

## Saudi Arabia's Image in the International Press: News Framing by CNN and the BBC

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### Abstract

**Objectives:** The main goal of the study was to answer the fundamental question of how leading global news websites depicted a non-Western country like Saudi Arabia in their journalistic coverage from January to June 2023.

**Methods:** Drawing upon framing theory, this study employed qualitative content analysis to analyze news texts related to the image of Saudi Arabia. The initial coding began with a literature review to identify the necessary analysis categories for conducting a qualitative content analysis. The analysis was conducted on a purposive sample, covering the period from January to the end of May 2023, with 207 news stories about Saudi Arabia on the websites of CNN and BBC News.

**Results:** Saudi Arabia was portrayed positively and extensively as a country that supports conflict resolution in the region, cares about the welfare of its society by promoting events and sports activities, and is economically strong in international investment and energy. However, Saudi Arabia was depicted as not respecting human rights and interfering in the affairs of other countries, as reflected in the negative news coverage about Saudi Arabia on the study's websites.

**Conclusions:** This study utilized framing theory and qualitative content analysis to examine how leading news websites framed Saudi Arabia from January to June 2023. While positive narratives emphasized Saudi Arabia's role in conflict resolution, societal welfare, and economic strength, negative narratives highlighted concerns regarding human rights and interference in the affairs of other countries. These results underscore the complexity of media framing and the presentation of diverse perspectives in international journalistic coverage of non-Western countries.

**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia, content analysis, international press, news, framing.

### صورة المملكة العربية السعودية في الصحافة الدولية: تأطير الأخبار من قبل إن إن وي بي

بي سي

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### ملخص

الأهداف: هدفت الدراسة بشكل رئيسي الإجابة عن السؤال الأساسي وهو كيف قامت المواقع الإخبارية الرائدة عالميًا بتصوير دولة غير غربية مثل المملكة العربية السعودية في تغطياتها الصحفية من يناير إلى يونيو 2023؟ المنهجية: بالاعتماد على نظرية التأطير، استخدمت هذه الدراسة تحليل المحتوى النوعي لتحليل النص الإخباري المتعلق بصورة المملكة العربية السعودية. بدأ الترميز الأولي بمراجعة الأدبيات لتحديد فئات التحليل اللازمة لإجراء تحليل كافي للمحتوى. تم استخدام التحليل على عينة عمدية، في الفترة من يناير إلى نهاية مايو 2023، وكان هناك 207 قصة إخبارية عن المملكة العربية السعودية على موقعي سي إن إن وي بي بي سي الإخباريين.

النتائج: تم تصوير المملكة العربية السعودية بشكل إيجابي، وعلى نطاق واسع كدولة تدعم حل النزاعات في المنطقة، وتهتم برفاهية مجتمعاتها من خلال تشجيع الأحداث والأنشطة الرياضية، وأنها قوية اقتصاديًا في مجال الاستثمار الدولي والطاقة. ومع ذلك، فإن المملكة العربية السعودية لم تحترم حقوق الإنسان، وتتدخل في شؤون الدول الأخرى، وهذا ما ورد في الأخبار السلبية عن المملكة العربية السعودية في موقعي الدراسة.

الخلاصة: استخدمت هذه الدراسة نظرية التأطير والتحليل النوعي للمحتوى لفحص كيفية تأطير المواقع الإخبارية الرائدة للمملكة العربية السعودية في الفترة من يناير إلى يونيو 2023. وبينما أكدت الروايات الإيجابية دور السعودية في حل النزاعات والرفاهية المجتمعية والقوة الاقتصادية، سلطت الروايات السلبية الضوء على المخاوف المتعلقة بحقوق الإنسان، والتدخل في شؤون الدول الأخرى. تؤكد هذه النتائج على مدى تعقيد التأطير الإعلامي، وتقديم رؤى حول بناء الصورة المتعددة الأوجه للدول غير الغربية في تغطية الصحافة الدولية.

الكلمات الدالة: المملكة العربية السعودية، تحليل المحتوى، صحافة دولية، أخبار، إطار.

### Introduction:

Media have a substantial influence on shaping public opinion, particularly regarding foreign policy and international events (Horvit, 2006). International news reporting on a certain country is 'a cornerstone of a country's image' (Bolin and Stahlberg, 2015, p. 3077). Various studies on the international press have examined the relationship between the focus of international news in reporting on a particular country and the public perception of this country (Ford et al., 1994). Individuals' perspectives on a particular nation are formed based on personal experience, stereotypes, and media coverage (Fan, 2010). Some of the literature has demonstrated a correlation between the positive media coverage a country receives and the target readers' perception of that nation regarding its importance and being 'essential' in world affairs (Kioussis and Wu, 2008).

This ability of the media to favorably or unfavorably portray other nations' images contributes to the readers' 'understanding or misunderstanding' of their country and other countries (McNelly and Lzcaray, 1986, p. 546). Thus, among the elements that affect nations' images in the media are the visibility (news frequency) and valence (positive or negative framing) that a specific country receives from media coverage (Manheim and Albritton, 1984). Generally, the greater the incidence of negative coverage of a certain country is, the greater are the negative attitudes toward that country (Kioussis and Wu, 2008).

Thus, some countries are perceived as, for example, strong, weak, ambiguous, clear (Fan, 2010), incubators of creativity, free and democratic, isolated, oppressive, or tyrannical because of media practices that strengthen or weaken the public image of countries (Torelli, 2019). According to Peng (2004, pp. 60–61), a positive image of a country refers to the prevailing elements or overall tone in the story that suggests economic, political, and social strength and stability and its progress. The negative image is defined as the prevailing elements or overall tone, which suggests economic, political, and social weakness and instability; conflicts; and religious and human rights issues; or other problems.

This study contributes to the field of news framing and international press research by focusing on articles from international news websites and how they contribute to setting the agenda of readers worldwide. Furthermore, this study provides an opportunity for decision-makers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) to understand, based on a scientific approach, the most current image of the KSA in the international press and whether it reflects the rapid developments and changes in the KSA in an impartial and objective manner to international readers. Finally, this study enriches the global library of international journalism research that targets countries in the Global South that have received media coverage but have not been the focus of a sufficient number of scientific studies on the nature of this media coverage. Thus, this study serves as a reference for scholars in the fields of international press, political communication, international relations, public diplomacy, and soft power and for journalism and media students in postgraduate studies.

The study of the image of countries in the international press is a crucial topic in international media and international relations. Some countries are interested in their image in the international media; thus, they use multiple means and strategies to enhance and improve this image via soft power and public diplomacy. They posit that the gains achieved by the favorable image of the country will strengthen its position globally in international relations by attracting investments, tourism, international trade, exports, and other gains that result in development gains (vam Ham, 2001). The importance of this study also coincides with a sharp decline by major international newspapers in covering foreign news, particularly in daily newspapers in the United States (Stepp, 1999). Consequently, in the United States, the decrease in interest in international news coverage will produce an 'incomplete' image (Emery, 1989) and negatively reflect on the understanding of its residents regarding certain critical global events and developments, owing to the media not translating their size and importance to the target audience (Perlmutter, 1999).

The literature on nation image has mainly focused on the United States and China; thus, there is a need to extend the scope by focusing on other nations (Peng, 2004; Thompson, 2005; Goodman, 1999; Chang, 1988; Yan and Riffe, 1989; Mann, 1999; Akhavan-Majid and Ramaprasad, 2000; Zhang and Boukes, 2019; Zhang et al., 2011). Few studies have focused on other countries, such as the framing of North Korea (Choi, 2010), Serbia (Cox, 2012), European countries in Russian media (Makukhin et al., 2018), Iran (Dorman and Farhang, 1987; Mughees-uddin, 1995) South Asian countries,

El Salvador (Solomon, 1992; Bukhory, 1989; Poornananda, 1998), and Australia (McCracken, 1987).

The low interest in studying the image of non-Western countries in the Western media, specifically countries in regions and environments that are culturally and socially different, such as the Middle East region, is what drew the attention of the research team. Thus, the problem is summarized in the following question. How did world-leading news websites portray a non-Western country such as the KSA in their press coverage from January to June 2023?

### **Media framing theory**

Media framing theory is appropriate to explain how the media portray the KSA in the international press. Gitlin (1980) defined media frames as ‘persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual.’ McCombs et al. (1997) defined framing as ‘the selection of a small number of attributes for inclusion on the media agenda when a particular object is discussed’ (p. 704). Furthermore, Scheufele (1999) summarized the concept of framing by saying it is ‘the process of conveying the salience of attributes of issues’ (p. 298).

Framing theory focuses on how a message is created, designed, and presented by journalists to yield coherent approaches of understanding the world, which are developed using all available verbal and visual symbolic resources. Thus, how information is presented affects the public’s understanding and interpretation of the message (Baran and Davis, 2010). Journalists use two methods to prioritize some aspects of the messages over others, namely, by focusing on particular parts and ignoring other parts. Frames help people to prioritize, simplify, sort out, categorize, evaluate, and interpret events (Norris et al., 2003).

Media framing theory is applicable to this study to explain news websites’ coverage of the KSA on the basis of the most prominent themes reported about the KSA and the frames used in presenting the KSA.

### **Image of the KSA in Western media**

The volume of literature on the image of the KSA in the Western media is much less than that regarding the image of other countries in the region whose image has been discussed. What has been circulated regarding the image of the KSA is not related to its overall image in the Western media. By contrast, it is related to issues and events related to the KSA, such as the inequality between men and women, domestic events, acts of terrorism, and human rights.

Zhang (2004) examined the image of the KSA in Western media and presented the findings at a scientific international communication conference, which analyzed 51 press releases issued by the embassy of the KSA in Washington, DC, between September 11, 2001, and December 31, 2002, and published in major newspapers in the United States, including the New York Times, Washington Post, Boston Globe, Christian Science Monitor, and USA Today. More than half of these news releases had headlines favorable to the KSA, recognizing its role in curbing terrorism, mainly detailing its counter-terrorism efforts implemented since airplanes piloted by citizens of the KSA attacked the United States on September 11, 2001 (hereafter 9/11). The study concluded that the major newspapers in the United States used press releases that were largely favorable and presented stories of positive valence on the front pages. Moreover, this method of publishing facilitated the KSA’s image restoration campaign in the United States, which was in response to the KSA being responsible for 9/11 and its support of terrorists.

Raszewski (2016) characterized the image of the KSA in the discourse of institutions defending human rights. The study described the KSA as a state dominated by a conservative model that uses its main political power function as a tool to defend the its community and prevent radical change by maintaining the traditional ethos of family relationships. The analysis characterized the KSA as neither interested in equal rights for women nor bowing to international organizations’ pressure regarding this matter. Another image presented in this analysis was that the KSA had created favorable conditions for attracting educated foreigners and specialists and provided for their safety.

Madani (2022) analyzed 100 relevant mentions and hashtags on Instagram posts concerning the MDL Beast festival (held in December 2019 in Riyadh) to understand the role of introducing and organizing entertainment events in portraying a new image of the KSA as part of its Vision 2030. In-depth interviews and framing analysis were employed and three main positive frames were demonstrated to promote a new image of the KSA, which included national pride, positive change,

and opening up to the world. These frames reflect the ongoing cultural changes in the KSA, and these events and festivals contributed to changing the stereotypical conservative image of the KSA.

Recently, Mittal (2023) presented various examples of how the KSA, after 9/11 and the Arab Spring 2011, and in compliance with Vision 2030, revisited its policy regarding women's inequality and expanded their rights to vote, travel, own property, drive cars, and have appointments in various positions inside and outside the country. The entry of Saudi women into male-dominated careers such as artists, painters, chefs, sculptors, filmmakers, musicians, sports celebrities, journalists, actors, writers, and television presenters is another indicator of the image of social change for women, which was nearly absent in the media before 9/11. The findings also revealed that today, women in the KSA are permitted to express themselves more freely than before through traditional and social media. Thus, women's rights, degree of openness, and freedom have increased, and the KSA is gradually progressing regarding these matters by implementing incremental changes.

Literature review suggested that the national image of the KSA in Western media has not been researched. Most of the prior literature focused on very specific aspects that related to the KSA, such as human and women's rights, hosting music festivals, and terrorism. Some events were observed to be important in negatively or positively shaping the image of the KSA, such as Arab Spring 2011, 9/11, and the launch of Vision 2030 in 2016. Thus, this study aimed to offer a deeper insight into the news media coverage of the national image of KSA by the leading international news websites thereby to understand the evolving role of KSA in its national development, in regional politics (e.g., mediation in Sudan, war with Yemen, rapprochement with Iran and Israel, and alliance with China) and its expanding role in international financial and cultural partnerships.

### **Methods**

This study investigates a research question, namely: How do CNN and the BBC report on the national image of the KSA in their online news coverage? Nation state is defined as "the cognitive representation that a person holds about a given country --- a person's beliefs about a nation and its people" (Kunczik, 2003, p. 412). It is "a representation of a country's positive or negative standing in media, in terms of historical, political, economic, military, diplomatic and religious context" (Hanan cited in Saleem, 2007, p.136). Thus, how news content presents a certain country strengthens or weakens its nation image (Torelli, 2019, pp. 40–41).

Moreover, this study used qualitative content analysis to analyze the news text related to KSA's image. The initial coding began with a literature review to determine the deductive categories necessary to perform qualitative content analysis. There were two reasons to choose qualitative content analysis as a research method. The purpose of qualitative content analysis was mostly consistent with the research direction of the relevant framework. Strong framing was often built on symbols, endorsements, and connections to partisanship and ideology, and much of the literature focused on how communication frames affect citizens' attitudes to produce framing effects (Chong and Druckman, 2007). By using qualitative content analysis, conclusions can be drawn through the in-depth analysis of materials such as texts.

### ***Sampling type and criteria***

This study used purposive sampling was used in order to select specific news stories related to the KSA's image in BBC and CNN online news. All news stories that mentioned 'Saudi' in any part of the news body were included in the analysis. Some news stories directly focused on issues and topics related to the KSA (e.g., the KSA and Canada restore diplomatic relations, ending the 2018 rift, and Al-Balad: Where the KSA's tourism industry began). Other news stories indirectly indicated issues related to the KSA's position or role in the published news. Some of these news stories focused on the conflict in Sudan or the earthquake in Syria and Turkey. Some parts of these news stories discussed the Saudi--American mediation between the two parties in fighting in Sudan or presented one paragraph on the role of the KSA in providing relief and humanitarian aid to the areas affected by the earthquake. Some examples of indirect headlines are as follows: *Sudan fighting: Warring sides in Saudi Arabia for talks* and *Yemen war: Women facing daily struggle to survive*).

The sample for this study included published news content on the KSA by CNN and the BBC. CNN and the BBC in English were used as the source of news content of this study owing to their reputation, influence, and presence in setting

the agenda of the readers worldwide, and both sites cover international events and provide appropriate coverage.

The word 'Saudi' was used for the sampling selection to search for news from CNN and the BBC that was related to the KSA. 'Stories,' 'photos,' and 'videos' were excluded from the analysis. News stories that only mentioned the KSA, were not related to the KSA, did not discuss the KSA in detail or in part, and did not form any negative or positive image of the KSA were excluded from the analysis. CNN's website (<https://edition.cnn.com/search>) offers 10 news stories on each page, sorted by time from newest to oldest. Each news item has an image on its left side and a headline on its right. Below each news item is the publication date, followed by the lead of the news. Clicking on the news title takes the reader to the full details of the news. The same process was used in the data collection of stories on the KSA from the BBC. However, the BBC Permission Team recommended using Google for searching the key terms, 'the KSA BBC News.' Google News (<https://www.google.com/search?q=saudi+arabia+bbc+news&source>) offered specific services to collect the dates and search for specific topics on Google BBC specific times with the most relevant topics. Each page on Google News offers 10 news stories, with a headline and short lead on the left and a news image on the right. Therefore, the unit of analysis was news text exclusively focused on the KSA.

From January to the end of May 2023, there were 207 news stories on the KSA on CNN and the BBC. Specifically, 141 news stories (directly and indirectly) on the KSA were published on the CNN website, that is, 31 in May, 25 in April, 30 in March, 22 in February, and 33 in January. On the BBC website, there were 66 news stories (directly and indirectly) on the KSA, that is, 21 in May, 12 in April, 13 in March, 8 in February, and 12 in January.

#### ***Data collection***

After the researchers identified the word 'Saudi' as a keyword for the search on the CNN and the BBC sites, they collected all the news and discussions on the KSA in separate Word files for each site, including the link, publication date, and the journalist's name. The news and their links were chronologically ordered from the newest to the oldest and grouped by month for each site.

The researchers read each news story to determine its relevant to the topic of the study. Subsequently, they exchanged their opinions by meeting on campus or via Zoom and by email and a group WhatsApp created especially for this research project. All news stories unrelated to the topic of the study were excluded from the analysis. Another review was conducted of the news links from each news site to ensure the data were completely obtained and ready for analysis. This review process resulted in 213 news stories on the KSA, with 143 on CNN and 70 on the BBC.

In the data analysis process, this study used a deductive coding approach to use predetermined codes. Deductive approaches use a pre-existing category, known as starting list, which is developed based on previous research, including theories, models, mind maps, and literature reviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The search for articles related to the research question demonstrated some of the core ideas already built into the code sheet. Therefore, this study used the deductive coding approach to conduct a directed qualitative content analysis of the coding scheme, and categories were distilled using framing theory.

#### ***Data analysis***

This section discusses how CNN and the BBC presented the KSA in their daily coverage, focusing on the main generated frames and the main inclinations of media coverage of the KSA. The qualitative content analysis revealed many frames, but in particular, it was noted that 15 and 11 frames generated by CNN and the BBC, respectively. These frames accounted for 213 stories from January through May 2023, with 143 and 70 news stories from CNN and the BBC, respectively.

The research team reviewed the 15 frames and then deductively re-grouped them based on the common general themes and inclinations. For this analysis, five broad and large frames were generated and some of those frames included subcategories such as, the legal, political, societal, business, humanitarian, and entertainment frames. There are four subcategories under the political frame, namely, conflict resolutions, peace broker, international partner, victim of foreign aggression, and intervention in internal affairs. There are three subcategories under the societal frame, namely, conservative state, development and modernization of society, and cultural change. There are four subcategories under the legal frame, namely, human rights violator, environmentally negligent, crime against humanity, and harboring terrorism.

As shown from the data in Table 1, CNN and the BBC tended to present the KSA in their daily coverage. The political frame received the most media coverage, followed by the legal and entertainment frames. The humanitarian image of the KSA received the least coverage, followed by the societal and business frames. The following paragraphs individually and collectively discuss these frames in detail.

**Political frame.** As aforementioned, the political frame received maximum coverage on CNN and the BBC from January through May 2023. Regarding the BBC, different narratives were presented in the political context regarding the KSA, particularly in a peace broker frame. Conflict resolution is another dominant frame linked to the KSA in the BBC's coverage. The third narrative in the political context was that the KSA intervenes in the internal affairs of other countries.

For CNN, the conflict resolution frame was the most dominant frame used regarding the KSA. This frame was presented among the political narratives in their media coverage, followed by the image of intervention in the internal affairs of others and that of the KSA as a peace broker. However, CNN portrayed the KSA as an international partner and depicted KSA as a victim of foreign aggression of other countries within the large political framework of the KSA's image in CNN's media coverage.

At a broad level, the analysis demonstrated that, within the political frame, the coverage of the Western news websites contributed to presenting the KSA within the frame of a country that contributes to conflict resolution of political crises worldwide and in the Middle East. Moreover, the KSA was presented as a peace broker between the fighting parties in conflict and war zones such as those of Sudan, Ukraine, and Russia. In addition, CNN and the BBC had limited coverage that depicted the KSA as a victim of foreign aggression, particularly from Iran and Al Houthi militants in Yemen. Simultaneously, CNN and the BBC presented the least daily coverage of the KSA as an international partner (Figure 1).

**Legal frame.** The legal frame is among the prevalent frames in the media coverage of CNN and the BBC in presenting KSA to international readers. The legal frame presented the KSA from different perspectives. For the BBC, there were limited legal narratives about the KSA. The most dominant was the KSA as a human rights violator. Being environmentally negligent was the other legal perspective on the KSA in BBC's coverage. Regarding CNN, it conveyed more legal narratives about the KSA than the BBC. For CNN, the frame of the KSA being a human rights violator was dominant. Environmental negligence was the other image of the KSA portrayed by CNN. Other legal frames also appeared on CNN about the KSA but with limited coverage, such as the KSA harboring terrorists and the KSA's crimes against humanity in Yemen.

Collectively, the frame of the KSA's violation of human rights has received substantial attention from CNN and the BBC than the other legal narratives did.

**Entertainment frame.** Topics related to sports and entertainment were found in this analysis. These topics {entertainment frame} received moderate of interest of coverage. The BBC presented the entertainment frame, mostly media coverage of sports events and champions of various games hosted and organized by the KSA. The situation was similar for CNN for this frame, which presented moderate coverage.

**Business frame.** Despite the KSA being an economic power, the largest oil-producing country, a critical player in the business and financial market, and an incubator for the largest international companies, the image of the KSA in the economic context received less attention than the aforementioned frames (i.e., political, legal, and entertainment frames).

For CNN and the BBC, the business frame was among the three least covered frames concerned in the international press coverage of the KSA. Thus, the business frame constituted a small amount of the total media coverage, resulting in this frame being weaker than the other frames in the formation of a clear image of the KSA in Western media.

**Societal frame.** The analysis revealed that the news websites used the societal frame for the KSA in their media coverage. The BBC did not pay much attention to this frame; it received minimal coverage and presented, for example, cultural changes in Saudi society. The BBC also provided minimal coverage to the frame that depicted the KSA as a conservative state, and the developments and modernization of Saudi society. By contrast, CNN largely used the first two frames. The cultural changes frame was the dominant frame in CNN's coverage, followed by the frame of developments and modernization in Saudi society, and depicting KSA as a conservative state received the least coverage.

Both CNN and the BBC focused more on presenting cultural changes in Saudi society than its developments and

modernization, and their framing of the KSA as a conservative state received minimal coverage. In summary, despite cultural changes being clearly and fairly mentioned in the reviewed coverage from CNN and the BBC, the societal frame was among the two least used media frames in presenting the image of the KSA.

**Humanitarian frame.** The last and least used frame on the websites of CNN and the BBC was the humanitarian frame. Thus, this frame received less attention than the other frames that dominated the Western press coverage of the KSA. Notably, CNN highlighted the image of the KSA as a country that supports humanitarian efforts and relief work more than the BBC did.

In summary, three main frames dominated the image of the KSA in the media coverage of the Western press (i.e., CNN and the BBC): the political, legal, and entertainment frames. Other frames received insufficient attention from the Western press when shaping the image of the KSA in its media coverage, namely, the business, societal, and humanitarian frames. Issues reflective of a broad agenda, such as depicting the KSA as a conflict resolution supporter, peace broker, and caring about entertaining its people, received maximum coverage. Notably, topics such as harboring terrorism, committing crimes against humanity, and being a conservative state received the least coverage from CNN and the BBC.

At the individual level, CNN produced a wider range of frames about the KSA than the BBC did. Moreover, in daily coverage, CNN and the BBC depicted the KSA by employing 15 and 11 media frames, respectively. For CNN, the most used frames were business power, conflict resolutions supporter, entertainment, cultural changes, and human rights violator. For the BBC, the most used frames were entertainment, human rights violator, peace broker, and conflict resolutions.

#### ***Favorable or unfavorable coverage***

As shown in Figure 1, Western news websites presented extremely positive coverage of the KSA. For CNN and the BBC, their overall tone in the news depicted the KSA favorably. Many events and issues linked to the KSA were reported positively in the media coverage, in the maximum range. For example, the BBC reported different topics from a positive perspective about the KSA, namely, hosting and organizing international sports championships, leading the energy and business in the world, being a conflict resolutions supporter, being peace broker, cultural changes, projecting the developments and modernization, and supporting relief and humanitarian work. By contrast, the BBC website published some news about events and activities related to the KSA in an unfavorable manner. Even regarding sports events that the KSA wanted to host or contract with professional players in local Saudi clubs, the tone of the coverage was not devoid of political incitement, most of which linked these events to the frame of human rights violations in the KSA. Other frames that the BBC used in its negative media coverage of the KSA were about its environmental negligence, human rights violations, interventions in the internal affairs of others, and status as a conservative state.

CNN provided a very positive perspective of the KSA, namely, regarding its cultural changes, business power, role as conflict resolutions supporter, role as a peace broker, leadership in relief and humanitarian work, role as an international partner, entertainment offerings, and developments and modernization in its society. By contrast, other events and activities related to the KSA resulted in unfavorable media coverage related to environmental negligence, human rights violations, intervention in the internal affairs of others, being a victim of foreign aggression, being a conservative state, harboring terrorism, and committed crimes against humanity.

In summary, the reviewed coverage of the KSA by CNN and the BBC included important topics reported in a positive tone, particularly the KSA's roles as a business power and conflict resolution supporter. However, human rights violations and intervention in the internal affairs of others were the topics and events that most contributed to shaping the negative tendency in media coverage (Figure 1).

#### **Discussion**

Some countries receive more media coverage from the international press than other countries do because of several factors, including trade volume, the magnitude of its interactivity in international relations, and the magnitude of the events and their news value (Wu, 2000). The average citizen, due to their insufficient direct experience and engagement, largely depends on the media as a main source of information on domestic issues outside their communities (Cho and Lacy, 2000; Horvit, 2006) and international issues (Li and Chitty, 2009). How the media construct the image of a certain country in its

coverage identifies how the public will perceive and interpret the nation's image (Bolin and Stahlberg, 2015). Notably, when reporting the events and developments in a country, the interests of the newspapers' countries are prioritized, not foreign countries' interests (Wittebols, 1996).

This study used framing theory to conduct a content analysis of the news text that focused on the KSA on the CNN and BBC websites. Framing is the process of selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues and making connections among them to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and solution' (Entman, 2004, p. 5). The primary principle of framing theory is that a problem can be viewed from various perspectives and understood to have consequences for numerous values or factors. Studying frames built around certain values is vital, but not all frames built around specific values are appropriate to all values, necessitating specialized discussions on how to develop strong frames for particular issues.

In the context of media framing theory, the qualitative content analysis suggests that there are three dominant frames through which the image of the KSA was shaped in the international press from January through May 2023: the political, legal, and entertainment frames. The three least visible frames were the economic, societal, and humanitarian frames.

Fifteen themes were under these six main frames, which contributed to presenting media images of the KSA. Some themes were new, and some had been observed in the literature. The results also demonstrated that the total coverage of Saudi topics had significant positive trends favoring the KSA.

The specific narratives that dominated the Western press coverage of the KSA for the first time received maximum coverage. That is, the KSA was presented positively and widely as a country that supports conflict resolution in the region, cares about the well-being of its society through promoting sporting events and activities, and is economically strong in international investment and energy. Regarding the negative narratives that dominated the coverage of the KSA image, CNN and the BBC mentioned that the KSA did not respect human rights and interfered in the affairs of other countries.

In addition to the dominant positive and negative narratives about the KSA in media coverage, other topics were covered. These topics received medium coverage; thus, the Saudi government could attempt to promote them in its short-term strategy to contribute to building the KSA's image in the international media. These oscillating themes include presenting the KSA as a state that promotes cultural changes, is a peace broker, and is a leader of relief and humanitarian efforts.

There are several possible explanations for these results. The first possible interpretation is related to the nature of the events that occurred during the studied period and were considered newsworthy from a professional journalist's perspective. The other possible explanation is that the KSA had a prominent role in such events, and its media appearance was linked to the nature of how the KSA invested its presence in these events, for example, participating in the United States-Saudi initiative to end the fighting in Sudan, mediating between Russia and Ukraine to release prisoners, hosting the Arab League Summit that resulted in the reinstatement of Syria's membership, being an international partner in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict and its movement with China, and resuming diplomatic relations with Iran. Notably, after 9/11 and the Arab Spring (Mittal, 2023), the KSA adopted new strategic tools to change its stereotypical image in the international arena. The nation is endeavoring to build a new image in line with Vision 2030 by investing its engagement in big events via diversifying its roles in crises, conflicts, and events. Moreover, the KSA is drawing the attention of the international press to highlight from a positive perspective its diplomatic activity and its active engagement with issues and events in the Middle East.

The legal frame received maximum coverage for the KSA due to its human rights violations, implementation of the death penalty, instituting women's inequality, killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, limitations on the freedom of expression, heavy censorship of media content (Raszewski, 2016), environmental neglect, role in 9/11, and role in the famine and death of civilians in Yemen due to the KSA's war with the Houthis. Even for sporting events, human rights objections were covered in Western media. For example, there were attempts to pressure the KSA during its acquisition of Newcastle Club, contracting with Portuguese player Cristiano Ronaldo and Argentine player Lionel Messi, and hosting and organizing of international tournaments such as Formula One and the Women's World Cup. The coverage of these events included information on the KSA's human rights violations.



The KSA has long been labeled in the Western media as an ‘absolute monarchy’ (Raszewski, 2016, p. 44), conservative (Madani, 2022; Mittal, 2023; Raszewski, 2016), traditional (Dhahir, 2016), an authoritarian state (Mittal, 2023), and a religious state (Al Farsy, 1980). Surprisingly, the analysis revealed that the entertainment frame was among the dominant narratives in media coverage of the KSA. As a strategy to gain media attention worldwide (Madani, 2022), the KSA has recently been active in hosting non-traditional sporting events, festivals, and tournaments, inviting famous top players and celebrities in the international sports arena, and hosting the final match of Barcelona and Real Madrid. This interest on the part of the KSA in promoting and diversifying an entertainment agenda on a global scale indicates a serious attempt by the Saudi government to reshape and build a new media image for the KSA in the international community. This effort is also an indication of the KSA’s desire to open up to the world and other cultures (Madani, 2022).

Notably, this analysis focused on specific issues: the role of the KSA as a mediator of peace, an instigator of societal change, and a leader in humanitarian relief. These topics are promising in building a new image of the KSA in the international media if the Saudi government continues its aim to realize the goals of Vision 2030. Notably, these frames were not at the top of the list of topics covered by the international press but remained swinging in the middle of the road. However, the continued use of cultural events is sufficient to constitute an influence (Avraham, 2014) and decisive qualitative leaps in the process of building the modern Saudi media image, especially because most of these topics were related to the core of society, including the role and the presence of women in its society; increasing the number of fashion events; establishing sizable international music festivals, art and tourism events, and parties. Thus, the KSA is endeavoring to alter its old traditional image as a ‘conservative culture’ (Madani, 2022, p. 10) and ‘very masculine state’ (Al-Rasheed, 2013) and to create a new image of a developed, modernized country that accepts other cultures and religious differences (Madani, 2022) and believes in diversity. Moreover, the KSA wants to be known as a state that has undergone substantial cultural changes (Madani, 2022). The new image should reflect a vibrant society that is welcoming to tourists and other visitors and has created favorable conditions for educated specialists and foreigners (Raszewski, 2016). This result is consistent with Mittal (2023)’s idea that the KSA is gradually progressing via incremental changes.

### **Conclusions, limitations, and recommendations**

Despite the KSA’s rapid, unprecedented changes in the last three decades, the clash between modernity and tradition persists regarding the image of the KSA (Dhahir, 2016). The KSA has its path to modernization, but sometimes this path collides with misunderstandings from democratic Europe (Raszewski, 2016). Current KSA coverage includes topics that are obviously important and need to be reported. However, the current KSA news agenda appears to be broad and presenting important narratives that might also help to explain the substantial transformation currently underway in the KSA. This study suggested positive inclinations in the Western media’s coverage of the KSA, as shown by the maximum coverage of positive topics and a slight decrease in negative themes. The qualitative content analysis also revealed a wide range of new images of the KSA that have not been presented in the literature on the international press and nations’ images, namely, as a conflict resolution supporter, international partner, peace broker, and leader in relief and humanitarian activities. The KSA has worked hard in investing its political role in huge events worldwide. This role has garnered the attention of international press coverage and successfully helped in producing new, strong, and positive images of the KSA in the international press.

The study was limited due to its scope and time restraint. This study only sampled news texts published about the KSA from January through May 2023; thus, choosing another time frame might provide different findings and frames. Additionally, the analysis used two leading Western news websites (CNN and the BBC); thus, analyzing other news websites from other regions of the world, for example, from Russia, might provide different results. Moreover, the types of events and crises in the analysis period affected the type of the produced frames and the tone of coverage. Furthermore, the findings cannot be generalized because a probability sample was not used.

Studying the image of Saudi Arabia in the international press holds significant practical and theoretical implications. Practically, such analysis informs policymakers, media practitioners, and international stakeholders about the perceptions and portrayals of the Kingdom in global discourse. Understanding how Saudi Arabia is represented can guide diplomatic

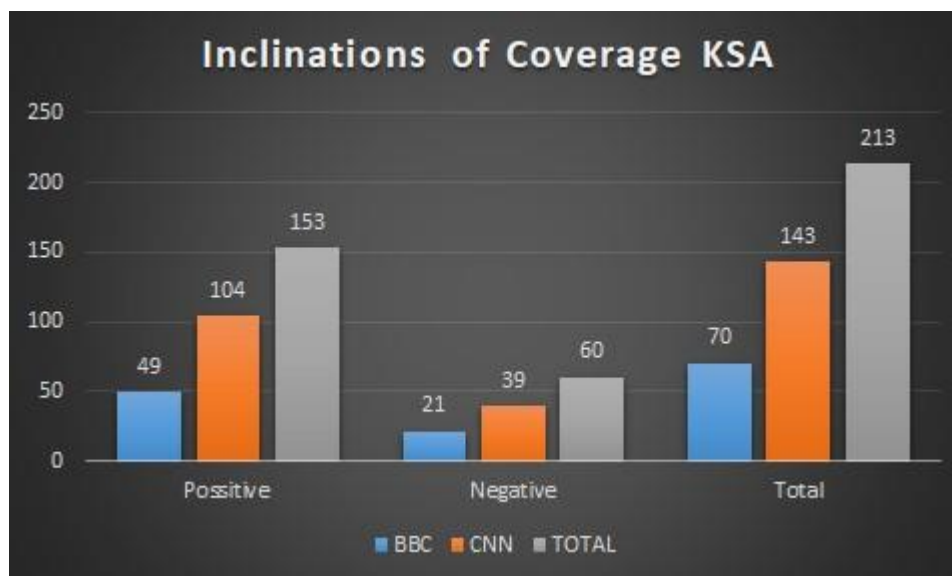
strategies, public relations efforts, and media campaigns aimed at shaping or reshaping its image on the international stage. Moreover, it can assist in identifying areas of concern or potential misrepresentations that may impact foreign relations, trade, tourism, and investment.

Theoretically, investigating the image of Saudi Arabia contributes to the broader field of media studies, communication theory, and international relations. It sheds light on the mechanisms of news framing, agenda-setting, and media bias, offering insights into how cultural, political, and economic factors influence the construction and dissemination of narratives about non-Western countries. By examining the nuances of media representations, scholars can deepen their understanding of power dynamics, ideological influences, and discursive practices in global media systems. Ultimately, such research enriches scholarly discourse on media effects, cultural diplomacy, and the role of media in shaping perceptions of nations and regions in the international arena.

The findings of this study provide insights into the most recent narratives and trends in Western news coverage of the KSA. Overall, the Western news media have remarkably increased their KSA coverage, and the general tone appears to be considerably positive. Additionally, the study encourages journalists inside and outside the KSA to broaden their news agenda. The study also recommends establishing additional correspondents in locations outside the KSA, pitching and commissioning ideas for more stories that move beyond conventional themes and locations, and considering commissioning ideas from individuals and groups outside the organization, subject to all the usual censorship.

**Table 1: Main frames of the KSA in BBC and CNN**

	Legal	Political	Societal	Business	Entertainment	Humanitarian	Total
BBC	14(20%)	24(34%)	3(4%)	4(6%)	19(27%)	6(9%)	70(34%)
CNN	24(17%)	49(34%)	21(15%)	23(16%)	15(10%)	11(8%)	143(66%)
CN& BBC	38(18%)	73(34%)	24(11%)	27(13%)	34(16%)	17(8%)	213



**Figure 1: Inclinations of coverage of the KSA**

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