea trade poses significant risks to marine ecosystems, threatening both plant and animal species in the region (Yusuf & Abdulmohsen, 2023).

### **3-11- Economic Situation of NEOM**

The Saudi leadership aims to diversify the economy in the long term by upgrading existing urban infrastructure while simultaneously developing new communities. A secondary objective of constructing NEOM is to reduce GDP leakage by encouraging both Saudi citizens and expatriates to invest locally instead of abroad, thus retaining more economic value within the country. This initiative seeks to create new investment opportunities, particularly those leveraging natural resources like wind, sand, and solar energy (Attia et al, 2019).

Moreover, some opinions express more fear and uncertainty about the NEOM project's feasibility. Steffen Hertog, a leading scholar tasked with assessing the project's risks, stated that NEOM will struggle to attract private investors who lack sufficient information and need more details than currently available. Monica Malik, chief economist at Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank, confirmed that investors seek detailed information, with their decisions and plans dependent on observed progress and initial investments (Farang, 2019). Another perspective on investor sentiment regarding NEOM highlights caution due to concerns over Saudi Arabia's bureaucratic hurdles that have historically delayed numerous development projects, coupled with uncertainties surrounding the legal environment (Farang, 2019).

An impartial assessment of Saudi Arabia's actions since the economic crisis of 2014 underscores the government's vigilance and commitment to reform. In response to the economic challenges and to prevent depletion of savings, the Saudi government implemented reforms including cancelling unnecessary projects and reducing costly subsidies. While some businessmen believe Saudi Vision 2030 was rushed and advocated for more gradual reforms, many acknowledge its importance and necessity (Shahine et al., 2017).

On the other hand, several analysts have emphasized the impracticality of executing such an ambitious project within such a brief timeframe. Marc Lavergne, director of the CNRS

research center and a specialist in the Middle East, highlighted that financially and technologically, achieving such a project within the specified timeline seems unfeasible (Farag, 2019).

### **3-12- Technical Details and Infrastructure**

#### **3-12-1- ICT driven sustainability in NEOM**

NEOM is committed to employing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and environmentally friendly approaches in its various projects. Notably, the Smart Transportation System aims to utilize ICT to ease traffic congestion, enhance traffic flow, and minimize air pollution. The system will incorporate a fleet of self-driving vehicles and electric buses (Mumtaz & Abidin, 2023).

Smart Grid: The integration of a smart grid within NEOM is pivotal to its sustainability strategy. This grid will incorporate electricity generated from renewable sources such as solar and wind power, utilizing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to efficiently manage real-time energy consumption and reduce peak demand periods. Smart Building System: NEOM's advanced building technology plays a crucial role in achieving its sustainability goals. The intelligent building system will leverage ICT to enhance energy efficiency, promote water conservation, and optimize indoor environmental quality. NEOM is poised to feature a cutting-edge intelligent building system (Mumtaz & Abidin, 2023).

### **3-13- Project Components**

NEOM, which is one of the kingdom's key giga-projects, is designed as a blueprint for sustainable urban living. This also includes the development of projects such as The Line, Oxagon, Sindalah and Trojena. The contract also includes building viaducts and underpasses (NEOM property Website).

#### **3-13-1- The Line**

While promotional videos proliferated online, the plans, schematics, and architectural drawings for The Line remained undisclosed for an extended period. This lack of transparency may have been influenced by hesitancy from major agencies to collaborate with a prince and country perceived negatively due to human rights concerns. This ethical issue underscores the reality that global capitalism often accommodates dictatorships with financial means or resources, posing a moral dilemma for companies seeking a positive international reputation. Finally, in October 2022, the project's executive director revealed that The Line's design and implementation would be led by the North American studio Morphosis, under the direction of Antoni Vives, former deputy mayor of Barcelona, along with other partners (Musset, 2023).

This vast project, shrouded in secrecy by its promoters, unfolds within a specific geopolitical context. Gulf and Arabian Peninsula countries, often in competitive or conflictual situations, have converged on a strategy to reduce dependence on oil through high technology, digital advancements, and extravagant urban development. The exterior of the megalopolis,

spanning 170 kilometers in length and towering 500 meters high, will feature mirrored facades designed to blend with the landscape by reflecting the desert vistas and sky. These facades will be supported by a structure of steel and concrete hidden beneath glass panels. Inside, modular structures will enable flexible organization, fostering autonomy among various neighborhoods and communities (Musset, 2023).

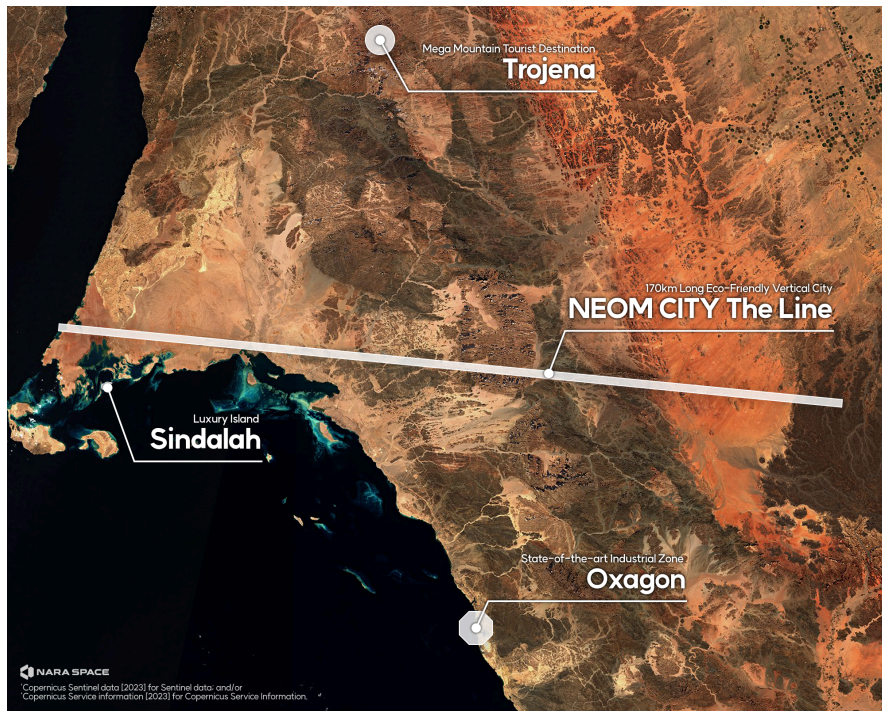


Figure 4. Location of the Line (source: NEOM Official Website)

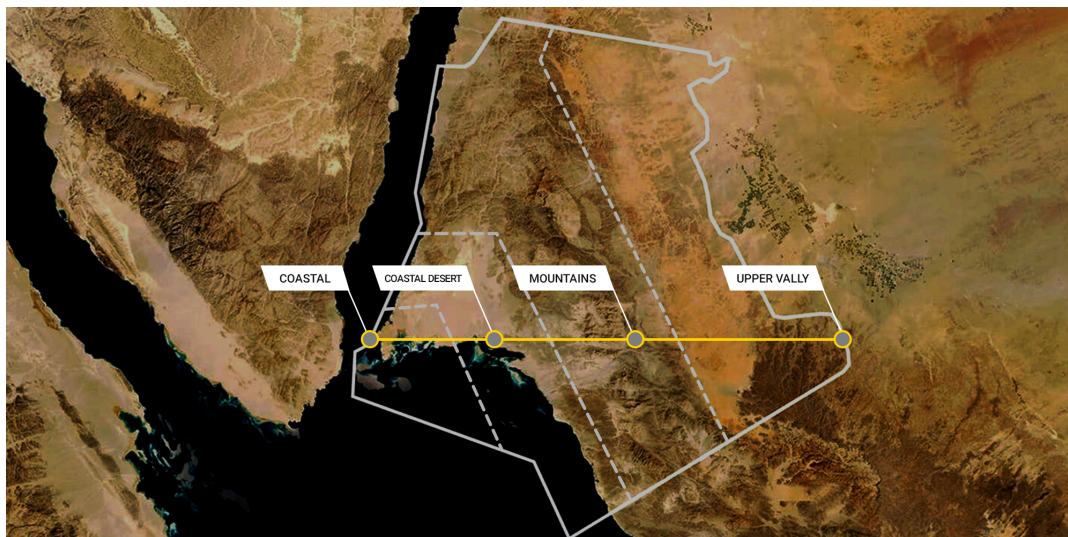


Figure 5. Four distinctive ecologies of the Line (source: NEOM Official Website)

The Line is notable for its four distinct ecologies. Stretching along the coast, it features exotic natural landscapes and extends southeast of NEOM, encompassing Red Sea islands and numerous natural reserves. Further inland, it spans a coastal desert region with relatively flat land, serving as a central axis connecting the project's northern and southern areas. This corridor is crucial for transportation routes within The Line (Al Sayed et.al, 2022).

The mountainous region, highlighted by Jebel al-Lawz, features peaks reaching heights of up to 2500 meters. This area is sparsely populated due to its geological characteristics. High valleys connect the regions of Saudi Arabia with the eastern part of NEOM, characterized by rocky formations interspersed with sandy plains. These valleys are linked to the Tabuk Province (Al Sayed et.al, 2022).

To access the Line, an average of four hours of flying is required for roughly 40% of the global populace. This accessibility for nearly half of the world's population simplifies reaching this landmark, further enhancing its unique position geographically.



Figure 6. The Location of the Line (source: NEOM Official Website)

Furthermore, a key benefit of this intelligent city is that, the travel time from the most distant point to another is only approximately 20 minutes. Additionally, NEOM preserves 95% of its natural surroundings and relies entirely on renewable energy sources.



Figure 7. The Line (source: NEOM Official Website)

In THE LINE city, competition drives efficiency, emphasizing pedestrian movement as individuals can access all their daily requirements within a mere five-minute walk. In comparison, projections indicate a 10-minute walk in New York by 2050, a 15-minute walk within Paris neighborhoods by 2030, and a 20-minute walk in Melbourne by 2050 (Al Sayed et.al, 2022).



Figure 8. Commuting in the Line (source: NEOM Official Website)

The Line is set to revolutionize urban life, positioning NEOM as a significant economic hub for Saudi Arabia, the region, and globally. Emphasizing environmental responsibility, the project will integrate sustainable and regenerative development practices into its business legislation, powered entirely by renewable energy. Essential amenities will be within a five-minute walk, fostering communities centered around people rather than vehicles, designed for accessibility and walkability, and offering serene and picturesque surroundings. Beneath the surface, physical and digital infrastructure will safeguard utilities and transportation services from external elements. The Line's three-tiered structure includes a pedestrian layer, a hidden services layer for infrastructure, and a transport layer equipped with high-speed, AI-supported transportation technologies, as illustrated in Figure 9 (Al Sayed et.al, 2022).

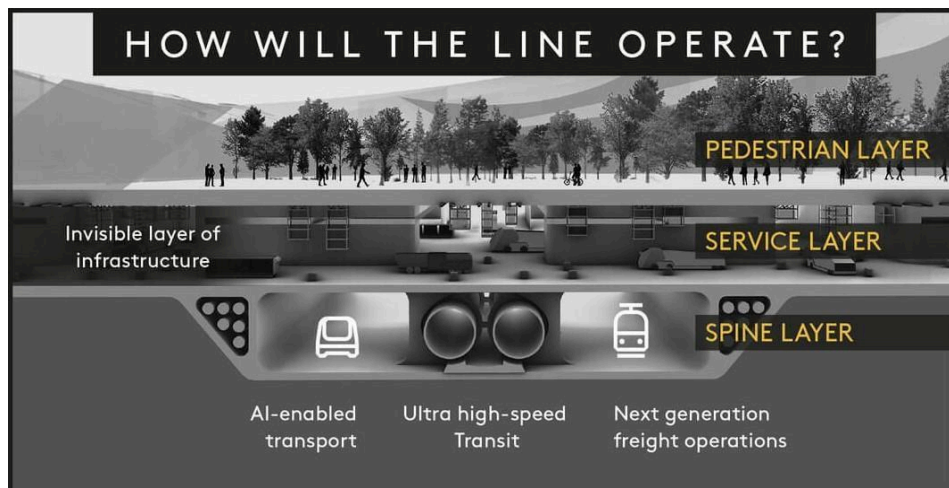


Figure 9. AI in the Line (source: NEOM Official Website)

## Deeper insights to the Line



Figure 10. The Line (source: NEOM Official Website)



Figure 11. The Line (source: NEOM Official Website)

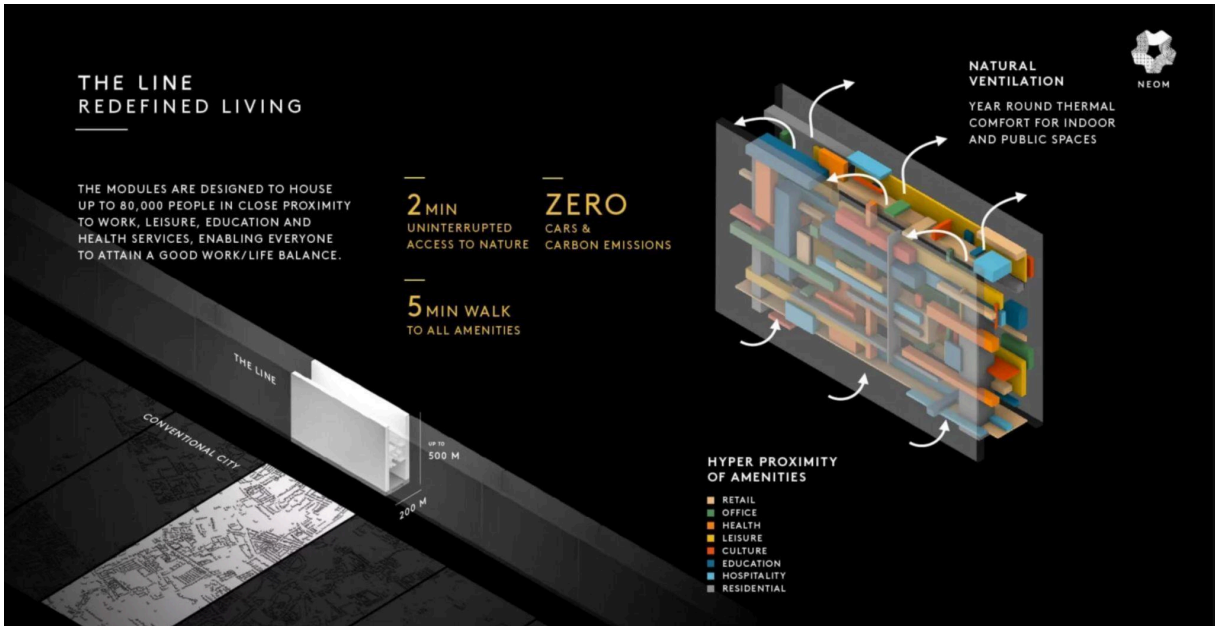


Figure 12. The Line (source: NEOM Official Website)

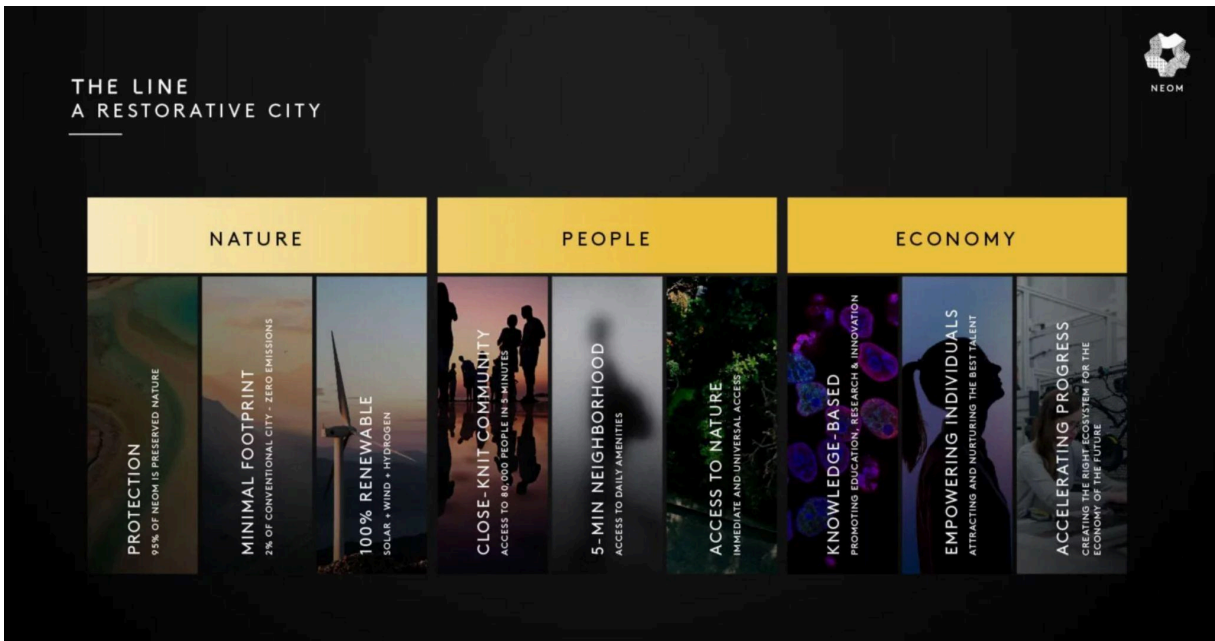


Figure 13. The Line (source: NEOM Official Website)





Figure 14. Satellite image of the construction site of the line (source: BBC.com )

### 3-13-2- Oxagon

Situated on the Red Sea in Northwest Saudi Arabia, Oxagon embodies advanced and clean industries within NEOM. It serves as a pioneering model for industry and urban development, designed as a dynamic living laboratory integral to a larger vision where entrepreneurship and human advancement drive a new era. Oxagon aims to establish a cutting-edge sustainable port, seamlessly integrated into a comprehensive supply chain system that connects to global trade routes. At its core, the innovative Integrated Digital Supply Chain Orchestration Platform (IDSCOP) will unify NEOM’s population and economy through a cohesive physical and digital network, encompassing a fully integrated port, logistics, and rail delivery system (Line Vision Website, [thelinevision.com](http://thelinevision.com)).



Figure 15. Oxagon (source: NEOM Official Website)

### 3-13-3- Trojena

Located in the Tabuk region of northwest Saudi Arabia, Trojena is strategically positioned near all of NEOM's notable attractions. As an integral part of NEOM's regional strategy, Trojena is situated 50 km inland from the Gulf of Aqaba coast within the nature region. Spanning nearly 60 square kilometers, Trojena features elevations ranging from 1,500 meters to 2,600 meters. Its location makes it ideal for alpine and adventure sports, with sub-zero winter temperatures and a year-round moderate climate that is cooler than other parts of the region on average (NEOM Official Website, [www.neom.com](http://www.neom.com)).



Figure 16. Trojena (source: NEOM Official Website)



Figure 17. Trojena (source: NEOM Official Website)

### 3-13-4- Sindalah

Sindalah is set to become NEOM's premier luxury island and yacht club destination. Positioned as a gateway to the Red Sea, it will serve as a tourism hotspot and a global hub for yachting, offering sustainable features alongside world-class cuisine, shopping, and wellness facilities. Located as NEOM's point of entry into the Red Sea, Sindalah is strategically positioned 17 hours by boat from most Mediterranean yachting destinations, making it a central hub for the European, Saudi, and GCC yachting communities (NEOM Official Website, [www.neom.com](http://www.neom.com)).



Figure 18. Sindalah (source: NEOM Official Website)

In summary, the NEOM project, central to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, aims to transition the nation from its oil-dependent past to a sustainable and technologically advanced future. Despite its promise of economic diversification and sustainable living, the project's detailed planning and implementation strategies remain vague. While the futuristic vision, including components like The Line, Oxagon, Trojena, and Sindalah, paints a picture of unparalleled urban innovation, concrete information about execution, governance, and target population is sparse. The ambitious branding of NEOM as a utopian mega-city highlights the kingdom's aspirations but also underscores significant challenges, such as attracting private investment and overcoming bureaucratic hurdles. As NEOM progresses, it remains to be seen whether it can fulfill its grand promises or will become another ambitious project with unfulfilled potential.

# 4 • Urban Branding: Scientific debates and Literature review

## 4-1- Introduction

In this part, the concept of city branding will be briefly introduced, drawing on definitions from scholars in the field. The goal of this literature review is to illustrate how these concepts have been elaborated upon by scholars up until now. This involves examining the main debates, perspectives, and connections within the academic discourse on city branding. This chapter will position the research within the broader academic context, connecting to how scholars have used and developed these concepts. It will explore the various approaches and contrasting viewpoints that have shaped the understanding of city branding. By framing the research within this scholarly discourse, it aims to highlight the evolution of key themes and indicators that will inform the analysis of the Line's branding strategies.

## 4-2- City Image

The city's image is shaped by diverse and sometimes conflicting messages projected by the city itself and individually constructed in the minds of its inhabitants. Each person's experience with the city is filtered through their own perceptions and interpretations, making the city not just a physical and objective space but also a subjective realm influenced by personal perspectives. City branding aims to establish a cohesive identity that consolidates and harmonizes the myriad images and meanings associated with the city into a unified message (Kavaratzis, 2004).

Luque-Martínez and colleagues describe the city's image as a collection of adjectival interpretations that individuals spontaneously associate with specific social and physical stimuli. These stimuli trigger a cascade of associations based on past experiences, forming beliefs or stereotypes. Individuals construct their perception of an object through a network of interconnected associations that develop over time in response to continuous exposure to stimuli (Castillo Villar, 2018).

The city's image is shaped through a process of bilateral communication between the city and individuals, where the city sends various messages and individuals select and organize cognitive and emotional elements to create a network of associations. It is important to note that individuals experience the city through their perceptions and images. Each person has a unique image of the city, influenced not only by city branding campaigns. The greater the disparity between the perceived images by individuals and the projected images, the lower the acceptance of the city brand (Castillo Villar, 2018).

During the initial phases of city branding, policymakers and practitioners predominantly utilized promotional and advertising strategies to transform the image of the city (Castillo Villar, 2018).

The image of a city is typically formed in people's minds due to its unique characteristics (Jannah, et.al 2014). "The image of a place is a combination of the characteristics of a place that is in line with the human perspective. He then divided the image of the place based on four main things, namely:

1. Cognitive, which is related to what a person knows about a location or place
2. Affective, which is related to a person's feelings regarding a particular location or place
3. Evaluative, which is related to a person's evaluation of a location or place of residence
4. Behavioral, which is related to whether someone is considering emigrating / working / visiting / investing in a certain place)" (Chan, et.al 2021: 333-334).

A brand image or city image is shaped in people's minds based on the city's unique characteristics. In the context of city branding, many cities today commonly promote themselves by highlighting their potential. City branding, as a holistic approach, acts as a promotional tool to create a distinctive image of the city. Consequently, the city's image is crucial for both its identity and branding efforts (Chan, et.al 2021).

"The contents of the city images, which are referable to physical forms, can conveniently be classified into five types of elements: paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks" (Lynch, 1960). These elements may be defined as follows:

- 1 . Paths are the routes through which individuals habitually, intermittently, or potentially navigate. They can include streets, sidewalks, transit lines, canals, and railroads. For many people, these pathways form the primary elements of their city experience. As people move through the city, they observe their surroundings, and the arrangement and relationship of other environmental elements are defined by these paths (Lynch, 1960).
- 2 . Edges are linear elements that the observer does not use or consider as paths. They act as boundaries between different areas and can include shores, railroad cuts, edges of development, and walls. These edges serve as lateral references rather than central axes. Edges can function as barriers, which may be more or less penetrable, separating one region from another, or as seams, where two regions connect and interact. Although edges may not be as dominant as paths, they are important organizing features for many people, helping to define and unify broader areas, such as the outline of a city by water or walls (Lynch, 1960).
- 3 . Districts are medium-to-large sections of the city that have a two-dimensional extent and are perceived as distinct areas with a common, identifying character. Observers mentally 'enter' these areas, recognizing their unique qualities. While districts are always identifiable from within, they can also serve as external reference points if visible from the outside. Most people organize their city to some extent using districts, although the prominence of districts versus paths can vary based on the individual and the specific city (Lynch, 1960).

4 . Nodes are strategic points in a city where an observer can enter and that serve as focal points for travel. These nodes can be junctions, such as transportation breaks, crossings, or path convergences, where a shift from one structure to another occurs. Alternatively, nodes can be concentrations of activity or physical character, like a street-corner hangout or an enclosed square. Some nodes act as the focal point of a district, symbolizing and radiating influence over the area, often referred to as cores. Nodes combine the characteristics of both junctions and concentrations, linking closely with paths and districts. Junctions, where paths converge, are events along a journey, while cores are the central focus of districts. Nodes are present in nearly every city image and can sometimes be the dominant feature (Lynch, 1960).

5 . Landmarks are another type of point-reference, but unlike nodes, the observer does not enter them; they remain external. Landmarks are typically well-defined physical objects such as buildings, signs, stores, or mountains. Their use involves distinguishing one element from many possibilities. Some landmarks are distant and can be seen from various angles and distances, serving as radial references. These can include isolated towers, golden domes, or large hills, which symbolize a constant direction. Even slow-moving objects like the sun can function as landmarks. Other landmarks are more local, visible only from specific areas and approaches, including signs, storefronts, trees, and doorknobs. These local landmarks help fill in the observer's image of the city and are often used as identity and structural clues, becoming more relied upon as familiarity with the area increases (Lynch, 1960).

### **4-3- Smart City**

According to Mohanty, in recent years, there has been a significant increase in the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a result of advancements in hardware and software designs. The idea of a smart city is still being defined and lacks a clear and consistent definition among academics and professionals. Put simply, a smart city is a place where traditional networks and services are enhanced to be more adaptable, efficient, and sustainable through the integration of information, digital, and telecommunication technologies. This transformation aims to improve city operations for the benefit of its residents, resulting in improved public services and resource utilization with a reduced environmental impact. One formal definition of a smart city is as follows: A city that integrates its physical infrastructure, information-technology infrastructure, social infrastructure, and business infrastructure to harness the combined intelligence of the city. Another formal and comprehensive definition is: A smart sustainable city is an evolving urban environment that leverages information and communication technologies (ICTs) and other tools to improve quality of life, optimize urban operations and services, and bolster competitiveness. It aims to meet the economic, social, and environmental needs of present and future generations through thoughtful planning and implementation (Mohanty, 2016).

#### **4-4- Urban Branding**

Branding is a fundamental concept aimed at enhancing products, whereas city branding serves as a strategic marketing approach to cultivate strong connections and foster a positive image of the city among visitors (Kavaratzis, 2004; Zhou & Wang, 2014: 27-32). The city branding strategy is a crucial strategic action that governments must manage to promote a place or country on an international level (Hazime, 2011). Many experts, including Oliveira, have concluded that city branding should be integrated into strategic spatial planning, as place branding is both a tool for and a component of strategic spatial planning (Oliveira, 2014). “But unfortunately, to this date, none of these studies have introduced the framework within which strategic city branding could be prepared for a city. Of course there are many cities which take advantage of branding values but then again the stages of strategic city branding have not been identified” (Mirmoeini and Azari, 2018: 98).

City branding aims to gain a competitive edge by enhancing the city's appeal to attract investment and tourism. It also aims to strengthen local identity and prevent social exclusion (Kavaratzis, 2004). This competitive edge is attained through the administration and dissemination of an appealing city image. City branding is thus focused on overseeing various processes in order to better convey and communicate the desired image of the city (Castillo Villar, 2018).

Cities are seeking innovative methods for promotion due to the rapid advancements in technology and the transition from local to a globalized setting. This shift forces cities to compete with one another to establish themselves as appealing tourist destinations, thriving workplaces, culturally vibrant hubs, and more. The introduction of city branding as a novel and imaginative solution to excel in this competitive landscape has become imperative. Although the practice of city promotion can be traced back to the 19th century, concepts such as place marketing, place branding, and city branding have only recently emerged in academic discourse (Mirmoeini and Azari, 2018). City branding is not just about promotion but should be viewed as a strategic endeavor. Therefore, city branding ought to be a vision-led process to achieve success. However, there remains a deficiency in strategic city branding literature from a practical standpoint (Mirmoeini and Azari, 2018). In recent years, city branding has become increasingly popular among local government officials. Nonetheless, despite the numerous efforts in this field, there is still a gap between theoretical studies and practical applications, underscoring the need for conducting practical research on how city branding can be effectively utilized and how it aligns with other spatial planning strategies (Mirmoeini and Azari, 2018).

According to Mirmoeini and Azari, reviewing the literature on city branding and strategic city branding reveals the foundational elements of this research field. It can be categorized into five general research types. Initially, studies aimed to define terms such as city marketing and city branding. As these concepts gained popularity among scholars, research expanded to explore the relationships between city branding, city marketing, and other phenomena like creative cities or cultural urban regeneration. For instance, Vonolo investigates the image of the creative city and city branding in Turin, while Okano and Samson examine the



connections between cultural urban branding and creative cities. Another type of research focuses on identifying city branding tools and strategies, such as Lee's examination of the impact of mega-sport events on city branding. A fourth research type looks at the branding stories of different cities. For example, Moilanen compares the challenges of city branding in ten European cities, and Zhao discusses public-private partnerships in branding Dali city in China. Lastly, some studies delve into branding visions and the role of city branding in strategic spatial planning. Building on the work of Ashworth and Kavaratzis, Oliveira seeks to identify the role of place branding in strategic spatial planning. Although these studies provide valuable insights into the relationship between city branding and strategic spatial planning, none have fully explored how this strategic process operates, merely highlighting the necessity of considering strategic processes in city branding efforts (Mirmoeini and Azari, 2018).

<b>Research Type</b>	<b>Summary of the content/ Reference</b>
<b>Type 1:</b> Definition of Terms	Focuses on defining terms such as city marketing, city branding, etc.
<b>Type 2:</b> Relations studies to city brandings	the relations between city branding, city marketing and other phenomena like creative cities or cultural urban regeneration. Example: 1- Vonolo: Image of the creative city and city branding in Turin 2- Okano and Samson: Relations between cultural urban branding and creative cities
<b>Type 3:</b> Identification of Tools & Strategies	Investigates city branding tools and strategies. Example: Lee examining the effects of sport-mega-events on city branding
<b>Type 4:</b> Branding stories	Examines branding stories of different cities. Example: 1- Moilanen: Challenges of city branding in 10 European cities 2- Zhao: Public-private partnerships in branding Dali city, China
<b>Type 5:</b> Branding in Strategic Spatial Planning	Explores the place of city branding in strategic spatial planning. Example: Oliveira: Place of place branding in strategic spatial planning

Table 2. Types of research about City Branding (Mirmoeini and Azari, 2018).

City brands share similarities with corporate brands, particularly in terms of their complexity and the diverse range of target audiences. Given the extensive research conducted on the influence of strong brands in the corporate realm, it is advantageous to leverage these insights as a foundation for exploring the significance of branding for cities. Moreover, examining the effects of robust brands on businesses can offer valuable insights for analyzing the effects of city branding (Raubo, 2010).

Brand equity is crucial for comprehending the impact of robust corporate brands on a company. It refers to the extra influence that brand familiarity has on how consumers respond to marketing efforts. As a result, consumers tend to respond more positively to marketing activities when they recognize and engage with the brand (Hoeffler & Keller, 2003). Brand equity boosts the perceived safety of a purchase, instilling greater confidence in the product's quality. It raises the expected satisfaction level and reduces the perceived difficulty associated with the purchase. These factors collectively influence customer behavior, making the purchase more probable (Raubo, 2010).

Branding and building brand equity are valuable assets for any organization. Initially, brand equity was gauged by customer behavior, but it now encompasses relationships with various stakeholders as well. From a financial perspective, a brand is seen as an asset that enhances the company's value by generating earnings beyond what tangible assets alone can achieve (Motion et. al., 2003).

Nagaynay and Lee define branding as a pivotal strategy in catalyzing urban renewal processes aimed at reshaping a city's image, emphasizing its role in fostering urban identity and devising sustainable renewal strategies. They outline three foundational pillars for branding and urban renewal based on stakeholder awareness and knowledge: (1) establishing a distinct place identity for promotional purposes and place promotion, (2) integrating cultural and historical preservation into branding strategies and urban renewal concepts, and (3) developing new infrastructure that supports the branding endeavor (Nagaynay and Lee, 2020). Guzijan and Cvijic argue that branding enhances cities through sustainable infrastructure projects and improved accessibility to heritage buildings, historical sites, and public spaces for tourists. It also promotes organizational and administrative structures conducive to implementing sustainable construction projects and preserving cultural heritage. This involves fostering partnerships between public and private sectors, as well as establishing networks among institutions, NGOs, and local communities. Additionally, city leaders play a crucial role by promoting heritage preservation strategies, such as offering financial incentives for cultural events and supporting rebuilding efforts within preservation frameworks (Guzijan and Cvijic, 2018).

Einwiller and Will conducted research involving case studies, desk research, and interviews with communication specialists from 11 leading global companies. Their findings highlight a consensus on the increasing significance of corporate branding, driven by five primary reasons. Firstly, future expectations positively influence stock prices, with 'soft factors' increasingly influencing business decisions. Secondly, companies with strong corporate brands are not only more appealing to customers but also attract talented employees due to their reputation. Thirdly, corporate values play a crucial role in consumer product choices, as people prioritize brands associated with strong corporate identities. Fourthly, corporate branding enhances coordination within multinational companies by facilitating unified communication and reducing complexity. Lastly, external stakeholders demand transparency, which a strong corporate brand supports, fostering positive media attitudes. The rapid advancement of telecommunications necessitates continuous interaction with stakeholders, and strong brands excel in managing these interactions. Overall, a robust corporate brand strengthens integration and organization across all marketing and communication efforts of a company (Einwiller & Will, 2002).

#### **4-4-1- A short history of Branding**

To understand the contemporary significance of urban branding, it is essential to explore its historical foundations and evolution. Based on the work of Wippel, the branding industry has experienced significant global growth, yet branding itself is not a recent development; it has a long historical lineage. Branding has traditionally served as a means to denote ownership, assert authorship, and distinguish one object from others. This practice has been applied to both living creatures and artifacts throughout history. City branding also has ancient roots, from the competitive spirit among cities in ancient Greece to the prominence of religious pilgrimage destinations. It was evident among members of the Hanseatic League, medieval Italian city-states, and in the establishment of absolutist town foundations. Historical examples highlight how seats of rulership and power were effectively transformed into influential brands, often through iconic and symbolically rich structures such as cathedrals, palaces, and castles (Wippel, 2023). As outlined by Kavaratzis and Ashworth, urban branding is not a recent phenomenon. City councils and governments have been deliberately shaping and promoting urban identities to target specific groups for as long as civic governance has existed (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005). For millennia, architecture and urban design have been used as potent propaganda tools. Many historical examples show how the design of capital cities and the architecture of their buildings and monuments were employed to demonstrate power, regional dominance, and cultural superiority (Koolhaas, 1994).

Matthieu Adam argues that modern place branding evolved from the combination of emerging capitalism and imperialism. Since the 18th century, the consolidation of modern nation-states has set the stage for contemporary nation-branding practices. Nation-states, functioning as social constructs and geographic entities, have consistently aimed to forge distinct identities and loyalties, often through deliberate image management in their interactions with others. This has involved employing various symbols and sophisticated strategies such as national flags, anthems, constitutions, and historical narratives to assert sovereignty, cultivate national citizenship, and establish themselves as recognizable entities — akin to brands, albeit before the term became commonplace. They have also showcased national culture through artistic creations and symbolic representations to impress international audiences and garner recognition as equal members of the global community. The advent of national newspapers and subsequent media like radio and television further enhanced the advertisement of products and their producers on a broader scale. During the globalization era, this dissemination crossed national borders, leading to the rapid growth of multinational corporations. To facilitate international trade, "Made in" labels and country-of-origin markings emerged, promoting national origin associated with positive attributes such as reliability, quality, industriousness, and innovation (Wippel, 2023).

The concept of promoting cities as brands stems from the belief that people inherently view them this way. Gregory Ashworth and Mihalis Kavaratzis contend that a city shapes itself in people's minds through the interpretation of its perceptions and images (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2009). "In other words, people already have preconceived images about the cities of their interest. This process follows the formation of images of other brand-managed entities like products or corporations. While this concept aligns with the basic branding

philosophy that is regularly applied in corporate branding, this is as far as the similarities between corporate branding and urban branding go. A city is not a product in the traditional sense, and therefore a distinct form of branding is needed” (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2009: 525).

The inception of modern city branding is often attributed to the creation of the iconic "I ♥ NY" logo and campaign in 1977. This development is commonly acknowledged by scholars such as Wippel, who highlight its connection to the rise of urban entrepreneurialism influenced by neoliberal ideologies and policies. These policies, which originated in the UK in response to economic decline and the shift away from traditional industrial centers, laid the groundwork for this approach. In the era of postmodern city branding, cities started to emphasize leisure and consumption, reimagining themselves as tourist and lifestyle destinations. This period saw significant urban restructuring and regeneration projects, such as Boston's waterfront revitalization, which repurposed former inner-city ports and industrial areas into museums, flagship urban developments, and venues for festivals and large-scale events (Wippel, 2023).

#### **4-4-2- The Objectives of Urban Branding**

The primary objectives of urban branding are to reimagine a city, to depend on place-based identities, and to foster an understanding of a particular local culture. However, urban branding transcends mere strategic place promotion and marketing; it involves constructing and shaping an urban imaginary. This concept entails a historically rooted collection of representations derived from the city's architecture, street layouts, local art, and media portrayals across various platforms such as movies, television, magazines, and other mass media. Urban branding strives to create a clear, consumer-oriented urban image capable of attracting desirable demographics and boosting consumer spending. As such, it aims to adapt, reshape, and strategically manipulate perceptions of the city to appeal to targeted consumers (Rehan, 2013).

Therefore, Urban branding primarily aims to:

- 1- Develop innovative methods for conveying the city's image to the broader region or the world, creating a media-driven perception (Rehan, 2013).
- 2- Secure competitive advantages on both regional and global scales (Rehan, 2013).
- 3- Bolster the city's reputation and corporate identity, thereby elevating its economic importance (Rehan, 2013).

According to Vanolo, marketing and branding are inherently political entities, as they are closely tied to issues such as inequality, conflict, identity formation, visibility and invisibility, framing, and exclusion or inclusion, as highlighted many years ago by researchers like Madsen, Paddison, Zukin, or Hall and Hubbard, and fully recognized by Kavaratzis and Ashworth, the publication of "City Branding: An Effective Assertion of Identity or a Transitory Marketing Trick?", a seminal article by Adam Arvidsson, introduced a Marxist perspective on analyzing retail brands. This work inspired numerous geographers by positing

that branding techniques facilitate the extraction of surplus value and exploit the free labor of consumers. Recent literature on branding seeks to challenge the simplistic assumption that branding merely perpetuates capitalist exploitation and commodification. For instance, Andrea Lucarelli draws on critical political philosophers like Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, and Jacques Rancière. Ultimately, Lucarelli contends that branding can lead to positive political outcomes, fostering new and progressive ways to conceptualize political subjects and urban phenomena (Vanolo, 2020).

#### **4-4-3- Themes and indicators of urban branding**

According to Al-Hinkawi and Zedan (2023) in their study "Branding for cities: the case study of Baghdad," the key components in the sustainable branding of cities can be categorized to include specific indicators and strategies aimed at enhancing a city's identity and competitiveness. The categorization of this part of the thesis builds upon their framework, adapting their categorization and indicators to analyze the branding strategies of NEOM.

##### **4-4-3-1- Characteristics**

As described by Al-Hinkawi and Zedan, each city possesses a distinctive identity that sets it apart from others, shaped by both positive and negative images and memories. As a result, a sustainable brand identity encapsulated in a logo can effectively differentiate the city and represent its intangible characteristics. Accordingly, the key components in the sustainable branding<sup>1</sup> of cities can be categorized as follows:

1- Distinctive: The concepts of a city's identity and brand deserve attention, as the city's image is essential. Institutional identity, in particular, distinguishes a city, emphasizing its crucial role in branding. A strong identity is pivotal for conveying a clear internal and external image to stakeholders and creating unique value. Effective, sustainable management of a city's identity fosters understanding and commitment among diverse stakeholders towards the institution (Middleton, 2011).

2- Memorable: This underscores the importance of sustaining culture and history in shaping a city's identity, revealing their uniqueness as a defining force in typical urban spaces. It showcases the city's exceptional capacity to preserve its identities over time. Prioritizing a high standard of living is more critical than simply boosting productivity. Today, enhancing quality of life has become a fundamental function of a city (Nursanty, 2019).

3- Authentic: Preserving the authenticity of cities aims to safeguard their identity amidst rapid changes, recognizing that stability is crucial. Heritage cities that maintain their originality demonstrate clear, independent development in their growth (Guzijan and Cvijic, 2018). The role of heritage as a unique symbol and defining feature of a city's brand creates a distinct place in the collective symbolic understanding over time. This aligns with the social concept of the tourist gaze introduced by British sociologist John Urry, where cities invest in

---

<sup>1</sup> The research defines city branding as a strategic process aimed at crafting a sustainable long-term vision for the city. It strives to ensure consistency between the city's brand identity and its perceived image during the time, fostering positive perceptions of the place. This involves highlighting a distinctive blend of tangible and intangible sustainable attributes, ultimately enhancing its competitive edge (Al-Hinkawi and Zedan, 2021).

their built environment and physical heritage, particularly for branding purposes, to enhance their appeal to tourists (Hammouda, 2019).

4- Placemaking: An integrated branding strategy is essential to capture the hearts and interest of visitors. Creating an emotional attachment to a place involves providing a deeper experiential connection based on 'feeling' rather than just 'seeing'. Another crucial aspect of the placemaking process is the sensory imagery of the place, which unveils deeper insights into elements traditionally reshaped in urban planning, such as streets, pathways, focal points, boundaries, and landmarks (Nursanty, 2019).

#### **4-4-3-2- Dimensions**

Based on the work of Al-Hinkawi and Zedan, a number of dimensions can be identified as follows:

1- Economic dimensions: Economic dimensions in city marketing and branding involve the fundamental elements of these institutions (Al-Hinkawi and Zedan, 2021). Both branding and these economic dimensions involve multiple stakeholder groups, carry substantial significance and complexity, navigate multiple identities, and demand long-term development (Al-Hinkawi and Zedan, 2021).

2- Cultural dimensions: The branding of a city hinges on its cultural values, with the relationship between culture and city marketing primarily rooted in (i) the city's historical and contemporary cultural image, and (ii) uncovering hidden identities to shape the city's brand (Bıçakçı, 2012). The identity of a city is shaped by its cultural values and the specialized crafts that contribute to its development (Dragicevic and Mihaljinac, 2016). Guzijan emphasized the role of tangible cultural and historical heritage in crafting a city's brand, examining how architectural heritage and the spatial qualities of urban fabric can create a distinct brand" (Guzijan and Cvijic, 2018).

3- Social dimensions: These encompass the experiences, perceptions, and beliefs of the city's inhabitants, as well as the role of everyday life in shaping the city's identity and brand. This goes beyond the city's material wealth or financial success, emphasizing the social interactions that establish a unique trademark for the city in daily life" (Winfield, 2005) Residents embody the local culture and personality of the city, shaping its richness and diversity. Therefore, leveraging these attributes inspires a business strategy aimed at constructing a sustainable, appealing, and trustworthy identity in the minds of stakeholders (Innie, 2011). Kavaratzis describes a city's branding strategy as consisting of both tangible and intangible elements. Beyond economic benefits for business stakeholders, the city's brand holds intrinsic value for local governments. This value includes fostering community development, strengthening local identity, encouraging active citizen participation in urban affairs, and potentially addressing social exclusion (Al-Hinkawi and Zedan, 2021).

#### **4-4-3-3- Types**

Ashworth identified three distinct or overlapping patterns of city branding (Al-Hinkawi and Zedan, 2021):

Type 1: Personality association, which focuses on identifying the unique personality of the city (Al-Hinkawi and Zedan, 2021),

Type 2: Signature building and design, emphasizing distinctive buildings and sites such as the Sydney Harbour Bridge and Opera House, and notable areas like Soho in London (Al-Hinkawi and Zedan, 2021),

Type 3: Event hallmarking, highlighting specific events such as festivals as defining features of a place (Al-Hinkawi and Zedan, 2021).

Nagaynay and Lee expanded on Ashworth's patterns by identifying several related concepts. Their study assessed the first pattern through place names, city slogans, logos, and symbols. The second pattern is characterized by monuments, landmarks, cultural institutions, renowned museums, public spaces, and squares. Lastly, the third pattern is exemplified by cultural festivals, conferences, exhibitions, and gatherings (Nagaynay and Lee, 2020). Winfield underscored the significance of the second pattern by suggesting that cultural and architectural landmarks act as defining attractions that bolster a city's brand. These distinctive monuments play a crucial role in shaping the city's image and indirectly contribute to the well-being and satisfaction of both residents and visitors (Winfield, 2005).

Maheshwari and colleagues highlighted the third pattern by emphasizing the role of sustainable development in shaping the city's brand. This involves preserving the city's tangible assets while enhancing them to sustain progress. Such sustainable initiatives promote the city and contribute to building a robust brand. They serve as drivers of sustainable growth, prioritizing 'quality' and 'sustainability' as key elements in competitive advantage and in place and brand marketing activities (Maheshwari et. al, 2011).

Hospers highlighted three patterns in the concept of public art within urban spaces: the built environment, distinctive events, and famous personalities. These elements possess intrinsic, symbolic, and promotional value in shaping the brand of a place, enhancing the visual appeal and tourist perception of the city (Hospers, 2011).

#### **4-4-3-4- Strategies**

Creating a positive city image is a meaningful blend of activity and structure. The adoption of image planning strategies has become crucial for cities to thrive in the global economy. Successful brands offer benefits that extend beyond the physical aspects of cities, driving a strong desire to transform visual images into unique brand identities through targeted strategies. Various urban branding strategies can be developed based on diverse city development goals and visions, including large-scale urban projects, iconic architecture, events, media initiatives, and more. Urban branding strategies not only aim to promote the

city's image but also strive to transform it into a comprehensive urban experience that appeals to investors, policymakers, real estate developers, planners, architects, and other stakeholders seeking to enhance their city's role. City branding encapsulates the essential aspects that define a place. The process of brand creation involves leveraging media-generated imagery, branding urban projects, and enhancing the city's life, historical landmarks, signature architecture, and overall urban form (Rehan, 2013).

Research has identified various strategies for city branding, drawing from existing literature in the field:

**1- Differentiation strategy:** Kavartzis highlighted that the values and emotions symbolized by a city are crucial elements in differentiation strategies. These strategies treat urban brands similarly to corporate brands, emphasizing their complex nature and reliance on collaboration across various stakeholders within a city or institution. The study elaborated on the factors driving widespread interest in brands through the following (Al-Hinkawi and Zedan, 2021):

**Differentiation:** This includes standing out to establish a distinct vision of the differences between products (Al-Hinkawi and Zedan, 2021),

**Transparency and synergy:** Corporate brands achieve synergies through the integration of brands rather than promoting them separately (Al-Hinkawi and Zedan, 2021),

**Conceptualizing and aligning:** This framework offers a comprehensive method to articulate a city's identity and functions as a mechanism to align organizational subcultures across diverse functional and geographical boundaries (Al-Hinkawi and Zedan, 2021).

**2- Creative city strategy:** Many visible and unseen elements serve as stereotypes of creative cities. Winfield emphasized the significance of the creative community in society, highlighting its importance for a city's sustainability (Winfield, 2005). O'Connor and colleagues advocated for the global adoption of creative city policies, transforming them into a trend aspiring to modernity. They explored how rethinking the discourse on creative cities, envisioning modernization, and leveraging local potential could reshape their image. This approach plays a crucial role in enhancing and preserving the city's creative reputation and brand (O'Connor et al., 2020).

**3- Experience city strategy:** The core of a city's brand revolves around defining its unique expertise and offering insights into the characteristics of the visitor experience it promises. This value proposition must align the city's identity with the expectations of the community it seeks to attract (Al-Hinkawi and Zedan, 2021).

**4- Tourism city strategy:** Emir and colleagues emphasized the critical role of tourism in establishing a city's brand to gain a competitive edge. They highlighted tourism's role in promoting the city by showcasing its unique symbols, features, or prominent elements, and the impact of the city's established image in generating a unique sense of place and identity. This approach enhances the city's attractions and contributes to its acceptance as a successful brand. (Emir et al., 2020). Dril and colleagues stressed that city marketing is fundamental for developing and implementing a long-term integrated sustainable vision in both the economic



and social spheres. It aids in gradually eliminating negative phenomena and addressing social and economic problems. Their analysis led to the conclusion that successful city marketing contributes to sustainable development by utilizing the city's competitive strengths to stimulate sustainable local growth (Al-Hinkawi and Zedan, 2021).

<b>Main theme</b>	<b>Sub theme</b>	<b>Indicator</b>
<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Distinction</b>	The institutional identity highlights how the brand embodies the uniqueness of the place.
	<b>Uniqueness</b>	The city's identity is forged through its distinctive uniqueness, embodying a singular and unmistakable sense of place.
	<b>Originality</b>	The city's originality primarily defines its personality, identity, and historical significance.
	<b>Place Making</b>	Strengthening the emotional connections and values created through people's experiences.
<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Cultural</b>	The interplay between culture and marketing in the city is rooted in the city's image, which draws from both its historical heritage and contemporary cultural landscape. The city's brand hinges on uncovering hidden identities and showcasing them.
	<b>Social</b>	People's interactions, perceptions, and beliefs about the city. The influence of daily routines and social interactions in everyday urban life.
	<b>Economic</b>	Promoting economic growth by creating new opportunities and benefits for the region.
<b>Types</b>	<b>Personality</b>	The inclusion of cultural and architectural landmarks as points of attraction.
	<b>Main Building and Design</b>	Incorporating public art spaces and monuments as tangible assets that demonstrate the city's cultural strength.
	<b>Distinctive events</b>	Highlighting locations hosting specific events like festivals to enhance the city's brand.
<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Differentiation</b>	The city's symbolic values and emotions serve as fundamental elements in differentiation strategies. Identifying three key factors: transparency and synergy, visualizing, and aligning various activities.
	<b>Creative city</b>	Incorporating a variety of visible and invisible elements to create stereotypes of creative cities aimed at attracting talented individuals in society. These elements include the built environment, distinctive events, and renowned personalities as the three main categories.
	<b>Experience city</b>	Enhancing the empirical representation of sense of place involves forming pre-visit images of locations. Experiences encompass interactions between individuals and physical, virtual, and social environments through various senses.
	<b>Tourist city</b>	Highlighting the city's distinctive character involves embracing cultural and architectural landmarks as key tourist attractions.

Table 3. Themes and indicators of a city branding (Al-Hinkawi and Zedan., 2021)

## **4-5- Case studies of cities in the Middle East**

From a globalization perspective, the early twentieth-century Middle East was well-positioned to benefit from a more interconnected world. However, many countries in the region struggled to adapt to outward-focused economic policies that prioritized private sector growth over political control. It was not until the late twentieth century that these countries began to slowly restructure their political economies, yielding mixed results (Henry and Springborg, 2010). A significant factor in the region's development was the series of oil booms, culminating in the period from 2003 to 2008. The increased revenues from oil and gas exports during this time positively impacted business, investment, and urban growth. This effect was felt not only in oil-producing countries but also in other regional nations that provided services and labor (Henry and Springborg, 2010). Alongside population growth, advancements in education, and increased economic development, the Middle East has become attractive for direct foreign investment. However, states in the region have only achieved limited success in diversifying their economies and integrating them into the global marketplace (Rodrik, 2006).

Although the Middle East's geographic location and political economies can be discussed collectively, the region's countries differ significantly in their histories, relationships, and resources, which influence their unique positions in globalization (Turki, 2017). In continuation, this thesis examines various Middle Eastern countries and the factors contributing to their successes and failures in branding:

### **1- Dubai**

Dubai developed strategic visions for the years 2010 and 2020 aimed at increasing the number of tourists to reduce the country's dependency on oil revenue. The branding vision of the Dubai municipality is to promote the city as an exemplary destination that embodies success and comfortable living, as well as a leading commercial, residential, exhibition, and convention center in the Middle East and surrounding regions (Sameh, 2018).

The rapid growth of the place branding industry in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is closely tied to Dubai's emergence as a globally recognized and esteemed brand. Dubai stands out as the quintessential example of branding within MENA and on a global scale, as evidenced by its prominent position in both global and regional rankings. Since as early as 1989, Dubai has established numerous specialized institutions aimed at enhancing its international visibility. Throughout the 2000s, it soared as a rising star in the global spotlight, attracting tourists, investors, celebrities, and more. Dubai's successful branding efforts have not only propelled it into the status of a global city but also reflect its transformation into a prominent world city (Wippel, 2023).

Dubai established its place brand through dynamic and well-coordinated initiatives, emphasizing intensive and mutually reinforcing co-branding across the city, project sites, businesses, and products. Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, Dubai's evolution through impressive architectural developments has positioned it as a "showpiece city" (Wippel, 2023). Its physical appearance makes it an "instantly recognizable" place and a symbol of modernity,

human endeavor, and success. Many constructions incorporate the city's name in their brand, equating the projects with the city itself. This strategy of continuous construction of attention-grabbing megaprojects across the city aligns with global marketing requirements, provides economic benefits, and enhances the ruling elites' political legitimacy. It includes extensive landscaping, large urban revitalization, extended waterfront development, and impressive standalone landmark buildings designed by global "starchitects," all lavishly presented in the media (Wippel, 2023).

Hosting events has become a significant tool for branding Dubai. Culture, in particular, plays a crucial role in this strategy. Alongside extravagant malls, internationally renowned annual shopping festivals feature hundreds of prestigious brands, attracting visitors to 'Do-Buy' (Wippel, 2023).

Dubai's policymakers have been more proactive than their counterparts in diversifying the economy away from dependence on oil revenues (Reuvid, 2007). The region's oil reserves were predicted to last only 30 years as early as 1990, prompting strategic efforts to diversify revenue sources. Dubai's effective branding strategy is evident in its booming tourism sector, where it achieved the distinction of being the fifth most visited city globally in 2014, drawing in 11.95 million visitors (Zeineddine, 2017). In subsequent years, these figures rose to 12.84 million international overnight tourists in 2015 and 13.34 million in 2016. Dubai has set a target to draw 20 million tourists annually by 2020. Data reveals that 86% of Dubai's visitors belong to the 20-40 age bracket and are frequent international travelers (Zeineddine, 2017). Dubai has earned worldwide recognition for its ambitious architectural projects, such as an underwater hotel, the Palm Islands, and the iconic Burj Khalifa, the tallest building globally. These landmarks have solidified Dubai's status as a pioneer in luxury tourism and real estate (Zeineddine, 2017).

Dubai has established itself as a hub of luxury across various domains. As the most progressive among the seven emirates, it serves as a melting pot where diverse cultures converge, fostering a unique atmosphere. The city aspires to be recognized as a 'global Arabic city' rooted in its rich heritage. Numerous slogans are employed to promote Dubai, yet the Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing champions 'Nowhere like Dubai'. Introduced on May 5, 2009, the brand identity incorporates the tagline 'Definitely Dubai' along with the accompanying brand signature (Sameh, 2018):



Figure 19 The brand identity of Dubai (source: Sameh, 2018)

## 2- Abu Dhabi

According to Abu Dhabi's 2030 plan, the city's brand marketing focuses on several pillars: empowering women, ensuring sustainable domestic resources, stimulating economic growth in neighboring countries (Zeineddine, 2017), attracting foreign investments is a key priority, alongside diversifying the economy through expansion into new sectors and markets and this includes efforts to enhance national productivity and develop human resources, which involves improving education and training institutions (AlOwais, 2019). Additionally, strategic economic sectors such as energy, petrochemicals, metals, aviation, aerospace, pharmaceuticals, tourism, healthcare, transportation, logistics, higher education, media, financial services, and telecommunications are being expanded to bolster the nation's economic portfolio (AlOwais, 2019).

Compared to Dubai, Abu Dhabi entered the realms of economic diversification, urban transformation, tourism development, and branding relatively later. As the federal capital and seat of the presidency, Abu Dhabi aims for a more centralized role within the UAE, particularly highlighted since the financial crisis when its substantial support for the country, including Dubai, became evident. A primary objective has been to cultivate a distinct brand identity distinct from its neighbor and to invigorate its somewhat conservative image. Emphasizing a smoother transition and drawing inspiration from heritage and tradition, the emirate focuses on cultural and event tourism within the travel sector. Culture, sports, and sustainability are key themes in its branding strategy, closely tied to major attention-grabbing projects. Since 2007, the dedicated Office of the Brand of Abu Dhabi has meticulously crafted and implemented a cohesive brand strategy. The logo, featuring a local dhow sail with the emirate's name in calligraphic script, is widely recognized across various sectors and regions of Abu Dhabi. The brand narrative revolves around the transformation from a humble fishing village into a vibrant and welcoming metropolis, celebrating heritage, nature, and its people. There's a concerted effort to ensure both public and private entities uphold the brand's integrity, reflecting in the behavior of citizens (Wippel, 2023).

Within Abu Dhabi, a significant urban transformation occurred with the development of the Corniche, a modern and idyllic place promenade that serves as a focal point for local events, enhancing the city's visibility both locally and internationally. In competition with Dubai, Abu Dhabi has established its own prestigious airline and more recently, a massive container mega-port. Like other emirates, Abu Dhabi has invested heavily in higher education to bolster its reputation and has attracted branches of renowned international universities. Culturally, the emirate aims to meet global standards and has focused since the late 2000s on transforming Saadiyat Island into a 'Cultural District' featuring numerous museums. To attract attention, Abu Dhabi has forged institutional and symbolic ties with Western brands, such as branches of the Louvre (opened in 2017) and the upcoming Guggenheim museum (scheduled for completion in 2025), alongside museums dedicated to national history and ecology that are still under construction. Saadiyat Island boasts iconic architecture by prominent architects, surpassing even Dubai in some respects. Integrating global culture with local traditions, these architectural structures blend indigenous building techniques and styles, such as Bedouin tents, wind towers, mosque domes and narrow alleyways (Wippel, 2023). The

island also includes exclusive residential compounds, tourism resorts, shopping facilities, golf courses, and an eco-reserve, presenting an image of a tropical paradise and an Oriental dream. However, it also highlights stark inequalities, symbolizing a spatial divide between a transnational creative and affluent class and the globally marginalized and poor (Wippel, 2023).

Abu Dhabi's leadership recognized the importance of crafting a distinct city image, one that serves as an appealing alternative to Dubai while complementing the concrete changes outlined in the Plan 2030 (National Vision for comprehensive transformation, focusing on societal adaptation to 21st-century challenges and economic diversification). This strategic approach was transformed into a branding initiative focused on gaining global recognition (Zeineddine, 2017). The first critical milestone came in the late 2000s when the Office of the Abu Dhabi Brand was established (Zeineddine, 2017), which introduced Abu Dhabi's first slogan and logo. The slogan 'travelers welcome' has been prominently integrated into local policies and marketing campaigns across various platforms, shaping Abu Dhabi's new identity distinctly different from Dubai's. Abu Dhabi is portrayed as a city renowned for cultural events, exemplified by the establishment of branches of world-renowned museums like The Louvre, and as a serene sunny destination that hosts prestigious international events such as the Formula One Grand Prix. This strategic positioning contrasts sharply with Dubai (Balakrishnan, 2009), known for its extravagant pursuits of Guinness World Records and its reputation as a city of superlatives (Beauregard, 2003).

The Office of Brand Marketing in Abu Dhabi (OBAD) focuses on distinguishing the emirate of Abu Dhabi from its neighbor, Dubai, historically seen as more conservative, while Dubai is renowned as a city of superlatives (Beauregard, 2003). The objective is to redefine Abu Dhabi's identity as 'the nation's livable, cultural, and sustainable capital'. OBAD's primary responsibilities include assisting both private and governmental sectors in embodying the emirate's core values and vision statement, and fostering collaboration to support branding strategies. The logo symbolizes the 'traveler's welcome' initiative, integrating elements of the desert, sea, heritage, and urban life into Abu Dhabi's identity shaping. The proposed logo prominently features a traditional fingerprint, designed to resonate with both local heritage and appeal to international audiences (AlOwais, 2019).



Figure 20. The brand identity of Abu Dhabi (source: AlOwais, 2019)

### **3- Kuwait City**

The vision for city branding in Kuwait City remains ambiguous in both literature and recent publications. This lack of clarity may be attributed to the scarcity of publications specifically addressing branding efforts for Kuwait City, particularly from sources outside the city itself. Authorities within Kuwait City convey limited and indirect messages and visions, primarily confined to their respective domains. Conversely, branding initiatives, particularly large-scale urban and real estate developments, have achieved notable success despite some projects being criticized for their perceived overestimation, such as Madinat Al Harir or Khabar City (Helmy, 2008).

The natural setting of Kuwait City is among its most valuable assets in terms of branding. Situated at the northern tip of Kuwait's territory, overlooking Kuwait Bay and surrounded by the sea to the north and east, it boasts a picturesque location. The city is well-connected by land, with roads linking to the first Ring Road that serves its urban structure. Positioned at the intersection of north-south expressways and east-west ring roads, Kuwait City is seamlessly integrated into the metropolitan area, facilitating its marketing for various purposes and target audiences. However, Kuwait City's harsh climate—characterized by a dry desert environment, extremely hot summers, brief cool winters, and occasional dust storms—poses significant challenges for its management and development (Helmy, 2008).

Marketing new urban projects in Kuwait utilizes multiple media channels to convey various messages, primarily focusing on prestigious and large-scale developments in shopping, entertainment, tourism, and business sectors, among others. These marketing efforts rely heavily on creating compelling visual effects and employing impressive slogans to attract potential customers and engage the local population in envisioning themselves within these new developments. In some instances, branding is leveraged to influence decision-making processes in favor of these projects. However, the branding of urban projects in Kuwait City lacks a cohesive and integrated vision for the city's future development. There is a notable absence of a unified strategy that comprehensively guides and coordinates these branding initiatives towards a shared long-term urban development goal (Helmy, 2008).

Similar to other Gulf cities, Kuwait City is witnessing a trend towards constructing fantasy architecture designed by renowned international architects. Projects like Madinat Al Hareer exemplify this trend, particularly in the design of its iconic super tower. Many other large-scale developments also involve international consulting firms, often competing to commission well-known architects celebrated for their successful fantasy architecture, such as the Burj Al Arab in Dubai by the London-based Atkins consultants. As a result, signature architecture plays an increasingly significant role in shaping and promoting Kuwait City's image, emphasizing its exceptional and futuristic aesthetic. Notably, Kuwait City itself lacks a specific logo, and there are few logos representing institutions responsible for the city's branding efforts. However, the municipality does have its own logo, which incorporates key symbols of the city such as the Water Towers, a distinctive skyline, and symbolic trees (Helmy, 2008).

#### 4- Cities of Qatar

Since the late 2000s, Qatar has strategically pursued a branding initiative akin to Dubai's, blending elements of catching up and carving out specific niches with a clear and proactive agenda. Under the leadership of Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, Qatar initiated its international branding by positioning itself as a pivotal diplomatic mediator and dialogue facilitator amidst the myriad conflicts of the Middle East. Concurrently, it deftly maintained relationships with major global players including the USA, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran, and radical Islamist factions (Wippel, 2023). Qatar leveraged its stature by hosting significant international political gatherings, from the WTO Doha Round in 2001 to COP 18 in 2012, solidifying its role on the global stage. In a calculated media strategy, Qatar launched Al Jazeera as a regional and global broadcasting powerhouse, challenging Western media dominance and becoming an influential platform for Qatari narratives (Wippel, 2023). Given its small geographic and demographic footprint as a microstate, Qatar's policy-driven branding and soft power tactics emerged as essential tools for securing international legitimacy, raising global awareness, and asserting its indispensable role in global affairs (Wippel, 2023).

Qatar has pursued a branding strategy focused on demonstrating competitiveness in specific niches as a world-class performer. One prominent approach has been the establishment of recognized national brands and direct investments in reputable international companies. Qatar has also embraced a culture of architectural spectacle and themed urban districts, elevating these as primary forms of communication (Wippel, 2023). Doha, in particular, has created a striking skyline with impressive high-rises adorned with pseudo-Arabic motifs. It has developed hyperreal shopping centers like the Villagio Mall, featuring a Venetian-style Canal Grande with gondolas, and crafted The Pearl, an artificial island marketed as 'The Riviera Arabia.' Adjacent to these developments, the Katara Cultural Village serves as a platform for showcasing arts and crafts from around the world, while the renovated Souk Waqif has become a major tourist draw, albeit in a contemporary form. The Msheireb Downtown flagship project, nearing completion, emphasizes a traditional Arab city layout and sustainability principles, mirroring efforts like the ongoing Lusail City development. Education City has attracted prestigious international universities and research institutions, further enhancing Qatar's global academic profile. Culturally, Qatar has embarked on a significant cultural investment initiative, spearheaded by a series of flagship museums. The endeavor began with the iconic Museum of Islamic Art, which opened its doors in 2008, showcasing Qatar's rich Islamic heritage. This was followed by the establishment of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in 2010 (Wippel, 2023). Unlike its regional counterpart Abu Dhabi, Qatar's cultural focus leans towards historical and contemporary Islamic artifacts and regional art, aligning closely with its nation-building narratives. However, many of these urban megastructures are perceived as exclusive enclaves serving branding objectives and catering primarily to elite interests, rather than benefiting the broader population (Wippel, 2023).

The transformations Qatar has undergone in recent years highlight the strategic efforts aimed at elevating its regional and global significance. Qatar's branding strategy not only focuses on enhancing international awareness but also aligns closely with economic objectives (Hazime,

2011). Central to Qatar's branding and physical development strategy are several key pillars. These include the influential Al Jazeera Broadcasting Network, robust tourism strategies, pivotal economic growth initiatives, the expansion of Qatar Airways, substantial investments in higher education, the redevelopment of Doha International Airport, and positioning the capital city, Doha, as a premier international event destination (Hazime, 2011).

Cultural attractions, particularly museums, have become central to Qatar's urban development strategies and serve significant economic objectives. Qatar has gained international recognition in the art world through the development of several world-class museums. These include the Qatar National Museum (expanded by the French architect Jean Nouvel), the Weaponry Museum, Zubara Fort, the Ethnographic Museum, Al Wakrah Museum, and Al Khor Museum. Future projects in planning or under construction include the National Library (designed by Arata Isozaki and scheduled to open by 2010), the Museum of Photography, and the Arab Museum of Modern Art (expected to open within the next three years). The Museum of Islamic Art, inaugurated in 2008 and designed by renowned architect I.M. Pei, stands as the flagship project of the Qatar Museum Authority (Hazime, 2011).

Qatar also focuses on branding itself in the field of sports, a common strategy among Gulf states. The promotion of competitive sports has become a key component of place branding, with Qatar establishing the Aspire Academy in 2004 to support its global aspirations in this area (Wippel, 2023).

## **5- Cities of Iran**

Across the Persian Gulf, Iran's branding efforts have received relatively little scrutiny. Since its establishment, the Islamic Republic has faced significant global criticism and been labeled a 'rogue state' in many parts of the world. However, similar to other authoritarian regimes, Iran has utilized cultural diplomacy to mitigate tensions over recent decades. Through its acclaimed cinema, poetry, theater, and fine arts, Iran has maintained a reputation as a vibrant cultural hub. Despite often embodying dissent, these cultural activities bolster the country's image, particularly in contrast to the Arab Gulf states, which historically have had less cultural engagement (Wippel, 2023). Iranian cinema, in particular, including films from the diaspora, has gained international acclaim and earned numerous awards at global film festivals following some easing of censorship. Conversely, these films have also contributed to the distinct branding of these festivals. For instance, the Berlinale has leveraged its focus on Iranian cinema since the mid-2000s to position itself as a politically engaged festival, originally established in the 1950s to showcase the values of the 'free world' and now highlighting nonconformist films and the personal brands of persecuted filmmakers (Wippel, 2023). Dubai has emerged as a global hub for exhibiting and selling Iranian artwork, serving as a meeting place for Iranian artists from both within Iran and in exile, facilitating interactions with critics and buyers. Domestically, Tehran's art scene has flourished, attracting growing interest from international observers. This includes the city's distinctive murals that adorn buildings throughout its urban landscape. These public art installations, whether sanctioned or commissioned by the municipality, contribute to a branding-like campaign. Modern murals, billboards, and tile works in Iran not only serve as prominent symbols of



Iranian identity but also play a role in challenging and countering negative perceptions of the country internationally (Wippel, 2023). While Iranian authorities have not pursued a comprehensive nation branding strategy, elements of place branding have emerged in tourism and other sectors (Wippel, 2023).

When comparing the branding strategies adopted by many Iranian cities with those examined in prior studies of Germany, the Netherlands, and China, it becomes evident that religious, cultural, and natural features play a significantly more prominent role in the self-images of Iranian cities. There is also a stronger emphasis on historical narratives. This doesn't imply a disregard for future economic development, but such aspirations are primarily evident in cities that are already economically prosperous (Noori & De Jong, 2018).

According to Noori & De Jong (2018), Iranian megacities can be categorized into five types based on their brand identity choices:

1- Cities that integrate a rich tapestry of cultural, religious and advanced technological facilities. They celebrate their natural and cultural landmarks, imbued with Islamic significance, while also striving to engage in cutting-edge innovations that bolster their economic prospects for the future (Noori & De Jong, 2018).

2- Cities adopting a modern, multicultural profile, positioning themselves at the intersection of various migration and ethnic streams. They derive strength and character from diversity without heavily relying on traditional elements (Noori & De Jong, 2018).

3- Cities with a strong industrial and manufacturing base, particularly in petroleum and chemicals. While they express interest in diversifying into tourism, the feasibility of achieving this goal is currently limited (Noori & De Jong, 2018).

4- Cities endowed with abundant natural and agricultural resources, often described in poetic terms. However, they maintain a relatively low profile in terms of industry and services (Noori & De Jong, 2018).

5- Cities characterized by a weak economic profile and a predominantly negative self-perception. Their brand identity focuses primarily on practical features like transportation accessibility, lacking strong connections to either historical heritage or future ambitions (Noori & De Jong, 2018).

In summary, the relevance of these examples lies in their varied approaches to urban branding and development strategies, offering valuable insights for the case study of NEOM. By analyzing the successes and failures of these cities, this thesis aims to identify key strategies that could be applicable to NEOM's branding and development. Similarities such as the emphasis on sustainability and technological innovation, as well as differences in political and economic contexts, provide a rich comparative framework. This analysis will inform the subsequent chapters, helping to discern which strategies might be most effective for NEOM and how they align with the broader goals of Saudi Vision 2030. The lessons learned from these case studies will guide the exploration of potential pathways for NEOM to achieve its ambitious objectives, while avoiding the pitfalls encountered by other cities in the region.

# 5 • Urban branding in NEOM: Scientific study

## 5-1- Introduction

In this chapter, the context of urban branding within the case study of NEOM will be thoroughly examined. This chapter aims to provide an in-depth analysis of how NEOM's image is being branded and the strategic efforts undertaken to position it as a futuristic and sustainable city. Furthermore, this chapter will identify the target groups for NEOM. Understanding the demographics and psychographics of these groups is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of NEOM's branding strategies.

The chapter aims to shed light on the successes and challenges of NEOM's urban branding, providing insights into the intricacies of branding a large-scale, ambitious urban project in the contemporary global landscape.

## 5-2- NEOM Image Branding

Saudi Arabia has undertaken a significant effort to transform the image of its cities. Historically, the country was often associated with stereotypical desert landscapes, featuring camels, traditional Bedouin tents, and expansive oil production facilities. However, in recent years, Saudi Arabia has embarked on ambitious urban development and branding initiatives aimed at redefining its urban identity. By leveraging projects like NEOM and Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia is shifting its focus towards creating modern, sustainable, and technologically advanced urban environments. These initiatives are part of a broader strategy to diversify the economy, reduce dependence on oil, and position the country as a global hub for innovation and tourism. The rebranding of Saudi cities involves not only physical infrastructure development but also strategic marketing efforts to change public perceptions and attract international investment and tourism.

As noted by Helmy, since the 1970s, Saudi Arabia has seized opportunities to portray its cities in a positive light, marking significant strides in economic growth, urban development, and evolving cultural and political landscapes. Rapid economic advancement transformed Saudi cities into some of the wealthiest regions globally within a short span, characterized by architectural and urban developments often termed as 'oil urbanization.' The demographic structure also underwent significant shifts, driven by the influx of foreign labor attracted by lucrative job opportunities. Urban branding during this period was bolstered by a robust economy and national projects aimed at projecting an image of progress and prosperity. These efforts collectively enhanced the appeal of Saudi cities as desirable places to live, visit, or conduct business for international tourists, investors, and entrepreneurs (Helmy, 2008).

As outlined by Aly, as a branded image, NEOM has emerged in a global landscape where "new cities" are proliferating. Within the same region, the Dubai model has set a precedent

and has since been emulated worldwide. The urban development of Dubai has been academically analyzed as a model and process of "Dubai-fication," representing a neoliberal trend and brand in urban development. Some studies have even delved into the "Dubai Effect." In this competitive arena, NEOM is positioned as more than just another new city or a Dubai replica. It is portrayed as an exceptional, futuristic city that surpasses the Dubai model, heralding a post-Dubai era (Aly, 2019).

When discussing city branding, it involves creating an urban imaginary and identity that embodies emotions and perceptions about the image and lifestyle of a place (Helmy, 2008). A city's functionality must encompass various aspects such as employment, industry, housing, public transportation, recreational amenities, as well as the overall experience and aesthetics of the city. This holistic approach serves as a crucial consideration for the Saudi Kingdom when deliberating on the establishment of NEOM, requiring strategic planning based on the prevailing economic, social, and political landscape. Branding NEOM is a pivotal initial step aimed at attracting investors and the creative class to this monumental project. While tourism discussions may not be relevant at this stage since the city has yet to be constructed, it remains an inevitable progression in the future (Frag, 2019).

The promotional video for NEOM features an envisioned urban landscape for the ambitious project, showcasing a variety of unique locations. Among these, Singapore's Gardens by the Bay stands out as a prominent example, offering a glimpse into what NEOM could potentially resemble. Singapore serves as a leading model of sustainable smart cities, demonstrating excellence in urban design and the creation of efficient urban environments (Attia et al, 2019). NEOM aims to become the safest, most efficient, forward-thinking, and premier destination for both work and living (Attia et al, 2019). In the case of NEOM, there is no existing city, rather NEOM represents a visionary concept of a future city, distinct from existing urban centers. It envisions a livable environment where residents can experience a healthier, happier lifestyle, free from stress, and with ample time to prioritize meaningful aspects of life (Attia et al, 2019).

Aly describes NEOM as a city that embodies and sells the concept of "the new future." As stated on the official website, NEOM is "where we live the future, as we create the future." The city aims to pioneer the future across eleven sectors, including energy, water, and biotech (figure 21). NEOM promises advanced technology that shapes the future, combined with an idyllic lifestyle and excellent economic opportunities. This vision is particularly appealing to the creative class and dreamers, who are seen as seeking such innovative and idealistic environments (Aly, 2019).



Figure 21. The new future (source: Aly, 2019)

Two primary tools have been instrumental in branding NEOM: the official website and the launch event. The well-designed website, "neom.com," offers a comprehensive overview of the city, including its vision, mission, objectives, and supporters (Aly, 2019).

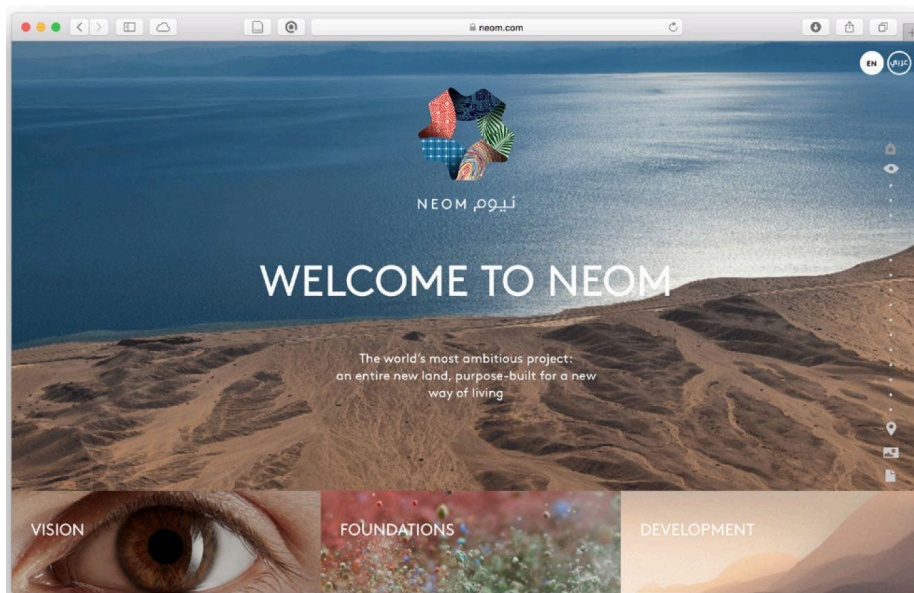


Figure 22. Website of the NEOM (source: Aly, 2019)

### **5-3- NEOM Target Groups**

According to Attia and colleagues, in NEOM, the envisioned community will integrate various elements, including traditional Saudi values, religious beliefs, and the objectives outlined in the 2030 Saudi Vision. This community will also reflect the aspirations and dynamics of the young Saudi population and encompass progressive aspects such as women's rights. Furthermore, NEOM aims to attract a diverse array of new residents, including robots, creative professionals, and international investors. These varied groups are expected to collectively influence and define the social fabric and future identity of NEOM. The project's target population includes both current Saudi citizens and new demographics, reflecting an intersection of tradition and modernity. The anticipated community of NEOM is envisioned as a blend of local culture and innovative elements designed to create a unique, forward-thinking environment.

#### **1- Saudi's Society**

The people of the Kingdom have undergone significant transformations in cultural, political, economic, and social aspects, marked by distinct pre- and post-oil, with distinct periods before and after the oil discovery. In the 1970s, before the discovery of oil, King Mohammed Ibn Saud and Mohammed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab established the National Saudi State (Attia et al, 2019). Historical accounts attribute to them the establishment of numerous conservative principles that still govern the kingdom today, including the emphasis on men's education and the requirement for women to have a male guardian for educational scholarships or travel (Attia et al, 2019). Recent political decisions, coinciding with the launch of NEOM, include allowing women to drive and a shift in Saudi Arabia's approach to Islam, moving towards

moderation over Wahhabism. There is also an expressed desire to open up to the world. Promoters of the NEOM project are banking on the perspectives of the new generation, which holds a different vision for the future (Farag, 2019).

## **2- Robotics and Future Technologies**

The Saudi leadership envisions NEOM as a city where robots outnumber humans, positioning it as a futuristic hub reminiscent of scenes from science fiction movies, where robots perform all tasks with precision, sincerity, cleanliness, and order. This branding aims to present NEOM as a cutting-edge, innovative city. During the NEOM conference, Masayoshi Son emphasized that integrating robots into daily life would improve overall well-being, allowing people to focus on what truly matters, and ultimately granting Saudi Arabia a leadership role in the future (Farag, 2019).

## **3- Creative Class population**

The term 'Creative Class,' introduced by Richard Florida, refers to individuals whose economic value lies in innovating new ideas, technology, or creative content within a specific domain. This group, which includes professionals in fields like science, engineering, arts, and design, is seen as a catalyst for economic development and urban growth. Florida posits that cities attracting the Creative Class through a high quality of life, cultural diversity, and technological infrastructure are more likely to thrive.

NEOM, a world-scale project, aims to become a hub for advancing robotic technology, significantly impacting both its population and humanity at large. The development strategy involves substantial investment in robotics, drawing in robot engineers to pioneer next-generation technologies (Farag, 2019). According to the official website of NEOM, Mohammed Bin Salman recognizes the formidable task of transforming a visionary project into reality. He has proposed that NEOM operate as an independent economic zone with its own legal and regulatory framework to attract global investors swiftly.

Nevertheless, the integration of Florida's Creative Class theory into NEOM's development strategy warrants critical examination. Aly and other critics argue that the theory's broad application and purported economic benefits are overstated and align with neoliberal policies that prioritize elite interests over inclusive growth. They contend that this focus on the Creative Class fosters inequality, overlooking the essential roles of the working and service classes that support the creative economy. Furthermore, the notion that the Creative Class prioritizes lifestyle over job opportunities has been contested, suggesting a need for a more nuanced approach (Aly, 2019).

In summary, NEOM's city branding has emphasized its vision of a techno-utopian future, promising high quality of life and economic opportunities. However, it has provided scant details on practical aspects such as city planning, the planners involved, or the target population size. This emphasis on a futuristic vision leaves the concrete details largely undefined. While creating a fantasy is a common strategy in city branding, the level of ambiguity surrounding the actual plans for NEOM is particularly notable.

# 6 • Empirical Analysis in NEOM project, the city of the Line

## 6-1- Introduction

In this chapter, I conducted a comprehensive analysis of the data collected to discover insights into the urban branding and development strategies of mega projects like the Line. Our approach integrates visual analysis of photos and videos, coding and analysis of interview transcripts and analysis of collected documents to provide an analysis of the complexities and implications of such large-scale urban developments. The visual material analyzed includes photographs and videos of interviews sourced from official websites, as well as promotional materials related to the Line project.

A visual-semiotic approach was used to analyze photos of the Line project, as visual representations play a crucial role in shaping public perception about urban mega projects. To understand the impact and narrative constructed by these visuals, I analyzed a selection of photos and videos associated with the Line. This visual analysis aims to discern how visual media is strategically used to construct and promote a desired brand image for the Line and how this image aligns with or diverges from the practical realities and challenges discussed in the interviews. The photos and videos, sourced from the architecture websites and platforms discussing the project, include references to their respective sources under each image.

Furthermore, the analysis draws connections to the literature review conducted in chapter four. Key indicators and themes identified in the literature are used as analytical lenses. By comparing our findings with these established indicators, I can assess how the Line's branding strategies align with or diverge from expectations and previously documented case studies. Additionally, press data from websites and other media outlets are reviewed and analyzed to supplement our understanding. This enables us to capture public perceptions and media portrayals of the project, adding another layer to our analysis. Moreover, the analysis includes an examination of video interviews with experts. These video talks provide valuable insights and expert opinions on the Line project, contributing to a deeper understanding of its branding strategies. This comparative approach, incorporating various data sources, provides a richer context for understanding the Line's place within the broader landscape of urban mega projects and their branding practices.

To gain deeper insights into the perceptions, motivations, and critiques of urban branding and development strategies, I conducted interviews with key experts in the field. The interview transcripts are coded and analyzed to identify recurring themes and patterns. This process involves carefully transcribing the interviews and conducting an initial reading to familiarize ourselves with the content. I applied open coding to label significant statements and segments of the text that relate to our research questions, identifying key concepts, ideas, and recurring

phrases. This thematic analysis helps in organizing the data into coherent categories that reflect the experts' perspectives. This synthesis helps to highlight the strategic use of urban branding, the environmental and social implications, and the challenges in balancing visionary ambitions with practical realities. Through this analysis, I seek to contribute to the broader discourse on sustainable and socially responsible urban development, providing valuable insights into the complexities and implications of urban mega projects.

## 6-2- Analysis of Photos



Figure 23. The Line (source: Designyoutrust.com)



Figure 24. The Line (source: Archilovers.com)



Figure 25. The Line (source: Archilovers.com)

The renderings 23, 24 and 25, display a notable linear structure that cuts across the diverse landscape, excellently encapsulating the "City of the Line" concept. The thin, straight line of the city structure contrasts dramatically with the organic shapes of the coastline, desert, and water bodies. The structure's linearity conveys concepts of progress and innovative planning. The aerial perspective highlights the massive scale of the project, spanning from coast to coast across varied terrains. This view reinforces the project's grand vision and technological capability, suggesting an ability to overcome natural barriers and unify diverse landscapes under a single, coherent urban concept. While the linear city appears to minimize its footprint, its presence nonetheless represents a significant intervention in the natural landscape, raising questions about the balance between development and conservation in such an ambitious project.





Figure 26. The Line (source: Designyoutrust.com)

This aerial view of the "City of the Line\_image number 26\_ powerfully illustrates the interplay between the natural environment and advanced human-made structures. The image is divided into distinct zones: the sea, the sandy desert, and the linear city structure cutting through both. The linear city appears as two parallel, reflective walls bisecting the landscape. This stark geometric form contrasts sharply with the organic shapes of the coastline and desert vegetation. However, within the walls, a strip of lush greenery is seen. This visual representation communicates NEOM's ambitious vision of harmonizing environmental sustainability with innovative urban development. The city structure doesn't just exist alongside nature; it appears to create a new ecosystem within itself, literally carving out a green space in the desert. The image also implies mastery over harsh natural conditions, with the city providing a habitable space that connects the desert to the sea. However, this rendering also highlights the tension between the promoted environmental values and the massive transformation required of the natural landscape, as the linear structure dramatically alters the existing ecosystem.

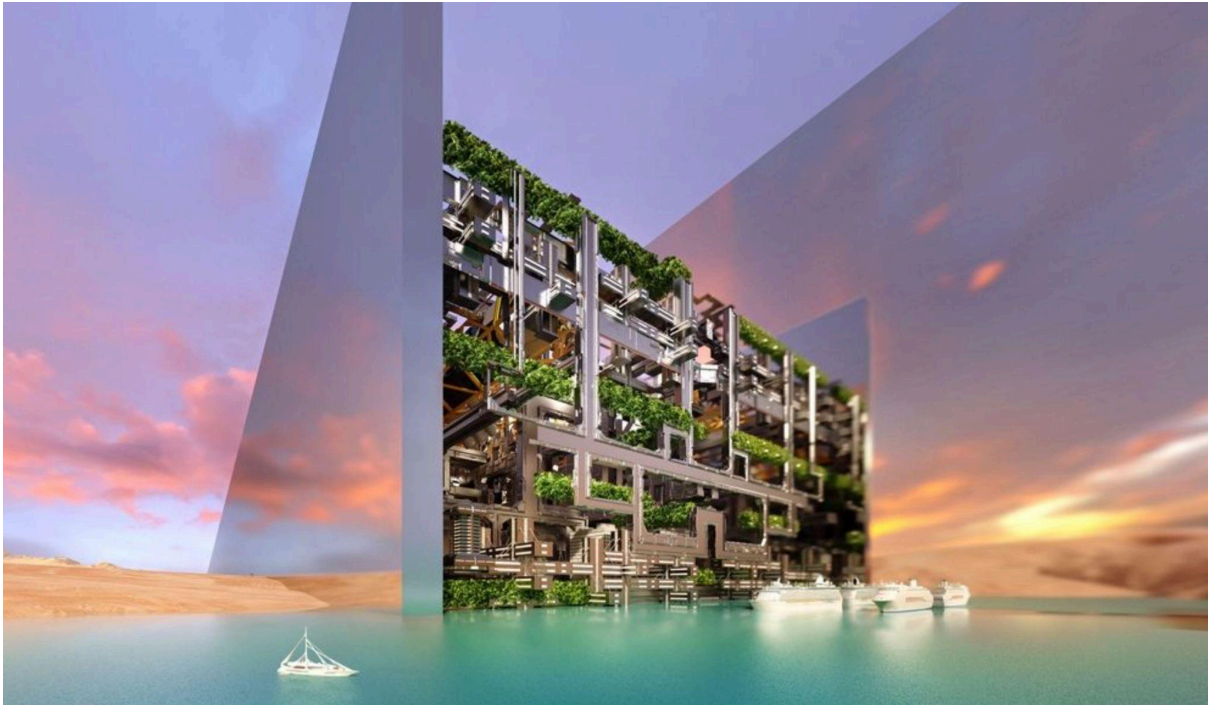


Figure 27. The Line (source: Geotech.com)

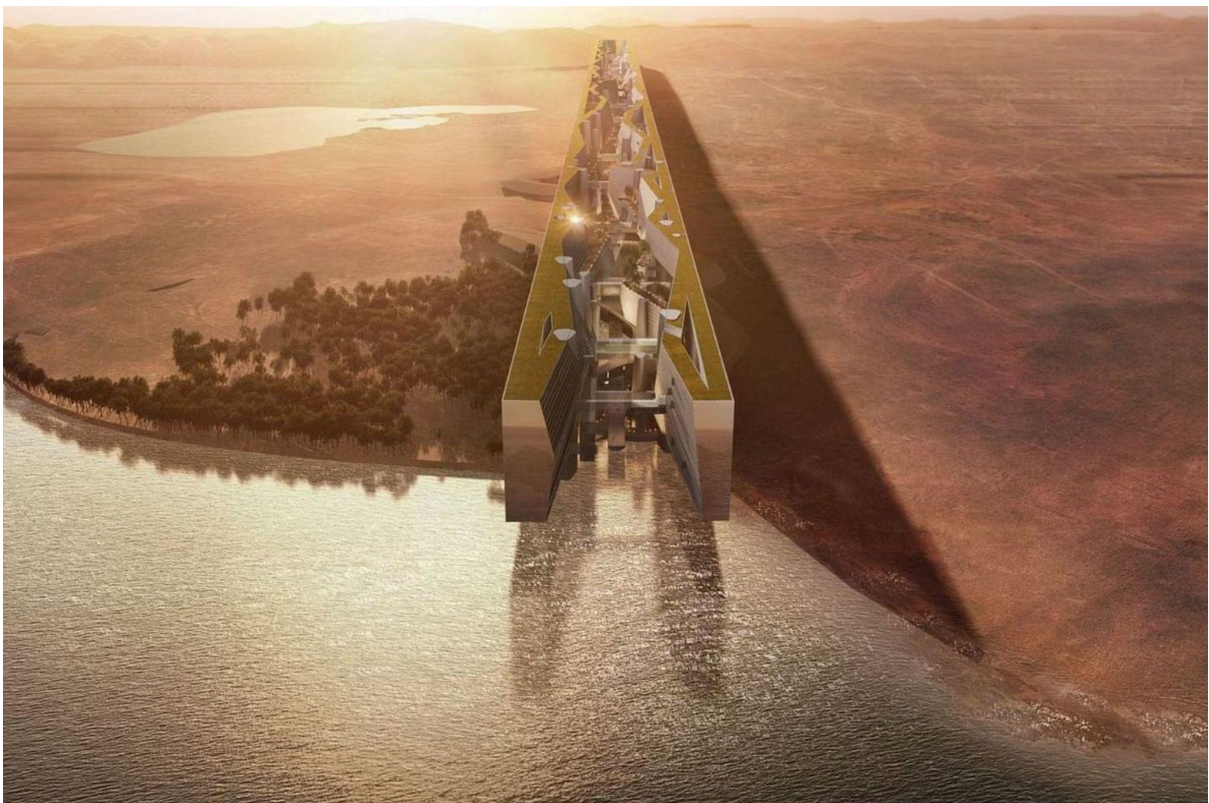


Figure 28 The Line (source: Archinect.com)



Figure 29. The Red Sea side of NEOM's, The Line starts with a luxury yacht port (source: Venturebeat.com)

All images number 27 to 29 strongly exemplify the juxtaposing nature and technology. In Images 27 and 28, a striking contrast between the harsh desert environment and the futuristic architectural structure can be seen. The building appears as a vertical oasis, with lush greenery integrated into its modular design. This visual representation communicates the Line's vision of creating sustainable, livable spaces in challenging environments. The structure's reflection in the water and the small boat in the foreground emphasize the scale of the project. Image 29 further reinforces this juxtaposition, showing a sleek, modern cityscape alongside a marina full of luxury yachts. The vertical city structure features hanging gardens and green spaces, again emphasizing the integration of nature into the built environment. The contrast between the arid landscape visible in the distance and the water-centric lifestyle depicted in the foreground underscores the transformative aspiration of the project. All images employ vibrant colors and dramatic lighting to create a sense of energy and vitality, aligning with your observation about the use of color in the project's visual branding. The scale of the structures in relation to the boats and yachts also communicates the monumental nature of the development, suggesting a reimagining of urban living on an unprecedented scale. These renderings effectively convey NEOM's narrative of pioneering sustainable, technologically advanced urban spaces in harmony with nature, while also highlighting the luxurious and aspirational aspects of the project.



Figure 30. The Line (source: Archinect.com)

The image number 30, starkly contrasts the harsh desert landscape with the futuristic, linear city structure. This pronounced contrast between the barren, natural environment and the sleek, technological marvel of the city emphasizes the Line's vision of harmonizing environmental sustainability with innovative urban development. The linear design of the city is the most prominent feature of this image. While not as vivid as some renderings might be, the image uses lighting effects to create a sense of energy and vibrancy. The sunlight reflecting off the structure and the green of the stadium field provide pops of color against the desert backdrop, enhancing the aspirational, hyper-modern messaging. But this image doesn't show any human figures, despite featuring a large stadium that would typically be associated with crowds. This absence reinforces the theoretical nature of the rendering and focuses attention on the architectural and environmental aspects of the project. The inclusion of a large stadium within the linear city structure suggests an emphasis on entertainment and communal spaces, potentially aiming to showcase the project's ability to provide comprehensive urban amenities. The aerial perspective of the image emphasizes the massive scale of the project in relation to the surrounding desert. The reflective surfaces of the structure create an interplay of light and shadow, suggesting transparency and integration with the natural environment, while also emphasizing the technological advancement of the design.



Figure 31. The Line (source: Archinect.com)

The image 31 shows a juxtaposition of futuristic, towering structures with natural elements. Trees and vegetation are integrated into the urban landscape, visible at ground level and on elevated platforms. This reinforces the narrative of harmonizing environmental sustainability with innovative urban development. The rendering employs a striking use of light, with warm golden hues contrasting against cool blues and silvers. Glowing elements and reflective surfaces create a sense of energy and vibrancy, aligning with your observation of "around-the-clock activity" in the envisioned cityscapes. The architectural design is dominated by extreme verticality, with towering structures that seem to defy conventional building forms. The angular, intersecting lines of the buildings create a sense of innovation, clearly embodying the "city of the line" concept. Human figures, though small and relatively few compared to the monumental scale of the environment, are engaged in various activities. The image highlights different typologies of urban life such as artistic and creative endeavors,

nightlife, admiring the architecture, and leisurely strolling. These activities suggest a vibrant and dynamic urban culture, emphasizing the city's aim to foster diverse social interactions and experiences. The low-angle view makes the buildings appear to soar impossibly high, reinforcing themes of ambition and pushing boundaries. The inclusion of what appears to be a body of water or a reflective surface at the bottom of the image adds another layer to the nature/technology interplay, potentially symbolizing the project's claims of sustainability in a desert environment.



Figure 32. The Line (source: me construction news.com)

The image number 32, strongly exemplifies the verticality and linearity of the structures. The rendering showcases a vertical cityscape that embodies the "City of the Line" concept in a striking visual manner. The composition is dominated by towering structures that create a canyon-like corridor, drawing the eye towards a central focal point. This extreme verticality is further emphasized by the reflective green buildings in the distance, which appear to stretch impossibly high into the sky. The linear pathway of water cutting through the center reinforces the idea of efficiency and innovative urban planning. This architectural design visually communicates themes of ambition, futurism, and a reimagining of traditional urban spaces. The verticality suggests a solution to land scarcity and population density, while also creating a sense of awe and monumentality. The image effectively conveys the Line's vision of a pioneering, vertically-oriented city that pushes the boundaries of conventional urban design. However, as you noted in your analysis, this hyper-stylized representation may create a disconnect between the aspirational concept and the practical realities of inhabiting such an extreme environment. Human figures, if present at all, are barely discernible, further accentuating the overwhelming scale of the urban landscape. This extreme disparity in scale between the human-sized elements and the gargantuan structures may also subtly highlight

the potential disconnect between the project's ambitious vision and the lived experience of its future inhabitants.



Figure 33. The Line (source: me construction news.com)

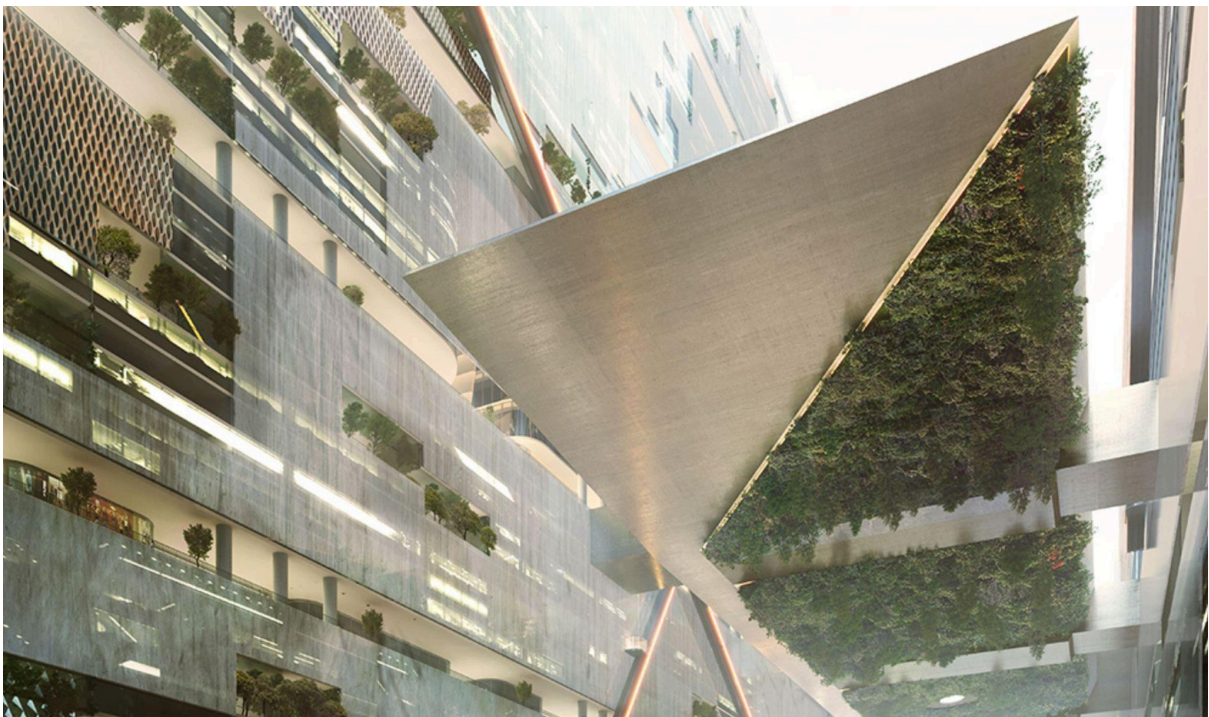


Figure 34. The Line (source: me construction news.com)

Figures 33 and 34, the integration of green spaces within the towering structures highlights the project's commitment to harmonizing environmental sustainability with advanced urban development. The green terraces and hanging gardens suggest an emphasis on incorporating natural elements into the high-tech urban environment, portraying a balance between nature

and technology. The extreme vertical structures and linear design dominate the visual composition. The towering buildings and geometric lines emphasize the project's innovative approach to urban planning. This verticality and linearity suggest themes of efficiency, order, and futuristic design. The presence of greenery within the vertical structures underscores the project's ambition to create a harmonious and eco-friendly urban environment. However, the stylized and highly controlled aesthetic might raise questions about the practical implementation and livability of such a meticulously designed space.



Figure 35. The Line (source: me construction news.com)

According to image 35, the use of vivid neon lights and colorful illumination creates a visually striking environment, symbolizing energy, dynamism, and modernity. The vibrant lighting highlights the innovative and futuristic aspects of the project, suggesting a city that never sleeps, bustling with activity and technological advancements. The extreme vertical structures and linear design are central motifs in this image. The towering buildings and the linear layout of the cityscape emphasize the project's futuristic and efficient urban planning. This verticality and linearity communicate themes of order, progress, and a forward-thinking approach to urban development. The visual codes in this rendering aim to construct an image of the Line as a pioneering, high-tech urban environment that integrates advanced technology with innovative design. The dramatic use of lighting and the imposing vertical structures reinforce the project's ambition to redefine urban living in a sustainable and cutting-edge manner. However, the absence of visible human activity within this vibrant and highly structured environment might suggest a certain detachment from the practical realities of everyday life in such a futuristic setting.





Figure 36. The Line (source: inews.co.uk)

The image 36 prominently showcases a blend of nature and technology. Trees and greenery are interspersed with futuristic buildings and advanced transportation systems, suggesting a balanced coexistence between the natural environment and human innovation. The vibrant colors, particularly the bright blues and greens, and the well-lit, clear skies, evoke a sense of vitality and optimism. The use of these colors amplifies the image's aspirational tone, emphasizing a lively, energetic, and futuristic city that never sleeps. The verticality is evident in the tall, sleek buildings that dominate the skyline, and the linear arrangement of transportation systems, including roads and futuristic vehicles, highlights the city's orderly design. Despite depicting a busy urban scene, there is a noticeable lack of individual human figures. This absence lends a somewhat artificial or idealized quality to the rendering, suggesting that the image represents a conceptual vision rather than a lived reality. It underscores the notion that the project is still in a visionary phase, awaiting real-world realization.

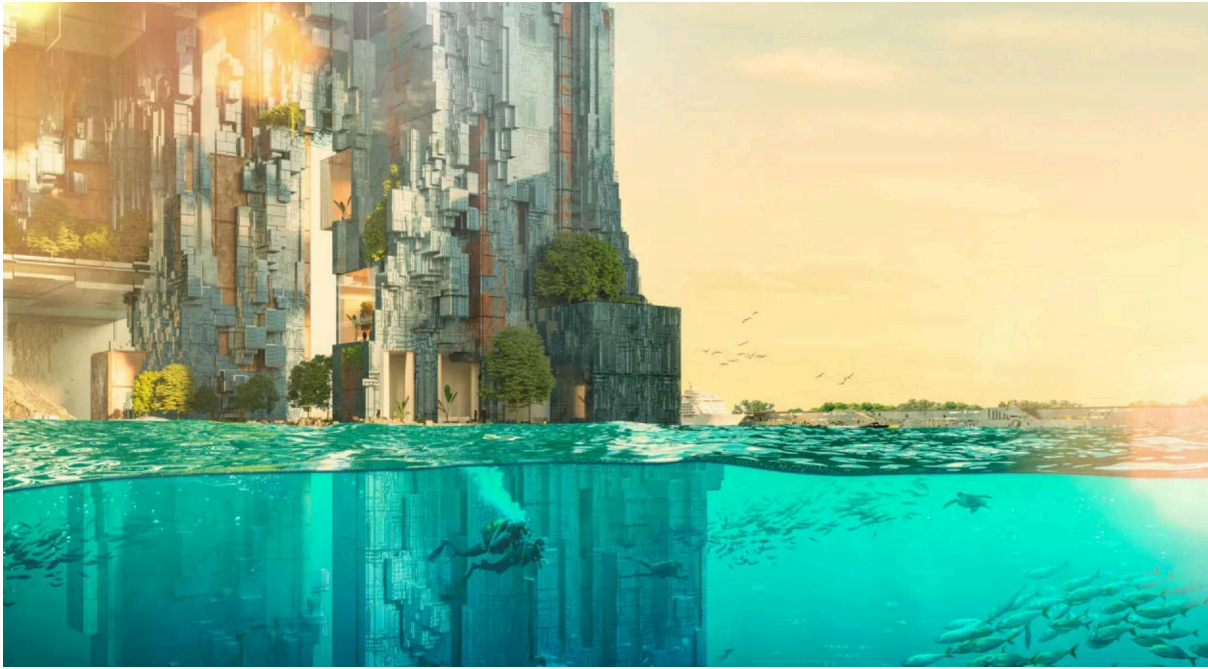


Figure 37. The Line (source: inews.co.uk)

Like other photos, the image number 37 shows the integration of urban architecture with natural elements. The cityscape emerges directly from the turquoise waters, with glorious greenery incorporated into the structure. This visual metaphor communicates the Line's vision of harmonizing environmental sustainability with innovative urban development. The use of color is striking in this image. The vivid turquoise of the water contrasts with the warm, golden tones of the sky, creating a sense of energy and vibrancy. The interplay of light on the buildings and water surface adds to the dynamic, aspirational quality of the scene. Although there are hints of human activity (scuba divers in the water), the image largely focuses on the architectural and natural elements, consistent with previous observation about the absence of prominent human figures in these renderings. The underwater perspective adds a unique dimension to the project's vision, suggesting a fully immersive environment that extends beyond traditional urban boundaries. The integration of marine life (fish schools) with the urban structure implies a harmonious coexistence between the built environment and aquatic ecosystems. The complex, modular design of the buildings, with protruding elements and integrated greenery, suggests a reimagining of urban living spaces that blur the lines between indoor and outdoor, artificial and natural.

## 6-2-1- Visual Semiotics Analysis

The Line represents a transformative vision for urban development, encapsulating sustainability, innovation, and human-centric design. Its distinct characteristics, including a linear layout and commitment to environmental stewardship, redefine conventional notions of city planning. Through cultural richness, social integration, and economic diversification, The Line fosters a vibrant and inclusive community. With iconic architecture, seamless urban experiences, and strategic tourism initiatives, it emerges as a beacon of creativity and economic growth. In conclusion, The Line not only shapes the future of urban living but also inspires a new era of sustainable, equitable, and prosperous cities worldwide.

The promotional photos released for the Line project depict a futuristic urban environment characterized by sleek architecture, verdant greenery, and integrated technology. While visually striking, these images may evoke a sense of skepticism due to their seemingly exaggerated portrayal of the project's envisioned reality. Based on general principles of urban branding and city image-making, it is not uncommon for promotional materials to portray cities and urban developments in a favorable light, sometimes emphasizing idealized or aspirational aspects. Exaggeration in urban branding can occur for various reasons, such as attracting investment, promoting tourism, or building civic pride. While it is essential for promotional materials to highlight a city's strengths and potential, it is also important for them to accurately reflect the realities and challenges of urban life. It is challenging to provide a precise opinion on the Line's urban branding efforts. However, in general, it's beneficial for urban branding initiatives to be transparent, inclusive, and reflective of the diverse perspectives and experiences within a city. While the vision presented in the photos is compelling, its realization remains uncertain. The ambitious goals of the Line, such as achieving zero carbon emissions, implementing advanced AI systems, and creating a pedestrian-centric urban environment, pose significant logistical and practical challenges. The complexities of urban development, including regulatory hurdles, funding constraints, and community engagement, may impact the project's ability to fully materialize as depicted.

To analyze the visual materials for "city of the Line" project through the lens of visual semiotics, prominent semiotic codes- the signs, symbols and aesthetic choices that communicate potential meanings and messages will be identified. By deconstructing these visual codes recurring across the renderings, I can unpack the broader narratives, ideals and brand positioning NEOM is looking to construct and promote. Some of the prominent visual semiotic codes that emerge across these renderings include:

**Proximity of nature/technology** - There is a constant interplay and convergence of natural landscapes with advanced human-made structures and technologies. This juxtaposition semiotically communicates the brand's positioning around harmonizing environmental sustainability with innovative urban development.

**Vibrant colors/lighting** - Bold, vivid colors and dramatic lighting effects are employed, connoting themes of energy, vibrancy, and around-the-clock activity in Line's envisioned cityscapes. This stylized use of color amplifies the aspirational, hyper-modern messaging.

**Verticality/linearity** - Extreme verticality and linear designs for the architecture and infrastructure are a central motif, clearly aligning with the city of the line framing. This linearity semiotically references ideas of efficiency, order, and innovative urban planning.

**Absence of people** - Despite portraying lively city scenes, few to no human figures actually appear, leaving the environments feeling artificial or curated. This absence could signify the incomplete or theoretical nature of these early renderings.

Drawing from these common semiotic codes, the overall analysis is that Line's visuals aim to construct an aspiring brand world of sustainable urban innovation - harmonizing greenery with high-tech verticality while prioritizing energy/vibrancy. The visuals construct an aspirational brand positioning the city of the Line as a pioneering, sustainable eco-city harmonizing nature with cutting-edge urbanism and technologies. However, the hyper-stylized aesthetics and lack of ground-level human representation could create disconnects between these visionary renderings and the practical realities of constructing and inhabiting such an ambitious development, particularly in a harsh desert environment. There are potential tensions between the promoted environmental values and the massive transformation required of the natural landscape. These visuals seem focused on attracting stakeholder interest by portraying NEOM as an innovative, luxurious eco-haven. But evaluating if/how the realities match the marketing narratives will be crucial, especially regarding the project's environmental sustainability and impacts on local communities and quality of life.

## **6-3- Document Analysis**

### **6-3-1- Themes and indicators of the Line's Branding**

In the literature review, I explored a range of themes and indicators central to the branding of cities, as outlined by Al-Hinkawi and Zedan (2021). These indicators include key characteristics, dimensions, types, and strategies that define and differentiate city brands. The table number 3 summarizes these indicators, highlighting their relevance to urban branding practices.

Following this theoretical framework, I applied the same indicators to analyze The Line, a visionary urban development project in Saudi Arabia's NEOM region. The Line represents a unique and ambitious example of city branding, aiming to integrate advanced technology, sustainability, and innovative urban planning. This approach allows us to systematically assess how the Line aligns with and diverges from traditional city branding practices. By mapping The Line's attributes, as taken from official documents, press releases, and promotional materials, onto these indicators, I gained insights into the project's branding effectiveness and the broader implications for urban development.

<b>Main theme</b>	<b>Sub theme</b>	<b>Indicator</b>
<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Distinction</b>	The Line is distinguished by its innovative urban design, representing a radical departure from traditional city planning. It aims to achieve excellence and creativity through its linear, high-density layout that integrates cutting-edge technology and sustainable practices.
	<b>Uniqueness</b>	The Line's unique characteristic lies in its linear structure, spanning 170 kilometers with no cars, streets, or carbon emissions. Its design promotes a new urban experience with vertical layers for different urban functions and seamless integration of natural and built environments.
	<b>Originality</b>	The Line aligns with a vision of futuristic living that combines advanced technology with environmental consciousness. It embodies a strong, coherent identity of a sustainable, human-centric urban habitat, making it a hallmark of originality and innovation in city planning.
<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Cultural</b>	The Line promotes a new cultural paradigm through the integration of global cultures in a futuristic urban setting. It aims to foster a culture of innovation, sustainability, and technological advancement. By blending traditional Saudi culture with cutting-edge design and technology, The Line is set to become a cultural hub.
	<b>Economic</b>	The Line is a key element of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, aimed at diversifying the economy away from oil dependence. It is designed to attract global investments and promote economic activities in sectors such as biotechnology, entertainment, and advanced manufacturing. The focus on high-tech industries and sustainable practices aims to position The Line as a leader in the global economy.
<b>Types</b>	<b>Personality</b>	The Line's personality is rooted in its vision for the future, blending advanced technology with sustainability at its core. It embodies the principles of innovation, environmental stewardship, and human-centric design.
	<b>Main Building and Design</b>	The Line features iconic architectural elements and public spaces designed to be both functional and aesthetically striking. Key structures include high-rise vertical living spaces, advanced transportation hubs, and expansive green spaces. The design integrates natural elements with urban infrastructure, creating a seamless blend of technology and nature.
<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Differentiation</b>	The Line differentiates itself through its unique linear design, which contrasts with traditional radial or grid-based city layouts. This differentiation is evident in the seamless integration of nature and urban life, with green spaces and high-tech infrastructure coexisting harmoniously.
	<b>Creative city</b>	The Line leverages its innovative architecture and urban planning to attract creative professionals and industries. It emphasizes the use of cutting-edge technology and sustainable practices to foster a culture of creativity and innovation. The city is designed to be a hub for research and development, particularly in fields such as biotechnology, renewable energy, and advanced manufacturing.

Table 4. Themes and indicators of the Line's branding

### **6-3-2- Comparative Analysis of Middle Eastern Cities and The Line in NEOM**

In examining branding experiences across various cities and countries in the Middle East, a comprehensive analysis reveals key factors that contribute to the success or failure of urban branding initiatives. This literature review identifies these factors based on empirical cases, highlighting strategic elements.

Based on this understanding, I aim to apply these identified factors to analyze and compare the Line. This phase sets the stage by summarizing the literature review's focus, outlining the factors identified, and establishing the framework for comparing Neom's branding efforts with those of other cities in the Middle East.

#### **Factors of Successful Branding**

- Clear strategic vision: Long term plans focusing on diversification, Sustainability and Tourism.
- Iconic projects and landmarks: Development of recognizable and innovative architectural projects.
- Cultural integration and promotion: Balancing modernity with cultural heritage and effective use of media.
- Investment in education and innovation: Attracting international institutions and fostering innovation.
- Hosting international events: Regularly hosting events to maintain global presence and attract tourists.
- Political stability and economic policies: Emphasizing stability and economic growth to attract investors.

#### **Factors of Unsuccessful Branding**

- Lack of clear vision and strategy: Absence of long term, cohesive branding strategies.
- Inconsistent messaging: Indirect and limited branding messages.
- Overestimated and challenged projects: Projects that face practical challenges.
- Negative global perception: Reputations that overshadow cultural and historical achievements.
- Economic and environmental constraints: Economic weaknesses and challenging climates affecting urban image.

"The Line," represents a bold initiative by Saudi Arabia to redefine urban living through sustainability, technology, and innovation. Its branding strategy aligns with several factors known to contribute to successful city branding. The Line demonstrates a clear strategic vision with long-term plans focused on diversification and sustainable development. The concept of "The Line," a linear city design emphasizing livability and environmental harmony, exemplifies this vision and sets it apart in the global urban development landscape. Iconic projects and landmarks play a significant role in branding efforts. The ambitious architectural designs and futuristic infrastructure plans aim to create recognizable symbols of modernity and innovation, enhancing the Line's global visibility and attractiveness to

investors and residents alike. Neom has attracted international attention and investment by investing in education and innovation. Collaborations with international institutions and initiatives in sustainable technologies position Neom as a hub for innovation and knowledge exchange, fostering its reputation as a city of the future. Looking at factors that could potentially hinder the Line's branding efforts, challenges include the perception of a lack of clear vision and strategy. Critics argue that the ambitious scope and rapid development pace may not be fully cohesive or transparent, potentially undermining stakeholder confidence. Inconsistent messaging has at times led to confusion or skepticism among stakeholders and the public regarding the Line's progress and objectives. Practical challenges such as environmental concerns and logistical complexities pose significant hurdles to realizing NEOM's ambitious projects like "The Line." Moreover, concerns over Saudi Arabia's human rights record and political controversies may overshadow the Line's branding efforts, especially in regions sensitive to these issues. Economic weaknesses and environmental constraints, such as water scarcity in the region, also present challenges to its sustainability goals. Addressing these challenges effectively will be crucial for Neom to maintain its image as a model of environmental responsibility and sustainable urban development. In summary, while Neom has made significant strides in branding itself as a futuristic and sustainable city, addressing potential pitfalls such as clear vision, practical challenges, and geopolitical considerations will be essential for its long-term success and global recognition.

### **6-3-3- Media Perspectives on The Line Project: Support and Critiques**

In addition to the previous analysis, I also examined various press documents, including news websites and interviews, to evaluate the diverse perspectives on The Line project. The Line project, part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, has sparked extensive debate among supporters and critics, each presenting compelling arguments regarding its potential impacts. These elements of support and critiques are sourced from a range of media sources, encompassing news articles, interviews published on websites, and analysis available on platforms like YouTube. The following section presents excerpts from expert opinions and public discourse, providing deeper insights into the varied viewpoints surrounding The Line project.

NEOM, an ambitious urban development project currently underway, proposes an unconventional city layout confined within a single 170-kilometer (105-mile) long line. This unique design challenges traditional urban planning conventions, aiming to accommodate a projected population of nine million within a 200-meter-wide corridor, reminiscent of a typical Chicago city block (BBC News, [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com)).

Dr. Manal Shehabi, an energy expert from the University of Oxford, raises critical points about the sustainability of Neom. Central to this evaluation is the question of food production: will Neom implement a system that minimizes resource use by producing food locally, or will it heavily rely on imported food? Neom's official website asserts ambitions to become "the world's most food self-sufficient city," proposing innovative solutions such as vertical farming and greenhouses—an ambitious goal for a country currently importing about 80% of its food. However, concerns persist about the feasibility and sustainability of these plans. Critics argue that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, the driving force

behind Neom, may engage in greenwashing—using ambitious environmental promises to divert attention from practical challenges and realities (BBC News, [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com)).

Many analysts noted that it is also in competition with the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf petrostates struggling with falling oil prices and attempting to diversify by luring large companies to establish headquarters within their borders. Rafi Rich, who is a senior lecturer in urban strategy and smart cities at the Technion — Israel Institute of Technology, in Haifa, questioned the sense of building a city from scratch in a “hot place far from the ecosystem.” (The Times of Israel, 2021) Rich pointed to Masdar, a planned city in Abu Dhabi that also has automatic transportation and was started 15 years ago with hype not unlike that surrounding Neom. But even though Abu Dhabi has already marked itself out as a hub of regional innovation, Masdar has failed to attract any sizable residential population and is made up mainly of offices and academic institutions, Rich said (The Times of Israel, 2021). “It is rare to take an empty space and build a city from scratch,” said Rich, who was quietly approached some years ago to get involved with Neom, but thought it too unrealistic at that stage. “Maybe it will get to the size of Masdar, around six square kilometers. On paper you can do anything, and The Line is pure genius — it can be done in segments — but you need to get clever people to leave places like New York, Hamburg, and Dubai and move to nowhere. It will take decades, if at all” (The Times of Israel, 2021).

Another critic says: “Is this really the most conducive shape for a city? What is the design’s impact on the natural habitats? If the focus is on green technology and its design is for sustainability so why does it cut through the surrounding? Even in the desert, there are a thousandth of animal and plant species and creating this massive 170 kilometers wall sounds problematic. Also, this giant mirror of the wall is going to reflect the light and it is going to create heat zones and burn everything around it. Second problem is transportation. How does this long line cut transit time compare to a rectangle or circle? This proposal relies on the super fast transit system and is going to take people from one end to the other side in 20 minutes and that would mean the train runs about 500 km per hour if we do not account for all the stops. This design and this concept of the Line is creating issues and is trying to solve the issue with expensive technology. Building a city instead of solving the existing problems is the antidote to sustainability. Many parts of Saudi Arabia do not have a proper sewer system and the country is full of abandoned projects which need to spend money for them to improve them and improve the lives of people. Maybe the whole purpose of this project is to repair their reputation and promote a positive image for the Kingdom (Youtube.com).

Anirban Adhya, a Professor of Architecture and Urban Design at Lawrence Technological University, shared with Business Insider, “While ambitious, The Line in Neom is hardly revolutionary. Urban planners frequently advocate for a new future in response to what they view as the unsustainable conditions of their time. The linear structure of The Line could function effectively in smaller, segmented installations.” (Business Insider Website, [www.businessinsider.com](http://www.businessinsider.com)).

Adhya elaborated, stating that compared to other urban designs such as ring layout, radial layout, grid layout or combinations thereof, a strictly linear urban development may lack



diversity and interest in human experience. Certain areas of the city could potentially become too distant and isolated (Business Insider Website, [www.businessinsider.com](http://www.businessinsider.com)).

Mona Lovgreen, a partner at the international architecture firm DIALOG, shared her perspective with Business Insider: "There is no single ideal shape for a city—they typically change over time, influenced by political, natural, economic, cultural, and transportation factors." Lovgreen believes that if designed thoughtfully, The Line's linear form could enhance accessibility and enable the integration of renewable energy sources along its entire length. While acknowledging the ambitious nature of its goals, Lovgreen finds The Line's vision admirable. "It challenges us to rethink urban design and explore new ways to create efficient, livable, and sustainable cities. It could set a pioneering example of using AI to enhance sustainability and energy efficiency, which U.S. urban planners should consider adopting." However, she cautioned that the repetitive infrastructure and standardized components could result in a "bland and monotonous" environment, lacking the unique character found in other cities (Business Insider Website, [www.businessinsider.com](http://www.businessinsider.com)).

According to John Gold, a professor of Urban Historical Geography at Oxford Brookes University, such structures not only risk monotony but also can hinder social cohesion. He further remarked, these projects, including the one in Saudi Arabia, envision a high-tech utopian future but often neglect the reality of human behavior. In his view, linear city schemes are better suited as design exercises for third-year architecture students (Business Insider Website, [www.businessinsider.com](http://www.businessinsider.com)).

Having explored these diverse perspectives, I now offer a synthesis and critical evaluation of The Line project. Supporters of The Line emphasize its revolutionary approach to urban development, particularly its commitment to sustainability and reduced environmental impact. By concentrating urban life vertically, The Line aims to minimize its footprint to just 2% of that of traditional cities, significantly preserving natural landscapes. Proponents also highlight the project's potential to foster economic diversification in Saudi Arabia, reducing dependency on oil and attracting international investment and talent, which can spur innovation and economic growth.

On the other hand, critics argue that The Line's ambitious scale and design may be unrealistic. The projected costs, estimated to reach up to \$1 trillion, pose significant financial risks, especially given Saudi Arabia's current economic reliance on oil. Skeptics question the feasibility of constructing such a colossal structure within the proposed timeline, suggesting that the project might face delays or budget overruns, similar to other grandiose projects in the region that have struggled to meet their goals. Environmental concerns are another major point of contention. The mirrored facade, while visually striking, could disrupt migratory bird patterns, posing a threat to biodiversity. Although project planners have proposed solutions like nature corridors and treated glass to mitigate these risks, the effectiveness of these measures remains uncertain. Moreover, the project's reliance on a massive influx of foreign skilled labor and potential displacement of local communities, such as the Howeitat tribe, raises social and ethical issues. Furthermore, the innovative urban concepts underpinning The Line, such as Zero Gravity Urbanism and Hyper-Mixed-use, challenge traditional city

planning paradigms. The project aims to eliminate zoning and create a seamless integration of living, working, and recreational spaces, but whether this vision can be realized in practice is still a matter of debate.

Determining whether supporters outnumber critics of The Line project is complex. Public opinion and expert analysis reflect a mix of enthusiasm and skepticism. Some view The Line as a visionary project that could set new standards for urban development, while others see it as an overly ambitious and potentially unrealistic venture.

#### **6-4- Analysis of interviews**

In this section, the interviews conducted with experts in urban branding and development are analysed, focusing on The Line project. The analysis is structured around open coding, a qualitative research method that allows for the identification of themes and patterns within the data. This process highlights recurring themes and concerns.

##### **Interviewees Insights on NEOM**

The analysis of the interviews reveals a complex interplay between ambition, marketing, and reality in the context of urban mega projects like Neom. The experts provide a multifaceted critique that underscores the challenges and implications of such developments. Skepticism about the authenticity and feasibility of Neom points to broader concerns about the manipulative nature of urban branding. These projects often serve as marketing tools designed to attract investment by creating commodified, attractive visions of cities that obscure less desirable realities. This aligns with the view that urban branding is fundamentally a marketing strategy aimed at reshaping a city's image to appeal to external investors and tourists. One expert highlighted that "renderings and images are more important to mobilize people, companies, investors, and the government rather than to be implemented as such."

The political motives and financial motivations behind such projects suggest that the grand visions may not always align with the social and environmental needs of residents. An interviewee noted that branding varies greatly by region and is often used to garner political consensus, stating that "they target more political consensus, aiming to convince people, voters, or subjects that the leadership is doing a good thing for the place."

The strategic use of highly photorealistic digital renderings to create an idealized version of projects like Neom can be misleading and set unrealistic expectations. Experts pointed out that these images are primarily tools to attract investment rather than realistic representations of the final outcome. This ties back to concerns about the authenticity of urban branding and the potential disillusionment when reality falls short of the marketed image. One expert remarked, "I believe renderings and images are more important to mobilize people, companies, investors, and the government rather than to be implemented as such."

Environmental concerns are a significant point of convergence among the experts. Questions about the sustainability of building mega projects in delicate ecosystems underscore the

tension between the ambitious goals of projects like Neom and the practical challenges of ensuring environmental sustainability. One interviewee noted that "green and sustainable elements often connect more with the image or reputation of a place rather than genuinely addressing environmental impacts."

The visionary ambition of Neom, while impressive, is also met with skepticism regarding its practicality and human-centered design. Experts questioned the feasibility of achieving the ambitious targets set by branding strategies within the projected timelines. One interviewee commented, "Scale is something that is growing, and it has been a component for a number of years." Another emphasized the importance of checking outcomes against initial promises to assess the project's success, stating, "It is crucial to check the outcomes against what was initially promised."

The social and cultural impacts of projects like Neom are also a critical concern. Critics argue that Neom's branding strategy overlooks the region's cultural heritage and social life, disrupting local communities. An expert observed, "There is an evident interest in heritage, as seen in projects like AIUla, which shows a keen interest in the kingdom's heritage."

In summary, the integrated analysis reveals that while projects like Neom aim to showcase technological advancement and national pride, they are fraught with challenges related to authenticity, environmental sustainability, social impacts, and the gap between visionary ambitions and practical realities. The critiques offer valuable insights into the complexities and implications of urban mega projects and the strategic use of urban branding. These insights highlight the need for a more nuanced and realistic approach to urban development that genuinely addresses the social, environmental, and economic needs of the communities involved.

Following the initial analysis, open coding was conducted to distill the key themes and insights that emerged consistently across the interviews. This method allowed for a deeper exploration of shared perspectives among the experts. Common themes that surfaced include concerns about authenticity in urban branding efforts, skepticism regarding the feasibility of ambitious projects like NEOM, particularly in terms of environmental sustainability and social impacts. The identified themes underscored the nuanced perspectives of the experts regarding NEOM, revealing overarching concerns about the project's alignment with genuine societal needs versus its potential as a marketing tool.

### **1- Skepticism and Authenticity**

A recurring theme among the experts is skepticism about the feasibility and authenticity of projects like Neom. One expert views these projects as marketing gimmicks rather than realistic developments, highlighting the manipulative aspects of urban branding. Another acknowledges the ambitious nature of Neom but notes that urban branding is fundamentally a marketing strategy aimed at attracting investment. Two experts emphasize the strategic use of visual representations in shaping public perception, suggesting a potential disparity between the projected image and reality, with a particular focus on the role of renderings in mobilizing

support rather than serving as precise blueprints. This skepticism underscores concerns about whether projects like Neom can truly deliver on their ambitious promises or are primarily designed to attract investment through polished marketing.

## **2- Urban Branding as Marketing**

Based on interviews conducted with experts in the field, some of them emphasize that urban branding involves creating commodified visions of cities to attract investment and obscure less desirable aspects. The strategic use of visualizations to influence public opinion and investors aligns with the notion that urban branding is a marketing tool. It is also noted that branding can generate opportunities and drive public action, with architectural and urban designers playing a significant role in providing visibility. There is a consensus that urban branding functions as a strategic marketing tool, crafting a city's image to attract investment, tourists, and global talent, often at the expense of a more nuanced and honest representation.

## **3- Political and Social Implications**

Urban branding and mega projects carry significant political and social ramifications. One expert highlights the political nature of urban branding, which serves specific agendas and often marginalizes less desirable aspects, causing social and cultural impacts. Another discusses how successful branding strategies can alter a city's identity and influence residents' perceptions, implying significant social implications. Ethical and political issues related to the displacement of communities and the project's social acceptance and sustainability are also noted. The authoritarian nature of such projects and the use of state power to clear areas reflect broader political contexts.

## **4- Environmental Concerns**

Environmental concerns are a significant point of convergence among the experts. Questions are raised about the sustainability of building mega projects in delicate ecosystems, with an emphasis on the ecological footprint and disruption of local habitats and biodiversity. The sustainability challenges faced by mega projects like Neom include the disruption of ecosystems and the ethical implications of large-scale development in fragile environments.

## **5- Technological and Visionary Aspects**

The visionary ambition of Neom is met with both interest and skepticism. Comparisons are made to other mega projects that blend modernist aesthetics with nationalistic ambitions, noting that NEOM's distinction lies in its size and visionary aspects, drawing inspiration from successful models in other cities. The futuristic imagery and ambitious vision of Neom are compared to radical architectural movements of the past. This theme captures the tension between the visionary, ambitious goals of projects like Neom and the practical challenges of realizing such grand visions. The importance of balancing innovation with practical considerations and the potential gap between projected images and real-world outcomes is highlighted.

## **6- Practicality vs. Spectacle**

Critiques are made about the disconnect between top-down projects and the everyday social lives and needs of residents, prioritizing spectacle over genuine development. The challenge of balancing visionary aspects with practical, relatable branding strategies is discussed, with skepticism about the human-oriented aspect of NEOM's vision. Questions are raised about the spatial arrangement and feasibility of the linear city concept, questioning the practicality of such a massive enclosed structure in a harsh environment.

## **7- Visual Representations and Reality**

An architectural photographer and a professor from the Polytechnic of Milan highlight the role of visual representations in shaping public perception is a key point of discussion. It is stressed that renderings are more about mobilizing support than accurately predicting the final outcome, pointing out the potential for significant deviations from the initial vision during implementation.

# 7 • Conclusion

## Key Findings

1. **Ambitious Vision vs. Practical Realities:** The research found that "The Line" project is marked by a highly ambitious vision of futuristic urban living, characterized by innovative architecture, lush green spaces, and advanced technologies. However, there is a significant contrast between the idealized portrayals and the practical realities of developing such a city in a harsh desert environment. This raises concerns about the feasibility and authenticity of the projected vision.
2. **Branding and Authenticity:** The analysis revealed that while "The Line" branding efforts are meticulously planned, there is a potential disconnect between the aspirational imagery and the actual implementation. The highly polished visuals often lack human activity and ground-level representation, which could lead to questions about the authenticity and practicality of the depicted scenes.
3. **Environmental and Social Challenges:** Environmental sustainability emerged as a critical concern. The feasibility of maintaining such an ambitious development in an ecologically sensitive area was questioned by experts. Additionally, the project's social integration aspects were scrutinized, with concerns about whether the development genuinely addresses the needs of the local and broader communities.
4. **Strategic Underpinnings and Geopolitical Context:** The research highlighted that "The Line" is a strategic endeavor within Saudi Arabia's broader ambitions to diversify its economy and position itself as a leader in sustainable urban development. However, this ambition is tempered by significant challenges, including environmental sustainability, logistical complexities, and concerns about the country's human rights record.

## Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to delineate the city branding processes within the city of The Line by acknowledging various urban branding strategies. The essence of a city's brand lies in encapsulating its fundamental values, unique characteristics, and future aspirations, deeply rooted in its original identity. A successful city brand cannot exist without a distinctive, authentic, and unique identity, varying across social, cultural, and economic dimensions. Hence, cities must prioritize developing their brand around all facets of their culture and history (Al-Hinkawi and Zedan, 2021).

The examination of promotional materials surrounding the development of The Line in the NEOM region presents a narrative rich in ambition and innovation. However, amidst captivating visuals and promises of a futuristic smart city, a critical lens is essential to distinguish between aspiration and actuality. It is imperative to acknowledge the inherent risks and challenges that accompany such ambitious attempts.

The analysis of The Line project reveals a complex vision of urban development, driven by a mix of ambition, strategic branding, and innovative aspirations. Through examining visual representations, documents, and expert insights from interviews, an understanding emerges that emphasizes both the potential and the problems of such a transformative initiative. This project has garnered both supporters and critics. Supporters acknowledge the ambitious vision of NEOM and see potential in its innovative approach to urban design, sustainability, and efficiency, believing the project could set new standards and challenge traditional city planning paradigms. Critics raise significant concerns about feasibility, environmental impact, social integration, and authenticity, arguing that the project might prioritize spectacle over practicality and genuine sustainability, questioning whether it can meet its lofty goals given the practical challenges and geopolitical context.

The promotional imagery of The Line encapsulates a vision of shiny, futuristic architecture seamlessly integrated with lush green spaces and advanced technologies. These visuals evoke a sense of utopian urban living, highlighting themes of sustainability, innovation, and human-centric design. However, the highly idealized portrayals, devoid of human activity and ground-level representation, raise concerns about the feasibility and authenticity of this vision. The stark contrast between aspirational imagery and practical realities of urban development in a harsh desert environment underscores the potential disconnect between marketing narratives and actual implementation.

Documentary analysis further illustrates the strategic underpinnings of The Line's branding efforts. The project is positioned as a cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's broader ambitions to diversify its economy and establish itself as a leader in sustainable urban development. Key elements of this strategy include iconic architectural landmarks, significant investments in education and technology, and the cultivation of a global image of modernity and innovation. However, this ambitious scope also presents substantial challenges. Critics point to a lack of cohesive and transparent strategy, inconsistent messaging, and significant practical obstacles such as environmental sustainability and logistical complexities. Furthermore, concerns over Saudi Arabia's human rights record pose additional hurdles that could overshadow the project's positive branding efforts.

Insights from expert interviews add another layer of complexity, revealing doubts about the project's feasibility and authenticity. Experts highlight the manipulative nature of urban branding, suggesting that projects like The Line often prioritize spectacle and marketability over genuine social and environmental needs. The strategic use of photorealistic renderings is seen as potentially misleading, setting unrealistic expectations and potentially leading to disillusionment. Environmental sustainability remains a critical concern, with experts questioning the practicality of maintaining such ambitious developments in ecologically

sensitive areas. The interviews also emphasize the importance of balancing visionary aspirations with real, human-centered needs, advocating for a more inclusive and realistic approach to urban development.

In synthesizing these diverse perspectives, it becomes clear that while The Line represents a bold and innovative approach to urban development, it is fraught with challenges that must be carefully navigated. The project's success will depend on its ability to reconcile visionary ambitions with practical realities, ensuring that marketing narratives align with on-the-ground developments. Addressing environmental sustainability, maintaining transparency, and genuinely considering the social and economic needs of local and broader communities will be crucial.

As The Line continues to develop, several critical questions remain open:

What are the global implications if NEOM's ambitious vision becomes a reality? Will it serve as a blueprint for future urban developments, fundamentally altering city planning paradigms worldwide, or will it remain an isolated experiment in utopian design?

How will the project be sustained and expanded given its unprecedented scale and complexity? What long-term strategies will be implemented to ensure its maintenance and growth in a sustainable manner?

What role will sole investors play in the project's trajectory? How might their influence shape NEOM's development, and what are the risks and benefits of such concentrated financial power?

Can The Line genuinely balance its utopian aspirations with the practical realities of urban living in a harsh desert environment? What innovative solutions are required to address the environmental and logistical challenges posed by this unique setting?

Is NEOM the beginning of a new era in urban development, or does it signal the end of traditional city planning paradigms? Could this project herald a shift towards more ambitious, technology-driven urban designs, or will it highlight the limitations and pitfalls of such grandiose visions?



## References

- Aboneama, W.A. (2021) "Applying sustainable principles to create new urban areas and developing existing cities in 2030 Vision of Saudi Arabia", In *Resilient and Responsible Smart Cities*, Springer: Cham, Switzerland, pp. 219–231.
- Alfalih, A.A.; Hadj, T.B., (2020) "Foreign direct investment determinants in an oil abundant host country: Short and long-run approach for Saudi Arabia", *Resour. Policy*, 66, 101616.
- Algumzi, A. (2022) "Risks and Challenges Associated with NEOM Project in Saudi Arabia: A Marketing Perspective", *J. Risk Finance. Manag.*, 15, 381.
- Al-Hinkawi, Wahda Sh. and Zedan, Sheren K. (2021) "Branding for cities: the case study of Baghdad", *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* 779, doi:10.1088/1755-1315/779/1/012037.
- Alkeaid, Majed Mohemmed G. (2018) "Study of NEOM city renewable energy mix and balance problem", Degree project in Electrical engineering, School of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, Stockholm, Sweden.
- AlOwais, Tuqa Mohamed (2019) "Emirate of Abu Dhabi Brand Marketing Strategy – Travelers Welcome", Published by Canadian Center of Science and Education, Vol. 13, No. 8, ISSN 1913-1844 E-ISSN 1913-1852
- Alqahtany, A. & Aravindakshan, S. (2020) "Urbanization in Saudi Arabia and sustainability challenges of cities and heritage sites: Heuristical insights", *J. Cult. Herit. Manag. Sustain. Dev.*, pp: 408–425.
- Al Saud, M. M. (2020) "Sustainable Land Management for NEOM Region", *Nature Switzerland AG*, pp. 7-8, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57631-8\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57631-8_1).
- Al Sayed, Amna; Al Shammari, Faizah; Alshutayri, Areej; Aljojo, Nahla; Aldahri, Eman & Abouola, Omar (2022) "The Smart City-Line in Saudi Arabia: Issue and Challenges", *Postmodern Openings*, ISSN: 2068-0236, Volume 13, pp: 15-37.
- Aly, H. (2019) "Royal Dream: City Branding and Saudi Arabia's NEOM. Middle East-Top. Argum", 12, 99–109.
- Ansari, A.A.; Siddiqui, Z.H.; Alatawi, F.A.; Alharbi, B.M. and Alotaibi, A.S. (2022) "An Assessment of Biodiversity in the Tabuk Region of Saudi Arabia: A Comprehensive Review", 14, 10564.
- Arab News (2022) "NEOM Selects Contractor to Build Solar Wind Plants to Electrify \$6.4bn Green Hydrogen Plant: MEED".
- Arab News (2021) "MENA's largest solar panel factory opens in Tabuk to serve NEOM, TRSDC".
- Arab News (2021) "Saudi NEOM Green Hydrogen Company awards 2GW electrolyzer Contract to Thyssenkrupp Uhde".
- Ashworth, G.J. (2009) "The Instruments of Place Branding: How is it Done?", *European Spatial Research and Policy*, 16(1), pp. 9-22.

- Ashworth, G. and Kavaratzis, M. (2009) "Beyond the logo: brand management for cities", *Brand Management* 16(8): 520-31.
- Attia, Sahar; Shafik, Zeinab & Ibrahim, Asmaa (2019) "New Cities and Community Extensions in Egypt and the Middle East: Visions and Challenges", Springer
- Balakrishnan, M. S. (2009) "Strategic branding of destinations: a framework, *European Journal of Marketing*", 43(5/6), 611-629.
- Beauregard, R. (2003) "City of Superlatives, City and Community", 2(3), 183-199.
- Bergman, Marko (2023) "City branding used as an instrument for justifying the initiations of megaprojects", A master thesis of the topic city branding towards the megaprojects of Öresundsmetro and HH-tunnel, Malmö University.
- Bıçakçı, A.B. (2012) "Branding the city through culture: Istanbul, European Capital of Culture, 2010", *International Journal of Human Sciences*, 9(1): pp. 994-1006.
- Braun, E. (2012) "Putting city branding into practice. *Journal of brand management*", 19, pp. 257-267.
- Bruzelius, N., Flyvbjerg, B., & Rothengatter, W. (2002) "Big decisions, big risks. Improving accountability in mega projects", *Transport Policy*, 9(2), pp. 143-154.
- Bryman, A. (2016) "Social research methods", Oxford university press.
- Cabral, A.R. (2021) "Saudi Arabia's Neom Teams Up with Germany's Volocopter for Urban Air Mobility System", *The National*.
- Castillo-Villar, Fernando Rey. (2018) "City branding and the theory of social representation", *Bitacora Urbano Territorial*, pp. 34.
- Chan, Aianis; Suryadipura, Dadan; & Kostini, Nenden. (2021) "City Image: City Branding and City Identity Strategies", *GMP journal, Review of Integrative Business and Economics Research*, Vol. 10, pp. 333-334.
- Dragicevic, M.S. and Mihaljinac, N. (2016) "From City Identity to City Branding: Artivistic Initiatives or Top-Down Urban Regeneration", In book: *The Role of Cultural Institutions and Events in the Marketing of Cities and Regions*, Łódź University Press, pp: 93-103.
- Einwiller, S., Will, M. (2002) "Towards an integrated approach to corporate branding – empirical study", *Corporate Communications* vol. 7 No. 2, pp. 100-109.
- Elkhateeb, S. & El-Shahat, M. A (2021) "Roadmap for Smart City in the Arab Region-A Paradigm Shift in Post-Pandemic Era", In *Proceedings of the 9th ASCAAD International Conference (ASCAAD 2021)*, Cairo, Egypt, pp. 317–328.
- Emir, A.; Sütçü, G. and Aksöz, O. (2020) "Conceptual Study on Tourist Attraction of Brand Cities: Antalya and St. Petersburg Cases", *Journal of Tourism and Gastronomy Studies*, 8(3), pp. 1608-1624.
- Fallatah, Khaled. (2019) "Guide for Sustainable Design of NEOM City", Thesis, Rochester Institute of Technology.

- Farag, Alshimaa Aboelmakarem. (2019) “The Story of NEOM City: Opportunities and Challenges”, Springer International Publishing AG, New Cities and Community Extensions in Egypt and the Middle East.
- Fiske, J. (1990) “Introduction to Communication Studies, Routledge”, London.
- Florida, R. (2002) “The Rise of the Creative Class. And How It is Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life”, Basic Books, New York.
- Flyvbjerg, R. (2017) “Introduction: The Iron Law of Megaproject Management”, in Bent Flyvbjerg, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Megaproject Management* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), Chapter 1, pp. 1-18.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2014) “What you should know about megaprojects and why: An overview”, *Project management journal*, 45(2), pp. 6-19.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2004) “Megaprojects and risk: a conversation with Bent Flyvbjerg”, *Critical Planning*, 11, pp. 51-63.
- Govers, R. (2013) “Why place branding is not about logos and slogans”, *Journal of Place Branding and Diplomacy*, pp. 71-75.
- Grab, B.; Geldmacher, W.; Ionescu, R. (2018) “Managing the risks associated with the cyber city project-case study of the NEOM Project”, In *Proceedings of the 31st IBIMA Conference in Milan Proceedings*, Milan, Italy, pp. 25–26.
- Guzijan, J. and Cvijic, S. (2018) “Building Heritage as an Important Factor of City Branding”, *Contemporary Theory and Practice in Construction*, 13(1), pp. 313.
- Hammouda, K.N. (2019) “Heritage as a Key Element of Cities and Destinations Branding”, *The Academic Research Community Publication*, (IEREK press), pp. 32.
- Hassan, Oz. (2020) “Artificial Intelligence, Neom and Saudi Arabia’s economic diversification from Oil and Gas”, *The Political Quarterly*.
- Hashim, A R.A.A.B. (2012) “Branding the Brand New City: Abu Dhabi, Travelers Welcome”, *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 8(1), 72-82.
- Hazime, H. (2011) “From city branding to e-brands in developing countries: an approach to Qatar and Abu Dhabi”, *African Journal of Business Management*, 5(12).
- Helmy, M. (2008) “Urban branding strategies and the emerging Arab cityscape: The Image of Gulf City”, University of Stuttgart, Stuttgart.
- Henry, C. M. & Springborg, R. (2010) “Globalization and the politics of development in the Middle East”, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Hoeffler, S., Keller, K.L. (2003) “The marketing advantages of strong brands”, *Journal of Brand Management* vol. 10 No. 6, pp. 421-445.
- Hospers, G.J. (2011) “City Branding and the Tourist Gaze”, In: Dinnie K. (eds) *City Branding*. Palgrave Macmillan, UK, pp. 27-35.
- Innie, K. (2011) “City Branding: Theory and Cases. Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke”, London, U.K.

- Jannah, B.; Arifin, Z.; & Kusumawati, A. (2014) “Pengaruh City Branding Dan City Image Terhadap Keputusan”, *Jurnal Administrasi Bisnis (JAB)*, 17(1), pp. 1-7.
- Kareem, B., (2021) “Do global Pandemics disrupt or seed transformations in cities? A systematic review of evidence”, *Soc. Sci. Humanit*, 4, 100138.
- Kavaratzis, M. (2009) “Cities and Their Brands: Lessons from Corporate Branding”, *Place Brand Public Dipl*, 5(1), pp. 26-37.
- Kavaratzis, M. (2008) “From city marketing to city branding: An interdisciplinary analysis with reference to Amsterdam, Budapest and Athens”, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, [Thesis fully internal (DIV), Rijksuniversiteit Groningen]. s.n.
- Kavaratzis, M., & Ashworth, G.J. (2005) “City Branding: An Effective Assertion of Identity or a Transitory Marketing Trick?”, *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie*, 96(5), pp. 506-514.
- Kavartzis, M. (2004) “From city marketing to city branding: towards a theoretical framework for developing city brands”, *Journal of Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 1 (1).
- Kılıç, Veysel & Sarikartal, Zekiye (2016) “What Do Images Mean in Visual Semiotics?”, *Aydın Sanat Yıl 2 Sayı 3 (2016)* pp. 1 -13.
- Kocabaş, A. (2006) “Urban conservation in Istanbul: Evaluation and reconceptualisation”, *Habitat International*, 30(1), 107–126. doi:10.1016/j.habitatint.2004.08.001
- Koolhaas, R. (1994) “Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan”, New York: Monacelli Press.
- Kotler, P. and Gertner, D. (2002 ) “Country as a brand, product and beyond: A place marketing and brand management perspective”, *Journal of Brand Management* , Vol. 9 , No. 4 – 5 , pp. 249 – 261
- Luque Martinez, T.; Salvador Del Barrio-García; José Ángel Ibáñez-Zapata; Miguel Ángel Rodríguez Molina. (2007) “Modeling a city's image: the case of Granada”, *Cities*, 24 (5), pp. 335-352.
- Lynch, Kevin (1960) “The image of the City”, The M.I.T. Press, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England.
- Mahdi, W.; Alhamawi, L. (2021) “Three Projects that Prove the Power of Saudi Arabia’s NEOM Giga-Project”, *Arab News*.
- Maheshwari, V.; Vandewalle, I. and Bamber, D. (2011) “Place Branding's Role in Sustainable Development”, *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 4(2), pp: 198-213.
- Middleton, A.C. (2011) “City Branding and Inward Investment, In: Dinnie K. (eds) *City Branding*”. Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp.15-26.
- Mirmoeini, Mehdi and Azari, Abbas. (2018), “Strategic City Branding; from Theory to Practice”, *Armanshahr Architecture & Urban Development*, 11(24), pp. 97-99.

- Mohanty, Saraju P. (2016) “ Everything You Wanted to Know About Smart Cities”, IEEE Consumer Electronics Magazine, University of North Texas.
- Moser, Sarah; Swain, Marian and Alkhabbaz, Mohammed H. (2015) “King Abdullah Economic City: Engineering Saudi Arabia’s post-oil future”, *Cities* 45, pp. 71-80.
- Motion, J., Leitch, S., Brodie, R.J. (2003) “Equity in corporate co-branding: The case of Adidas and the All Blacks”, *European Journal of Marketing* vol.37 No. 7/8, pp. 1080-1094.
- Mumtaz, Muhammad Hamza and Abidin, Zain Ul (2023) “ICT for sustainability in smart cities: a case study of NEOM”, Lahti University of Technology LUT.
- Musset, Alain (2023) “NEOM and the Line (Saudi Arabia) futuristic utopia or urban nightmare”, *Geographic Information*, ISSN 0020-0093, pp. 139-161.
- Nagaynay, C. and Lee, J. (2020) “Place Branding and Urban Regeneration as Dialectical Processes in Local Development Planning: A Case Study on the Western Visayas, Philippines”, *Sustainability. MDPI, Open Access Journal*, 12(1), pp: 1-20.
- Nereim, V. (2022) “Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Maps Out Neom Project to House 9 Mil-lion People”, Bloomberg.
- Nihal, M. (2022) “What is Neom and The Line? All You Need to Know about Saudi Arabia’s \$500 Billion megacity of the future”, *The National*.
- Nihal, M. (2022) “Saudi Crown Prince Committed to Delivering City of the Future”, *The National News*.
- Noori, Negar & De Jong, Martin (2018) “Towards Credible City Branding Practices: How Do Iran’s Largest Cities Face Ecological Modernization?”, *Sustainability*, 10, 1354; doi:10.3390/su10051354.
- Nursanty, E. (2019) “Smart City Branding: Gazing and Sensing Place”, *Vietnam Journal of Construction* 3, pp. 75-79.
- O’Connor, J.; Gu, X. and Kho Lim, M. (2020) “Creative Cities, Creative Classes And The Global Modern City”, *Culture and Society*.
- Oliveira, E. (2014) “Place Branding as a Strategic Spatial Planning Instrument”, *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 11(1), pp. 18-33.
- Oxagon. Neom. Available online: <https://www.neom.com/en-us/regions/oxagon> (accessed on 14 December 2021).
- Patel, R. & Davidson, B. (2019) “Forskningsmetodikens grunder. Att planera, genomföra och rapportera en undersökning”, (Femte upplagan). Lund, Studentlitteratur AB.
- Pinar Özdemir, B. (2018) “Branding a Millennia-old Turkish City: Case of Gaziantep”, *ilef dergisi*, DOI: 10.24955/ilef.492104, pp. 121-140.
- Pratiwi, Cindy; Muchtar, Muhizar & Perangin-Angin, Alemina Br. (2022) “ A visual semiotic analysis on Webtoon True Beauty”, *IJEAL (International Journal of English and Applied Linguistics)*, Volume : 2, E-ISSN : 2787-9482, DOI: doi.org/ijeal.v2i1.1420

Raubo, Anna. (2010) “City Branding and its Impact on City’s Attractiveness for External Audiences”, Master Thesis, Erasmus University Rotterdam.

Rehan, Reeman Mohammed. (2013) “Urban branding as an effective sustainability tool in urban development”, Housing and Building National Research Center, HBRC Journal, pp. 3.

Reuvid, J. (2007) “The Handbook of Country Risk 2006-2007”, London: GMB Publishing. Qatar profile (2016). Retrieved from: <https://www.forbes.com/places/qatar/> Dubai’s Tourism.

Riza, Müge; Doratli, Naciye & Fasli, Mukaddes (2012) “City Branding and Identity”, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 35, pp. 293-300

Rodrik, D. (2006) “Goodbye Washington consensus, hello Washington confusion? A review of the World Bank's economic growth in the 1990s: learning from a decade of reform”, *Journal of Economic literature*, 44, pp. 973-987.

Sager, T. (2011) “Neo-liberal urban planning policies: A literature survey”, 1990–2010. *Progress in planning*, 76(4), pp. 147-199.

Sameh, Hesham; Mohamed Abd El-Aziz, Hosam & Hefnawy, Noha Hussein (2018) “Building a successful city branding, Case study: Bubay”, *Journal of Al Azhar University Engineering Sector*, Vol. 13, No. 48.

Scheck, J.; Jones, R.; Said, S. (2019) “A Prince’s \$500 Billion Desert Dream: Flying Cars, Robot Dinosaurs and a Giant Artificial Moon”, *The Wall Street Journal*.

Shahine, Alaa; Nereim, Vivian and Abu-Nasr, Donna (2017) “Saudi Arabia’s great makeover can’t afford to fail this time”, *Bloomberg Politics*.

Smolaks, M. (2022) “Saudi Arabia’s City of the Future Will Include a \$500m Colocation Da-ta Center”, *Data Center Knowledge*.

The World Bank (2021) “Urban Population (% of Total Population)—Saudi Arabia”.

Turki, Mohammed Shoaib (2017) “Place Branding in a Globalizing Middle East: New Cities in Saudi Arabia”, *Oxford Brookes University, School of the Built Environment, Faculty of Technology, Design and Environment*.

Uysal, Ülke Evrim (2017) “A Brief History of City Branding in Istanbul”, *Beykent University*, doi: 10.4018/9781522505761.ch006

Vanolo Alberto. (2020) “Cities are not products”, *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, v. 111, n. 1, pp. 10-17; doi: 10.1111/tesg.12385.

Winfield, J. (2005) “The Branding of Cities: Exploring City Branding and the Importance of Brand Image”, Master Thesis, Graduate School of Syracuse University, USA.

Wippel, Steffen. (2023) “Branding the Middle East: Communication Strategies and Image Building from Qom to Casablanca”, *Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston*.

Wray, S. (2020) “Saudi Neom Megacity Plans World-First “Solar Dome” Desalination Plant”, *Smart Cities World*.

Yüksel, F., Bramwell, B., & Yüksel, A. (2005) “Centralized and decentralized tourism governance in Turkey”, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 32(4), 859–886.

Yusuf, Nadia & Abdulmohsen, Dareen (2023) “Saudi Arabia’s NEOM Project as a Testing Ground for Economically Feasible Planned Cities”, *Sustainability*, 15, 608.

Zhou, L.; & Wang, T. (2014) “Social media: A new vehicle for city marketing in china”, *Cities*, 37, pp. 27-32.

Zeineddine, Cornelia (2017) “Nation branding in the Middle East - United Arab Emirates (UAE) vs. Qatar”, De Gruyter, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, DOI: 10.1515.

## **Sitography**

BBC Official Website. [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com)

Business Insider Website. [www.businessinsider.com](http://www.businessinsider.com)

NEOM Official Website. [neom.com/en-us](http://neom.com/en-us)

NEOM property Website. [www.neom-property.com](http://www.neom-property.com)

The Times of Israel Website (2021). As Saudis sell the city of the future, investors and critics see a desert mirage.

Youtube. [youtube.com](http://youtube.com)

Vision 2030 of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. [www.vision2030.gov.sa](http://www.vision2030.gov.sa)

The Line Vision Official Website. [thelinevision.com](http://thelinevision.com)

[www.architecturaldigest.com](http://www.architecturaldigest.com)

[www.designboom.com](http://www.designboom.com)

[www.rinnovabili.it](http://www.rinnovabili.it)

[www.dezeen.com](http://www.dezeen.com)

[buildindigital.com](http://buildindigital.com)

[www.ninja.it](http://www.ninja.it)

[www.arabianbusiness.com](http://www.arabianbusiness.com)

[www.admiddleeast.com](http://www.admiddleeast.com)

[www.turbosquid.com](http://www.turbosquid.com)

[www.globalconstructionreview.com](http://www.globalconstructionreview.com)

[www.oilandgasmiddleeast.com](http://www.oilandgasmiddleeast.com)

[www.theurbanist.org](http://www.theurbanist.org)

[www.railwaypro.com](http://www.railwaypro.com)

[www.dailymotion.com](http://www.dailymotion.com)

[blooloop.com](http://blooloop.com)

[www.google.com](http://www.google.com)

[www.touristsaudiarabia.com](http://www.touristsaudiarabia.com)

[www.middleeasteye.net](http://www.middleeasteye.net)

[www.hoteliermiddleeast.com](http://www.hoteliermiddleeast.com)

[justfreddythomas.medium.com](http://justfreddythomas.medium.com)

[www.parsons.com](http://www.parsons.com)

[luxurylaunches.com](http://luxurylaunches.com)

[www.dawn.com](http://www.dawn.com)

[dreamcivil.com](http://dreamcivil.com)

[www.newarab.com](http://www.newarab.com)

[www.haaretz.com](http://www.haaretz.com)

[koreajoongangdaily.joins.com](http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com)

[theloadstar.com](http://theloadstar.com)

[www.ilpost.it](http://www.ilpost.it)

[www.thenationalnews.com](http://www.thenationalnews.com)

[www.archpaper.com](http://www.archpaper.com)

[www.alamy.com](http://www.alamy.com)

[honeysucklemag.com](http://honeysucklemag.com)

[timesglo.com](http://timesglo.com)

[www.archipanic.com](http://www.archipanic.com)

[www.popularmechanics.com](http://www.popularmechanics.com)



[www.ndtv.com](http://www.ndtv.com)

[www.businessinsider.com](http://www.businessinsider.com)

[www.ief.org](http://www.ief.org)

[www.railjournal.com](http://www.railjournal.com)

[www.newscientist.com](http://www.newscientist.com)

[www.world-architects.com](http://www.world-architects.com)

[theconversation.com](http://theconversation.com)