



Master's Programme: International Relations

THESIS TITLE:

Image versus Reform: Saudi Arabia's Strategic Use of Formula 1 for Global Image Enhancement

AUTHOR:

Simone Duello

SUPERVISOR:

Andreas Beyer Gregersen

DATE: MAY 2023

Table of Contents

1. **Introduction**
2. **Theoretical Framework**
 - 2.1 Nation Branding
 - 2.2 Strategic Communication and Framing Theory
 - 2.3 Soft Power, Sports Diplomacy, and Authoritarian Branding
 - 2.4 Theoretical Synthesis: Discourse, Power, and Image
3. **Methodology**
 - 3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis
 - 3.2 Data Collection
 - 3.3 Use of AI and Reflection
4. **Analysis**
 - 4.1 Strategic Reform and Global Legitimacy
 - 4.1.1 Economic Diplomacy and Global Partnerships
 - 4.1.2 Gender and Inclusivity
 - 4.1.3 Sustainability and Environmental Reform
 - 4.2 Image Performance and Symbolic Power
 - 4.2.1 Spectacle and Prestige
 - 4.2.2 Youth and Future Orientation
 - 4.2.3 Celebrity Culture
 - 4.2.4 Cultural Identity and Artistic Expression
5. **Discussion**
 - 5.1 Formula 1 as Strategic Communication
 - 5.2 Selective Visibility and Symbolic Politics
 - 5.3 Between Projection and Perception
6. **Conclusion**

7. **Future research**
8. **Bibliography**

1.Introduction

This thesis aims to explore how Saudi Arabia leverages its involvement in Formula 1 as a tool for international image-making and nation branding. Specifically, it investigates how the Kingdom projects narratives of modernity and reform to Western audiences, and how these efforts are received, challenged, and reframed in media and public discourse. By focusing on nation branding, strategic communication, soft power, and Critical Discourse Analysis, the study aims to understand the symbolic role of sport in shaping global perception.

In an increasingly interconnected and media-saturated global community, international image might be as precious as material strength in shaping the global standing of a nation. Perception - constructed around narratives, images and symbols -has the ability to influence foreign investment, diplomatic engagement, tourism, and global legitimacy. In order to manage and improve their international reputation, nations are turning to nation branding, a concept with roots in marketing and strategic communication that is now intensively researched in the field of international relations. Nation branding is the deliberate effort to develop a national image that will attract foreign markets and publics (Anholt, 2007; Fan, 2010). This is achieved by promoting national identity via soft power conduits — media, culture, and sport. Mega-sport events, especially, have emerged as highly visible platforms through which states position themselves symbolically in global arenas.

Sports facilitate emotional storytelling, mass media spectacle, and the projection of values such as modernity, excellence, and openness (Dubinsky, 2023). The staging of events such as the FIFA World Cup, the Olympic Games, or Formula 1 Grand Prix motor races is often less about the sport itself, and more about what the event says about the host (Grix & Brannagan, 2024). This is especially relevant to states that have a disputed or weak international image. For such actors, sport is employed as a tool of soft power projection, reputational risk avoidance, and symbolic entry into global discourses of progress and legitimacy. These events allow a country to perform a desired version of itself — one that often centres on reform, youth, inclusivity, and modernisation.

Among global sports mega-events, Formula 1 (F1) is a great and peculiar example of a platform for high-level nation branding. As opposed to fixed-site events such as the Olympics or World Cup, F1 is a touring show. Its visibility is not limited to a single point in time but recurs annually (usually from March to December each year), offering host nations prolonged international exposure. Furthermore, F1 carries powerful symbolic meanings: upscale luxury, cutting-edge technology, economic power, and global sophistication (Dubinsky, 2023).

As Grix and Brannagan (2024) explain, sports diplomacy is now a highly strategic, professionalized discipline in which governments use sport to advance far-reaching foreign policy goals, including establishing credibility, forging alliances, and promoting global appeal. Formula 1's emphasis on cutting-edge technology, affluence, global sponsorships, and high-end branding makes it especially appealing to countries wishing to rebrand their national image in visible ways.

Above all, F1 also offers a visual storytelling platform: high-definition photos of modern skylines, mega-infrastructure projects, and cosmopolitan masses allow host nations to construct a carefully designed story of transformation (Swart & Hussain, 2023). These stories are not incidental; they are carefully constructed, repeated annually and shared globally through sporting media, social media, and business marketing. It functions as a media-intensive stage where national image and global identity are carefully managed and performed.

The selection of Saudi Arabia as a target for this thesis stems from its dominant and controversial role within the international nation branding arena. Since the onset of Vision 2030 - a sweeping state-led economic diversification and de-oil-dependency strategy - Saudi Arabia has been engaging an assertive multi-pronged branding strategy at great expense in tourism, entertainment, and foreign sport (Khan, 2020; Alshuwaikhat & Mohammed, 2017).

Rebranded as part of a grand modernization initiative, the Jeddah Grand Prix is promoted by the Saudi state as an expression of a "new" Saudi Arabia — dynamic, innovative, cosmopolitan, and culturally engaged (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016). Marketers highlight cutting-edge racetrack design, global expertise, women's participation, and high-profile partnerships. Saudi state messaging sits on the pillars of reform, openings, and ambition — a discursive strategy intended to resonate with global audiences (Bayle, 2025).

Yet this image uncomfortably sits alongside the Kingdom's ongoing reputational challenges. Despite light, superficial liberalization measures, Saudi Arabia remains an authoritarian monarchy with drastic restrictions on civil rights, extreme gender inequality, and a well-documented record of human rights abuses (Petersen-Smith, 2023; Grix & Brannagan, 2024). High-profile events - including the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and mass executions - have cast long shadows over its rebranding efforts. These paradoxes make the Grand Prix not only a site of celebration but also a site of contestation, most notably in international media. It is precisely this tension - between Saudi Arabia's preferred image and the image it still provokes - that makes its case urgent and analytically fruitful.

Organizing an F1 Grand Prix is not merely an economic or logistical undertaking - it is a communicative action. Saudi Arabia's foray into Formula 1 must be viewed through a strategic communication lens, whereby governments and their respective groups meticulously design messages to shape external perception (Dubinsky, 2023).

Strategic communication, as it has been envisioned in political communication and public diplomacy, is intentioned, purposeful, and narrative-driven. In the Saudi case, the message is one of progress, modernization, and openness. This is conveyed through curated visuals (e.g., drone shots of modern infrastructure), branding partnerships (e.g., Aramco's global sponsorship), celebrity endorsements, and the frequent invocation of reformist language (Swart & Hussain, 2023; Petersen-Smith, 2023). This aligns with framing theory (Entman, 1993), which helps explain how events are interpreted depending on what is highlighted, downplayed, or left out. In Saudi Arabia's case, the state attempts to frame itself as visionary and progressive. Yet, international media - particularly in the Western world - may reframe the same event as one of hypocrisy or sportswashing (Grix & Brannagan, 2024; Dubinsky, 2023). This dynamic shows that communication is not one-directional - it's part of a broader global space where meaning is constantly negotiated and reinterpreted. Saudi Arabia's efforts to reimagine itself via F1 are as much about building an image as they are about managing competing discourses that challenge it.

A central analytical focus for this thesis is the role of Western perception in evaluating the success or failure of Saudi Arabia's branding strategy. While the Kingdom speaks to a universal audience, it is particularly interested in reframing how it is perceived in the West - where global reputations are largely shaped by the influence of financial markets, media narratives, and diplomatic relationships. The Western worldview is shaped by liberal democratic values, human rights discourses, and historical power imbalances. In such a situation, Saudi efforts at branding will be interpreted with suspicion, especially when public relations campaigns are seen to mask, not terminate, domestic repression (Bayle, 2025).

Western reporting on the Saudi Grand Prix frequently includes references to Jamal Khashoggi, women's rights activism, workers' rights exploitation, and executions - even when praising logistical or sporting dimensions of the event (Petersen-Smith, 2023). This recurring scepticism has led to the widespread use of the term "sportswashing," suggesting that investments in sport may be more about distraction than transformation (Grix & Brannagan, 2024).

However, Western reception is not uniform. Some media, sports bodies, and business elites adopt a more pragmatic line - collaborating with Saudi Arabia as a trading partner, at times not engaging with the political dimension. This creates a fragmented perceptual landscape, in which narratives of modernization and repression coexist, conflict, and evolve.

It is within this field, therefore, that Saudi Arabia's Formula 1 experiment must be placed — as an attempt not simply to prove its progress, but to win recognition in the eyes of the Western world. This thesis is not concerned with evaluating the domestic legitimacy of Saudi reforms or domestic popularity of sport initiatives. Instead, it is concerned with the external communication strategy behind the Kingdom's acquisition of Formula 1 - and how the strategy is perceived and interpreted by outsiders, indeed in the West. Through analysis of official communication, promotional campaigns, and global media discourse, the study explores how nation branding, strategic communication, and perceptual framing converge in Saudi Arabia's development of an international image. It argues that Formula 1 is used as a symbolic platform where messages of legitimacy, modernity, and global alignment are performed and contested.

By placing this case within the broader literature on soft power, sports diplomacy, and discursive politics, this thesis provides some insight into how image-driven authoritarian regimes navigate an era in which perception is power. To make sense of this communicative strategy, this thesis draws on several interrelated theoretical frameworks. These include nation branding, which explains how states use symbolic tools to shape international perception; strategic communication and framing theory, which help unpack how narratives are crafted and contested; and soft power theory, which situates Saudi Arabia's use of sport within broader efforts to gain international influence.

2.Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the conceptual foundation through which Saudi Arabia's use of Formula 1 will be analyzed. By engaging with theories of nation branding, strategic communication and framing, soft power and sports diplomacy, it develops a discursive lens for understanding how the Kingdom projects and negotiates its international identity. In line with this thesis's focus, the emphasis is not on domestic political transformation, but on the external communicative strategies deployed to influence foreign perception — particularly that of Western publics and media.

This framework approaches Formula 1 not as a sporting event per se, but as a strategic spectacle: a site where image, legitimacy, and reputation are constructed, performed, and contested. The analysis will be grounded in a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, which enables a systematic interpretation of how language is used to assert power, construct narratives, and influence global perception.

2.1 Nation Branding

The theory of *nation branding* emerged from the intersection of marketing and international relations, as governments began applying corporate branding techniques to national reputation management. According to Simon Anholt (2007), nation branding involves the systematic cultivation of a positive image to shape how the country is perceived globally. This image is not static, but performed and negotiated, and can influence everything from tourism and trade to foreign direct investment and soft power.

Unlike traditional diplomacy, which operates through intergovernmental channels, nation branding is mediated and symbolic, engaging audiences through mass communication, cultural signals, and visual politics. A strong nation brand allows a state to project desirable attributes such as stability, modernity, and progressiveness — values that have become central in a global environment where symbolic legitimacy, cultural influence, and perception carry growing weight alongside traditional markers of material power.

In Saudi Arabia's case, the push toward rebranding has been formalized through the *Vision 2030* program, which articulates a strategic ambition to transition from an oil-dependent economy to a diversified, globally integrated state (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). This transition is not merely economic — it is imagistic, requiring the transformation of how the Kingdom is seen and understood abroad.

Anholt's "Nation Brand Hexagon" identifies six dimensions of national image: governance, investment and immigration, culture and heritage, people, tourism, and exports. Saudi Arabia's Formula 1 Grand Prix touches many of these:

- Governance: Projecting modernization and economic reform through state-led investment;
- Tourism: Advertising Jeddah and Riyadh as global destinations;
- Culture: Using international sport to show openness to global norms;
- Investment: Showcasing infrastructure and signaling readiness for global capital

(Anholt, 2007; Dubinsky, 2023).

Yet the Saudi case challenges the standard assumptions of nation branding theory. While most models assume democratic openness or cultural liberalism as soft power assets, Saudi Arabia lacks these traditional components. As Ettinger (2023) notes, the Kingdom's brand is being constructed in a top-down, elite-driven way, absent grassroots nationalism or participatory legitimacy. The branding is therefore not grounded in a pluralistic society, but in symbolic performances tailored to foreign audiences, especially the West.

Moreover, while some countries build their nation brand primarily on values such as ecological sustainability or cultural diversity, Saudi Arabia's approach is more hybrid. It includes references to sustainability — often framed around initiatives like the Saudi Green Initiative — but these are embedded within a broader emphasis on performance through prestige, including Formula 1, luxury investments, and celebrity partnerships (Bayle, 2025). This suggests that ecological themes are not absent, but

rather incorporated into a branding strategy that is primarily image-driven and tailored to global consumption — something the analysis will explore in greater depth.

2.2 Strategic Communication and Framing Theory

Where nation branding explains the *why*, strategic communication and framing theory help us understand the *how*. Strategic communication refers to the deliberate orchestration of messages by an actor — usually a government or institution — to shape perception and behavior in a targeted audience (Hallahan et al., 2007). It is an essential tool of statecraft in the digital age, where global visibility must be carefully managed through curated narratives, symbolic events, and media partnerships.

Saudi Arabia's strategic communication architecture for Formula 1 includes:

- Promoting gender-inclusive imagery (e.g., women attending the Grand Prix, women racing in lower "Formula" series);
- Showcasing high-tech infrastructure as a symbol of future-readiness;
- Aligning with Western brands like Mercedes-AMG Petronas, Pirelli, Ferrari, Rolex, DHL etc.;
- Disseminating reform-oriented messages through global press releases and official campaigns (Bayle, 2025; Swart & Hussain, 2023).

These efforts are not isolated — they are strategically sequenced to frame the Kingdom as modern, forward-looking, and worthy of inclusion in elite global circuits. This leads directly into *framing theory*, particularly as developed by Entman (1993) and extended by Chong and Druckman (2007). Framing involves selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of reality while omitting or minimizing others to guide interpretation.

In this thesis, framing is used to analyze how Saudi Arabia's Formula 1 messaging constructs a narrative, and how that narrative is received, challenged, or reframed by international media — particularly in liberal democratic societies.

For example:

- Saudi officials may frame the Grand Prix as evidence of gender reform;
- Western media may reframe it as "sportswashing," noting the imprisonment of women's rights activists;
- NGOs may introduce a counter-frame that links the race to greenwashing and authoritarian legitimization (Ettinger, 2023; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015).

Framing theory is essential here because it connects message production with audience reception. Meaning is not fixed; it is negotiated in public discourse. This makes Formula 1 not just a spectacle, but a discursive battlefield where legitimacy is at stake. By integrating this with CDA, the analysis will be paying attention not only to the content of the message but also to how language and discourse shape interpretive frames and ideological positions.

2.3 Soft Power, Sports Diplomacy, and Authoritarian Branding

The broader conceptual setting of this thesis is soft power theory, coined by Joseph Nye (2004), who defines it as the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. It derives from a state’s culture, values, and foreign policy — but crucially, from how those elements are perceived by others.

Traditionally, soft power has been associated with liberal democracies — the U.S. through Hollywood and higher education, or the EU through human rights promotion. However, authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia now actively engage in soft power projection, often through non-traditional means, such as sport, investment, and controlled narratives (Dubinsky, 2023; Grix & Brannagan, 2024).

Ettinger (2023) identifies this trend as “authoritarian sports diplomacy,” where states use mega-events to gain soft power without democratizing. Rather than promoting shared values, these regimes invest in global spectacles to gain status, normalize engagement, and shape elite networks of influence. This is particularly true in Saudi Arabia’s case, where billions have been spent on LIV Golf, football clubs, and Formula 1 — all meant to symbolically reposition the country in the eyes of global stakeholders.

But soft power is a double-edged sword. When seen as credible, it can generate admiration and influence. When seen as manipulative or insincere, it can backfire. Nye (2004) warns that soft power cannot be bought — it must be earned. In the Saudi case, this tension is apparent: while the Grand Prix projects modernity, critics point to repression, executions, and censorship, casting doubt on the authenticity of the narrative.

This dynamic complicates soft power theory, revealing that attraction is not necessarily cultural or ethical — it can also be constructed through money, spectacle, and global visibility. Scholars such as Brannagan and Giulianotti (2015) have observed that sporting mega-events are often used to produce international legitimacy through performance, raising the possibility that visibility itself can increasingly stand in for actual credibility or meaningful change in global discourse. In simpler terms, this suggests that just being visible on the global stage — through big events, branding, or media coverage — could, in many cases, act as a substitute for genuine progress.

2.4 Theoretical Synthesis: Discourse, Power, and Image

Together, these three theoretical pillars provide a robust framework for analyzing how Saudi Arabia uses Formula 1 to project — and contest — its global identity. They allow us to treat F1 not as entertainment, but as a stage for symbolic geopolitics, where legitimacy is sought, performances are scripted, and meanings are negotiated.

Theory	Focus	Applied Insight
--------	-------	-----------------

Nation Branding	Identity construction	Saudi Arabia aims to shift its global image toward modernity and reform
Strategic Communication & Framing	Narrative design and interpretation	The Kingdom crafts stories, but these are contested by external media
Soft Power	Influence through attraction	F1 is leveraged to gain symbolic capital without political liberalization

This framework supports the thesis's central argument: that Saudi Arabia's use of Formula 1 is not just an instance of sports diplomacy, but a strategic discursive project, designed to shift international perception in a world where media visibility and reputational currency are central to global standing.

3. Methodology

This chapter explains the approach used in this thesis to analyze how Saudi Arabia communicates through its Formula 1 presence. It is divided into three parts. First, it introduces Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which forms the theoretical and analytical foundation of the study. Second, it describes how the data was collected and organized. Third, it reflects on the use of AI tools in the writing and research process, discussing both their benefits and limitations.

3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the central analytical tool used in this thesis. CDA is based on the idea that language is never neutral: words, phrases, and even what is left unsaid can shape how people think about politics, identity, and power. As Fairclough (2001, 2003) argues, discourse plays a key role in building the social world we live in, reflecting power structures and helps maintain or challenge them.

This project uses Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA. This model looks at texts on three levels: the text itself (what is said and how), the discursive practice (how the message is produced and received), and the social practice (how it connects to wider social or political structures). This method allows us to look closely at how meaning is constructed, and what kinds of narratives are being reinforced or questioned. CDA is especially useful in a case like this, where the material being studied—official tweets and visuals from Formula 1 events—is both public and strategic. Those are not random posts; they are created to shape perception. CDA helps analyze how these posts are trying to influence audiences, and what kind of national image they are projecting. It also helps us explore what is being emphasized (e.g., modernity, sustainability, inclusion) and what is being left out (e.g., legal limitations, political tensions).

As Fairclough (2013) notes, discourse often works by highlighting some things while ignoring others. This makes CDA useful not just for understanding what is being said, but also for identifying the gaps and silences in communication. In the context of Saudi Arabia's Formula 1 messaging, these silences are just as meaningful as the posts themselves. The method allows for a reading that goes beyond face value, asking deeper questions about audience, intention, and ideology.

3.2 Data Collection

The data analyzed in this thesis consists of over 50 carefully selected posts (drawn from hundreds reviewed) published by official Saudi accounts on X." (formerly Twitter), covering the years 2021 to 2024. These years were chosen because they span the full period of Saudi Arabia's involvement in hosting the Formula 1 Grand Prix in Jeddah, which started in 2021.

The posts were selected from four main accounts:

- @SaudiArabianGP (official F1 event account)
- @Vision2030 (the national reform program)
- @SPA_ENG (Saudi Press Agency, English version)
- @MISA (Ministry of Investment)

Posts were chosen manually, using keyword searches such as "F1 Saudi," "Vision 2030," "sustainability," "gender," "youth"

etc. Additional browsing was done around each Grand Prix weekend to make sure key moments were included. The main selection criteria were relevance and recurrence. Posts were included if they contributed meaningfully to one or more of the themes that emerged in early stages of the research. Each post was analyzed in terms of its text, visuals, and overall tone or structure. The posts were first sorted into seven recurring themes: economic diplomacy, gender inclusion, sustainability, spectacle, youth, celebrity culture, and cultural identity. These were then grouped into two broader categories used in the analysis chapter:

- Strategic Reform and Global Legitimacy
- Image Performance and Symbolic Power

This thematic organization allowed for a more focused interpretation and helped show how different types of messaging work together to build a coherent narrative.

The decision to use X as the main platform was based on its relevance to Saudi Arabia's communication strategy. Government-linked accounts use X regularly to speak to international audiences in real time. Compared to more local platforms or traditional media, X provides a direct and fast-moving window into how the country wants to be seen globally—especially during high-profile events like Formula 1.

3.3 Use of AI and Reflection

During the development of this thesis, AI tools—especially ChatGPT—were used to support the brainstorming, the organization process and the editing of the text. These tools were not used to do the analysis itself, but rather to assist with:

- Create summaries of selected texts
- Identifying relevant academic literature
- Translations of some texts from Arabic to English or from Italian to English
- Improving the overall flow and structure of the text by suggesting more apt words

During the early stages of this thesis, AI tools such as ChatGPT were used to support the brainstorming process and help clarify the research focus. These tools were especially useful in refining the main themes and generating initial ideas around the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to study Saudi Arabia's Formula 1 communication. Once the analytical direction was established, AI was also used to assist in the early mapping of relevant literature. By entering keywords such as "nation branding," "Vision 2030," and "Formula 1," AI helped identify a broad range of academic sources that informed the conceptual background of the study. Although the literature review was conducted manually, AI tools supported the identification and summarization of dense theoretical texts—especially those related to CDA, soft power, and strategic communication. This saved time and allowed for a clearer focus on selecting the most relevant frameworks for the analysis. Rather than replacing critical engagement, AI functioned as a support tool for organizing information, rephrasing complex arguments, and improving clarity during the writing process. In

this way, AI helped streamline the preparatory stages of the project, allowing more time to be dedicated to close reading, interpretation, and original analysis. The use of AI was always guided by critical thinking. No full sections were generated solely by AI, and all suggestions were reviewed, edited, and fact-checked by the author. The interpretations, citations, and analytical points are entirely original and based on the researcher's engagement with the material.

Furthermore, it's important to reflect on the role of AI in academic writing. On one hand, it can be a helpful tool - especially for language polishing and editing. On the other hand, it should never replace the researcher's own ideas or judgment. In this thesis, AI tools were used similarly to how a student might use a writing assistant or peer reviewer: to test clarity and structure, not as a shortcut. Using AI also raises ethical questions. Academic work should reflect the author's independent thinking. That is why this section acknowledges the tool's involvement clearly. The use of AI here follows academic integrity standards and contributes to a broader conversation about how new technologies are changing the research process.

Chapter 4. Analysis

Formula 1 is more than a race; it is a spectacle of vivid emotions, high technology and global prestige. For Saudi Arabia, hosting a Grand Prix is not simply about sport — it is a tool designed to project a new national image to the world. This chapter analyzes how the Kingdom communicates that image through carefully styled messaging around the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix, particularly on social media, with a focus on X (formerly Twitter), which serves as the most relevant platform due to its prominence in official state communication and real-time international media engagement. X is widely used by Saudi governmental accounts to disseminate English-language promotional content aimed at foreign audiences, making it central to the Kingdom's image-building efforts.

Drawing from a curated set of more than 50 official tweets and posts shared by accounts like @SaudiArabianGP, @MISA, and @SPA_ENG between 2021 and 2024 -a period that marks the full span of Saudi Arabia's involvement in Formula 1 to date, beginning with its inaugural Grand Prix in Jeddah in 2021- this chapter focuses on how language, visuals, and narrative structures are used to construct meanings of modernity, openness, and legitimacy.

The analytical framework is based on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse, which, as explained before, looks at communication on three levels: the textual (what is said and how), the discursive (how the message is produced and interpreted), and the social (how it connects to wider power relations) (Fairclough, 1992). This structure will guide the breakdown of the theme across the next sections. This approach treats tweets and visual media not as isolated messages, but as discursive acts shaped by broader ideological structures and patterns.

Based on Fairclough's (1992, 1996) concept of discourse as social practice, the analysis does not attempt to speculate on the intent of the author(s). Instead, it focuses on how each post participates in a wider communicative strategy linked to

state objectives, including the Vision 2030 reform agenda — constructing certain meanings while leaving others out.

The dataset reveals seven recurring discursive themes:

1. Economic diplomacy and global partnerships
2. Gender and inclusivity
3. Sustainability and environmental reform
4. Spectacle and prestige
5. Cultural identity and artistic expression
6. Youth and future orientation
7. Celebrity culture and entertainment

To make the analysis more focused and easier to follow, these seven themes are grouped into two broader categories that reflect how Saudi Arabia communicates through Formula 1. The first one, titled “Strategic Reform and Global Legitimacy” brings together themes (point 1-3) that are more political and policy-oriented, messages that try to present Saudi Arabia as a serious global player — modern, responsible, and aligned with international norms. The second, titled “Image Performance and Symbolic Power” is more about style and emotional appeal. It includes themes (points 4-7) that show how the country uses visuals and symbolic cues to perform a modern, exciting identity on the global stage. These two sides — one about substance and the other about image — are both central to how the Kingdom builds its international reputation through Formula 1. They don’t always overlap, but together they show how sport can be used both to tell a political story and to stage a powerful image.

In each theme, tweets are selected and examined in depth — what matters is not only for what it says, but how it says it, who it speaks to, and how it fits into a larger communicative strategy aimed at shaping public perception. The main tweets are also supported by other posts from the dataset, which help to show how recurring patterns, images, and slogans reinforce a consistent communicative strategy. In line with Fairclough’s later work on policy discourse, particularly in contexts of global change (Fairclough, 2013), the Saudi Grand Prix of Jeddah is understood here as not only a media event but as an arena of strategic communication that ties soft power, nation branding, and governance into a coordinated mix of images and texts. The aim is not to expose contradictions or criticize omissions for their own sake, but to examine how these absences function discursively, and what they reveal about the broader ideological landscape in which this communication occurs. This “discursive arena” can be understood as a stage in which Saudi Arabia performs the version of itself it wants the world to see.

4.1 Strategic Reform and Global Legitimacy

The first group of themes focuses on how Saudi Arabia uses Formula 1 as a platform to communicate narratives of modernization, international cooperation, and policy reform. Compared to the more symbolic and aesthetic themes in the next section, these messages are more substantial and policy-related, aiming to present Saudi Arabia as a serious and responsible global actor. It examines messaging that aligns closely with Vision 2030 objectives, especially in areas like global diplomacy, gender representation, and environmental responsibility.

4.1.1 Economic Diplomacy and Global Partnerships:

One of the more strategic aspects of Saudi Arabia's Formula 1 messaging is how it features international partnerships and economic cooperation. Before diving into the more visually striking and entertainment-driven narratives, it's important to look at a different — and arguably more substantial — dimension of Saudi Arabia's communication: its efforts to present itself as a modern and globally connected economy. Posts ¹ showing foreign delegates, business meetings, and international sponsorships suggest that the Grand Prix serves as a chance for Saudi Arabia to meet with international businesses and strengthen global ties.

¹ <https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1504145310913814534>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1460683077236273153>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1904944384359165968>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1770465015167893717>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1913123586107130054>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1915814830570607060>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1770465527707689422>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1919721250135458294>



Textual Practice

The tone and vocabulary of these posts differ markedly from those focused on entertainment or spectacle. Slogans like "a gateway to the kingdom of opportunities"² shape the Grand Prix not just as a sporting event but as a venue for economic ambition. This style of messaging closely aligns with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 goals of attracting investment and diversifying its economy beyond oil. A central element of this narrative is the emphasis on Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) — formal but non-binding agreements between Saudi institutions and foreign companies or governments. MOUs frequently appear in social media posts during race weekends, often accompanied by visuals of formal handshakes or staged signing ceremonies.

² https://x.com/Spa_Eng/status/1467055396921696258



وزارة الاستثمار @MISA · Mar 18, 2024

On the sidelines of the **Formula 1** event, **#MISA** signed several MOUs with local and international entities.



In July 2022, the Jeddah Central Development Company (JCDC) signed a Memorandum of Understanding to design a luxury cruise terminal as part of the Jeddah Central project (Jeddahcentral.com, 2022). While not directly tied to the F1 event, this agreement was part of broader initiatives to enhance Jeddah's infrastructure, coinciding with the city's hosting of international events like the Grand Prix. These agreements seem to serve more than a procedural function; they symbolize a willingness to collaborate internationally and project an image of economic credibility. As Alregab (2021) points out, such signaling is key to attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), especially in markets that may still be viewed as reforming. In some tweets, the Grand Prix is framed explicitly as a platform for global innovation and cooperation: hashtags like #InvestSaudi, #SaudiVision2030 are used to tie these agreements directly to national reform efforts. Even posts that are short on details — showing only photos of ministers or CEOs — contribute to this broader narrative, suggesting that business happens here, even if the specifics remain vague.

Another concrete example of how the Grand Prix supports international business cooperation is the partnership between Saudi Arabia and Averda, a global waste management company. In March 2022, during the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix week, Averda announced it had secured a contract to provide waste management services for the event (SMC, 2023). The company was selected as the environmental partner

to manage the waste generated by visitors at the Formula 1 race in Jeddah, following a similar operation during the inaugural race in 2021, where Averda collected nearly 28,000 kg of mixed recyclable waste and approximately 55,000 kg of general waste. (Averda, 2022).

This partnership was presented as part of Saudi Arabia's broader efforts to promote sustainability and improve infrastructure in connection with international events. For the 2022 edition, the company deployed dedicated vehicles and staff working continuously throughout the event to manage waste collection and ensure the venue remained clean and orderly. The operation included specialized equipment, such as compactors for food waste, emphasizing efficiency and environmental standards. Additionally, they rebranded their waste collection vehicles across Jeddah to reflect the Formula 1 event, visually connecting their services to the global profile of the race. A particularly notable example is the slogan displayed on Averda's branded trucks: "Caution! This vehicle makes frequent pit stops," a clear reference to the

Formula 1 context.

Averda wins race to provide waste services at Saudi F1 Grand Prix



By Staff Writer ✉

Posted on March 21, 2022

SHARE

TWEET

EMAIL

The company collected nearly 28,000kg's of mixed recyclable waste and around 55,000kg's of general waste during last year's Jeddah race

Averda Jeddah Generic branding - proposal 2022



This adaptation of the company's operations and visual identity to the specific theme of the Grand Prix illustrates how business partnerships are not only functional but also contribute to the event's narrative and atmosphere. Whether such collaborations represent genuine long-term commitments to sustainability and international cooperation, or serve primarily symbolic and promotional purposes, remains an open question. This will be further explored in the following sections.

Discursive Practice

Discursively, these posts don't stick to just one style. They blend official updates, business-related news, and promotional messaging all in one, allowing Saudi Arabia

to present itself as more than just a Grand Prix host; it becomes a way to show the country as an active player in global investment and diplomacy. As Alqahtani (2023) points out, high-profile events like these help Saudi Arabia reshape its international image, shifting away from its long-standing association with oil.

However, this blending of sport and business messaging is not without its challenges. While it amplifies the visibility of Saudi Arabia's economic agenda to a broad international audience, there is a potential risk that an overemphasis on economic narratives could overshadow the sporting spectacle, potentially alienating fans primarily interested in the racing aspect. This concern is not merely speculative or anecdotal. Within the Formula 1 community, both among fans and specialized media outlets, there is a recurring debate about how the increasing focus on commercial and geopolitical interests affects the authenticity of the sport. Discussions about the balance between sporting excellence and external agendas frequently emerge in fan forums, post-race analyses, and media coverage, especially around high-profile events such as the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix. For fans who follow the sport closely, this is a well-known and still ongoing conversation.

Despite Saudi Arabia's efforts to rebrand itself through high-profile events like the Formula 1 Grand Prix, international media and human rights organizations have raised concerns about these initiatives. Critics argue that such events may serve as instances of "sportswashing," where sporting spectacles are used to divert attention from ongoing human rights issues. For instance, Amnesty International (2021) has highlighted that the Grand Prix should not distract from the Kingdom's human rights record, noting the prosecution of individuals for exercising their rights to freedom of expression. Similarly, Human Rights Watch (2021) has pointed out that hosting such events is part of a broader strategy to distract from human rights abuses. Media outlets like NPR (2021) have also reported on these concerns, discussing how countries with human rights challenges use global sporting events to improve their international image.

This contrast highlights a gap between the intended messaging of economic progress and the global perception of underlying political and ethical concerns. As noted by the Council on Foreign Relations (Berman, 2023), accusations of sportswashing directed at Saudi Arabia are largely linked to its substantial investments in international sports, which critics view as attempts to improve the country's image despite ongoing human rights concerns.

Social Practice

Beyond how these messages are crafted and shared, it's important to also consider what they reveal about Saudi Arabia's broader strategy of positioning itself in the global economic landscape: they contribute to a broader social narrative around Saudi Arabia's international positioning. The consistent appearance of global business leaders, diplomatic figures, and multinational brands helps paint a picture of institutional maturity and connectivity. Alregab (2021) emphasizes that such imagery is essential in signalling reform and attracting investment, especially when actual policy details may be harder to communicate through short-form media.

Rather than issuing lengthy statements or data sheets, Saudi Arabia uses visuals — formal handshakes, flag displays, and meeting rooms — to convey trust, stability,

and cooperation. These symbolic acts, while subtle, align with broader nation-branding strategies aimed at improving international reputation (Czornik, 2024). While the posts don't offer a complete picture of Saudi Arabia's investment environment, they contribute to shaping perception. They allow the Kingdom to appear competent, professional, and future-oriented — all key messages in a competitive global economy.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia's Formula 1 messaging shows clear differences in how it is presented and what it tries to achieve. In textual practice, the posts use formal language and business slogans to focus on economic goals. In discursive practice, there is a mix of business news and promotional content to present the Grand Prix as an opportunity for international cooperation and investment. On a social level, these messages aim to show Saudi Arabia as a serious and connected global player, though some international audiences still see this as image management or "sportswashing."

Building on the economic and diplomatic messages, the next section shifts focus to how gender and inclusivity are selectively represented in Saudi Arabia's Formula 1 communication, offering another dimension to the Kingdom's global narrative.

5.1.2– Gender and Inclusivity

Alongside the focus on economic diplomacy and global partnerships in Saudi Arabia's Formula 1 image, there's also a clear - although limited - effort to show women taking part in this story. Among the hundreds of posts shared between 2021 and 2024 by @SaudiArabianGP and affiliated accounts, only a small portion directly feature women - whether as drivers, engineers, or spectators. Yet despite their relative rarity, these posts stand out for how deliberately they are framed, often using visual cues or symbolic language to suggest progress and inclusion.

This section centers on a post³ published on March 24, 2022, where the @SaudiArabianGP account announces the historic moment when two women, Aseel Al Hamad and Abbi Pulling, drove a Formula 1 car in Saudi Arabia for the first time.

³ <https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1506966558945550343>



Post



Saudi Arabian GP 🌟

@SaudiArabianGP



In Saudi Arabia, we are breaking new ground! 🏎️

The first women to drive an #F1 car in the Kingdom were @ASEEL_ALHAMAD and @abbipulling, who visiting locations from Diriyah to the King Abdullah Financial District in the @alpinef1team E20 ahead of the #F1 stc #SaudiArabianGP 🇸🇦



1:10 PM - Mar 24, 2022

Most posts suggest progress in a general way, but this one mentions actual names, shows what happened, and clearly tries to present it as a big moment — using the phrase “*breaking new ground*.” It thus provides a focused entry point for examining how gender inclusion is framed as part of the Kingdom’s evolving international image.

Textual Practice

The phrase “breaking new ground” serves a performative function. The post doesn’t explain why this is important in terms of law or society — it just presents it as a big deal on its own, as if the image speaks for itself. This kind of phrasing can be understood as a form of rhetorical emphasis — short, symbolic expressions that carry significant ideological weight, as Fairclough (2003) describes in his discussion of aesthetic and strategic aspects of discourse.

The images accompanying the post show the two women in driving suits, posed confidently beside an F1 car, surrounded by crew members. There is no verbal

framing that links the act to broader gender reforms, nor is there any political or social commentary — the representation is visual, momentary, and polished. The focus is on presentation rather than process.

Other posts⁴ follow the same style — like ones about female engineers, the F1 Academy, or women painting track art. In all of them, women are shown, but there's not much explanation or detail. These representations form a repertoire of symbolic gestures that, while brief, signal alignment with gender norms favored in global discourse.

Discursive Practice

What makes the March 24 post stand out is that it links the visibility of women to a “first-ever” moment — the first-time women drove an F1 car in the country. This allows the post to market a media-friendly spectacle while positioning it as social progress. Fairclough's (2010) notion of interdiscursivity - the blending of visual, linguistic, and generic conventions across different contexts - is relevant here, as the post blends reformist language with celebratory branding and sport promotion.

Even though the post celebrates progress, it doesn't touch on the legal or political structures that actually shape women's lives in Saudi Arabia. There's no mix of narratives — no mention of laws, activism, or deeper reforms. It stays fully in the space of promotion, focused on image rather than context. And that silence isn't accidental — it helps keep the message simple, safe, and easy to consume for international audiences. This fits what Ettinger (2023) describes as a form of “authoritarian branding,” where states construct curated displays— including gender representation — aimed at influencing foreign audiences rather than addressing, reforming their own internal issues. In this model, representation substitutes for engagement — it is not about what rights women have, but how their visibility can be framed to serve national image goals.

They mostly show short clips or images with little context, often focusing on famous figures or collaborations with global teams. As van Dijk and Fairclough both suggest, ideologies are often reproduced not through direct statements, but through what is assumed, emphasized, or left unsaid. In this case, the silence around rights, legal

⁴ <https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1501254287233458179>

<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1714257167698571535>

<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1759583272206565642>

<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1772938224375099646>

<https://x.com/FormulaRapidaEN/status/1466520336363446274>

https://x.com/ahmed_baokbah/status/1461479723050192903

barriers, and activism becomes ideologically meaningful — shaping how viewers interpret the message without needing explicit claims.

Social Practice

Showing women in F1 content seems to be part of a bigger communication plan — it helps the country gain approval from global audiences while keeping tight control over how change is actually talked about inside. The broader Vision 2030 strategy identifies gender inclusion as a public-facing reform area, yet the actual communicative output is limited to visual confirmation — women appear, but their social position is not explored or debated.

This way of showing progress aligns with what Satish et al. (2025) describe as a carefully curated media strategy — one that emphasizes visual signs of openness while avoiding deeper public engagement or policy explanation. Women's participation in elite, controlled environments (such as F1 press events or promotional videos) becomes a form of gendered branding, reinforcing the image of a nation evolving within acceptable limits.

Furthermore, the previously mentioned “silence” contributes to an image of gender equality that appears convincing from the outside but lacks depth. It seems intended more to influence how Saudi Arabia is perceived internationally than to reflect meaningful internal change.

Conclusion

Posts that show women in F1 settings aren't about showing full equality, they're mostly about creating a certain image of progress. They are acts of discursive management, in which gender becomes part of a broader image economy. By using powerful but vague language, carefully staged images, and selective representation, these communications align with international expectations while minimizing the risk of domestic backlash. However, in a conservative society like Saudi Arabia, even symbolic gestures toward gender inclusion may be seen by some internal audiences as culturally disruptive. For instance, the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), historically known as the religious police, has been known to enforce strict interpretations of Islamic norms, often opposing public displays that deviate from traditional gender roles. Although their powers have been reduced in recent years, their influence persists in certain segments of society (Arab News, 2019). Additionally, prominent clerics have publicly criticized reforms related to women's rights; for example, in 2017, a Saudi cleric was suspended after stating that women should not drive because their brains are a quarter the size of men's. (The Guardian, 2017). These examples illustrate the ongoing tension between the state's modernization efforts and conservative elements resistant to rapid social change.

Through Fairclough's CDA lens, we see that these posts do not exist in isolation. They function within a larger strategy where being seen is both a way to send a message and to avoid harder questions. The March 24 post, as others like it, offers visual evidence of progress - the event is real and the images are powerful - but it still frames reform without explanation, inclusion without critique, and transformation without structural depth, making it a symbolic gesture aimed more at shaping perception than enabling change.

Alongside efforts to portray gender inclusion, another recurring theme in Saudi messaging is environmental sustainability. The next section explores how ecological narratives are framed within the Grand Prix context.

4.1.3 Sustainability and Environmental Reform:

Among the most visually and symbolically powerful posts promoting Saudi Arabia's Grand Prix are those that emphasize its alignment with sustainability and environmental innovation. One of the more visually distinct posts from the @SaudiArabianGP account features a woman speaking in Arabic⁵, set against a backdrop of greenery and natural light. While the content remains minimalistic and symbolic, the setting appears to evoke themes of sustainability and environmental consciousness, without making these themes explicit through accompanying text or

⁵ <https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1772938224375099646>

narration. The visual tone gestures toward a cleaner, greener Saudi Arabia — a message likely intended to align with broader Vision 2030 goals. This post operates as a symbolic claim that Saudi Arabia is not only entering the global sporting elite, but doing so on environmentally conscious terms — a crucial gesture given international criticism of the Kingdom's environmental record.

As in the previous chapters, this section applies Fairclough's (1992, 2003) three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model to examine the textual, discursive, and social layers of this communication, focusing on how environmental branding is embedded in the broader narrative of Vision 2030 and global green transitions.

Textual Practice

The language used in sustainability discourse by @SaudiArabianGP often relies on expressions such as “green innovation,” “clean future,” or hashtags like #sustainability and #earthday. Rather than offering conclusive judgments, this section invites reflection on the gap between ambitious narratives and measurable outcomes, leaving the assessment open to interpretation. As Fairclough (2003) argues, discourse often operates by selecting and emphasizing certain representations, making language a powerful tool for shaping perception. By repeating these buzzwords across multiple posts, Saudi Arabia seems to attempt to associate its Grand Prix not just with speed or excitement, but with responsible stewardship and global relevance.

Still, what's striking is the near absence of technical data, policy specifics, or references to the Kingdom's actual environmental challenges and therefore unable to substantiate actual progress. Instead, the content leans heavily on the aesthetics of sustainability — sleek visuals of solar panels, wind turbines, or desert vegetation integrated with race visuals. This use of imagery creates a connection between sport, sustainability, and national image, presenting sustainability as part of the event's identity as much as an environmental commitment.

Rahman et al. (2022) argue that Saudi Arabia's green messaging often emphasizes visuals and symbolism over detailed policy communication. However, not all posts fit this pattern so neatly. A tweet from @SaudiArabianGP on June 5, 2023, for example, highlights specific initiatives — using solar panels, promoting recycling, and repurposing race-day materials into accessories. These are not just slogans; they reflect tangible actions.



This introduces some complexity to the critique. It shows that sustainability messaging around the Grand Prix does involve visible efforts. Still, the way these actions are communicated remains tightly curated — with no mention of long-term goals, data, or integration into broader environmental policy. The question, then, is whether these are genuine steps forward or simply curated moments designed to signal progress.

As Satish et al. (2025) explain through their idea of “managed modernization,” authoritarian states often promote visible, controlled reforms that are designed to impress international audiences, while avoiding deeper or more difficult structural changes. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the truth probably sits somewhere in the middle. These posts suggest that some real steps are being taken toward sustainability, yet it remains unclear how much they extend beyond symbolic gestures.

Discursive Practice

From a discursive point of view, these posts reflect a wider global trend where showing environmental responsibility has become part of how countries try to shape their image. Saudi Arabia’s messaging fits into the model described by Satish et al., where progress is presented through carefully curated stories that look modern and appealing to the outside world. In the Formula 1 context, this often means using

styles and language similar to Western environmental campaigns — with familiar buzzwords and polished visuals aimed at boosting international credibility.

This includes the use of English terms like the previously shown “eco,” “net zero,” and “sustainable”, sometimes even when speaking in Arabic-language posts. This interdiscursivity (Fairclough, 2010) enables Saudi messaging to align with global green norms, enhancing its credibility in international arenas like the UN and COP (Conference Of the Parties), a global climate summit held annually, where countries assess progress on climate goals and negotiate new environmental agreements. In 2024, COP16 was hosted in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia — a significant moment for the Kingdom’s international climate diplomacy. (UNCCD, 2024)

However, the repeated use of certain discursive strategies — such as nature imagery ⁶ - (e.g., invoking hashtags like #WorldHeartDay), broad and unverified claims⁷ - made without supporting data, and perfect-looking city visuals⁸ seems designed to avoid controversy and keep the message safe.

While Saudi Arabia is one of the world’s highest per-capita CO₂ emitters (Rahman et al., 2022), the posts rarely acknowledge these contradictions. Instead, sustainability is framed as a “target” or “commitment”⁹ rather than as a response to critique or as a structural transformation.

Social Practice

Sustainability, in this context, functions as a tool of soft power and strategic legitimization, since Vision 2030 emphasizes environmental reform not only as a national necessity but as a public diplomatic strategy. Alfantookh et al. (2023) explain that Saudi Arabia’s transition to manufacturing and diversification is tied to environmental goals — yet this creates tension, as increased industrial activity also threatens to raise emissions. The Grand Prix becomes a way to show progress without dealing with the harder choices or compromises behind it.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia’s sustainability narrative in Formula 1 seems designed for foreign consumption, particularly targeting Western audiences where climate consciousness is high. This reflects Fairclough’s (2013) argument that, in a globalized world, discourse is often shaped by pressures to appear legitimate to external audiences, especially in transnational policy and branding contexts. The social practice here is again less about domestic environmental reform and more about shaping Saudi Arabia’s image as a modern, globally integrated actor capable of hosting high-tech, eco-friendly events.

At the same time, the exclusion of local voices — such as environmental activists, policy experts, or civil society — highlights the top-down nature of this discourse. As

⁶<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1649857651231137794>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1665812380427735040>

⁷ <https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1910288796010037493>

⁸ <https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1767551316581064843>

⁹ <https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1716817189674860969>

Satish et al. (2025) argue, green initiatives in authoritarian contexts often operate as tools for international image management, rather than as participatory processes. This aligns with what Gilley (2012) terms “authoritarian environmentalism”: a model in which environmental action is led by the state, with little public input or democratic accountability. In the case of Saudi Arabia’s Formula 1 communication, these traits are visible in the way sustainability is framed — polished and appealing for foreign audiences, but lacking transparency, measurable policy goals, or broader civic involvement.

Conclusion

The sustainability posts related to the Saudi Grand Prix present an emotionally resonant, visually rich, but politically sanitized vision of environmental reform. Textually, they emphasize certain representations, creating a connection between sport, sustainability, and national image. Discursively, they emulate global green norms; socially, they serve as instruments of branding discourse within the broader Vision 2030 agenda. Although these posts show a commitment to being modern and eco-friendly, they also hide the conflict between growing industries and protecting the environment. This reveals a deeper issue: in today’s world, having the right image can sometimes matter more than real action — even vague green messages can help a country look more legitimate. Yet as Fairclough (1992) and van Dijk (1998) remind us, discourse is never neutral. It constructs, omits, and frames, often serving those in power more than those most affected. In the Saudi case, sustainability is framed more through curated images and optimistic language than through transparent policy communication. While these posts may reflect real initiatives, the emphasis remains on how they appear to external audiences — making it difficult to assess how deeply they connect to broader structural reforms or measurable climate goals.

While the previous sections focused on reform-oriented narratives, the next set of themes moves toward the symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of Saudi Arabia’s messaging — starting with spectacle and prestige.

4.2 Image Performance and Symbolic Power

The second part of the analysis will explore how Saudi Arabia uses Formula 1 not only as a site for policy messaging, but as a stage for visual storytelling and symbolic projection. Unlike the previous themes that focused on diplomacy and reform, the following themes emphasize emotion, prestige, and cultural visibility — using imagery and aesthetics to craft a compelling national identity.

4.2.1 Spectacle and Prestige

Across numerous promotional posts shared by the @SaudiArabianGP account since 2021, a consistent communicative strategy can be observed. These posts often feature cinematic imagery of Formula 1 cars under artificial lights, sweeping aerial shots of the Jeddah Corniche Circuit, and bold, stylized text overlays emphasizing keywords such as “longest,” “fastest,” “speed,” and “modern.” Most of these posts rely heavily on visuals, with little or no narration or spoken language. The result is a form of linguistic and visual minimalism that communicates through tone, aesthetics, and selective messaging.

While this type of content may appear at first glance to follow the conventions of mainstream sports marketing, its repetitive stylistic choices and framing devices suggest a more intentional project of symbolic communication. Within the context of Saudi Arabia’s broader rebranding efforts under Vision 2030, these posts can be read not merely as event promotion, but as discursive acts — carefully curated to project narratives of technological progress, modernity, and global relevance. This pattern, visible across dozens of posts, forms the basis for deeper critical analysis.

This section also applies Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (1992), which, as previously read, treats discourse as simultaneously a textual product, a process of meaning-making, and a social practice incapsulated in power and ideology. The tweet is not examined as a self-contained artifact but as part of a broader communicative structure that helps articulate the values, aspirations, and contradictions of Vision 2030.

Textual Practice

The textual layer of the videos ¹⁰ is built around only a few phrases, but extremely powerful as said before. The language blends technical and affective registers. Technical words evoke performance, innovation, and control — themes central to the Formula 1 brand. The visual aspects, the sounds, and especially the careful choice

¹⁰ <https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1902782195346907568>

https://x.com/Spa_Eng/status/1372530117830971392

<https://x.com/SaudiVision2030/status/1467884466593050624>

https://x.com/TheSaudi_post/status/1466868717040582661

of words such as “passion, speed, historic”, without forgetting the strategic phrasing of them, introduce a human element, a sensory engagement meant to transcend the technical. The use of the superlative “ultimate,” along with the phrasing in another post¹¹ from the @SPA_ENG (English account of the Saudi Press Agency) that describes Formula 1 — linking it with Saudi Arabia — as the “greatest engine race in the world,” strongly suggests a sense of superiority—not only regarding the event itself, but also its symbolic significance. The phrase constructs F1 not as competition, but as an experience — one that resonates emotionally and positions Saudi Arabia within an elite cultural register.

What the videos do not show is just as significant as what it does. The absence of drivers, fans, officials, and Saudi cultural references — including national symbols or language — gives the videos a neutral, global feel rather than a distinctly local identity. As Fairclough (2003) argues, discourse constructs reality selectively, and what is excluded can be as ideologically meaningful as what is included. In this case, the absence of Saudi-specific content suggests that the aim is not to localize the Grand Prix, but to elevate it to a global stage where national identity is made legible through association with speed, light, and spectacle — not tradition or place.

Discursive Practice

Stylistically, the videos resemble content used by other F1 hosts such as Singapore or Monaco, two other Grand Prix on the F1 yearly calendar, and this similarity is precisely what makes Saudi Arabia’s case so interesting: by adopting a familiar global visual language, the Kingdom carefully avoids cultural or political markers that might raise controversy. What stands out is not the originality of the content, but the strategic decision to blend in — to frame Saudi Arabia as a “normal” and modern F1 host through visual conformity. This resemblance reflects again what Fairclough (2010) describes as interdiscursivity — the blending of visual, linguistic, and generic conventions across different contexts. The Saudi promotional style borrows heavily from existing F1 discourse, becoming part of a familiar and trusted style of communication. This helps establish Jeddah’s Grand Prix not as a political or experimental entry, but as already aligned with the sport’s global identity.

This is reinforced through the posts’ deliberate neutrality. The lack of cultural or political references means the videos can circulate freely across audiences, platforms, and geopolitical contexts. According to Satish, Ginesta, and De San Eugenio Vela (2025), such neutrality is intentional; it is a tactic of reputational management, allowing controversial host countries to appear professional and competent, while avoiding political scrutiny. Ibnuyasa and Rasyidah (2023) similarly note that Saudi Arabia’s Grand Prix communications repeatedly rely on visual codes

¹¹ https://x.com/Spa_Eng/status/1467527107278479360

— modern infrastructure, speed, and lighting — that resonate with global expectations of a “future-ready” brand image.

By using F1’s visual grammar without altering it, Saudi Arabia does not disrupt the discourse — it inserts itself into it. As van Dijk (1998) explains, ideological messages often work best not through overt statements, but through the organization and repetition of familiar forms. The choice to speak the language of international spectacle — and to do so without cultural deviation — reinforces Saudi Arabia’s strategic self-placement in a high-status, cosmopolitan domain.

Social Practice

The videos can also be understood within the broader ideological context of Vision 2030, where sport functions as a tool of symbolic governance. As Fairclough (2013) notes, discourse can operate as a “resource for change,” and in this case, the videos function as performances of identity, where spectacle becomes a way for Saudi Arabia to manage legitimacy, promote reform narratives, and position itself within global conversations. Saudi Arabia here also seems to send a message: it not only has the capacity to host a world-class event, but it belongs to the same elite circuit of prestige, innovation, and global relevance that defines Formula 1. The point is, apart from looking modern, to be seen as part of that world.

What remains open to interpretation is the reception of this strategy: while the promotional material frames the Grand Prix as seamlessly integrated into the global F1 circuit, Western media coverage often frames it otherwise — raising issues of sportswashing, political repression, and human rights abuses (ADHRB, 2025). This discrepancy underscores the importance of strategic communication not as a singular message, but as part of a discursive struggle.

Conclusion

These posts do more than promote a sporting event — they stage Saudi Arabia as a global actor through the language of speed, scale, and spectacle. Textually, they use minimal but powerful language to frame the race as both emotional and elite. Discursively, they mirror the branding styles of other high-status hosts, using familiarity to gain legitimacy. And at the social level, this aesthetic strategy allows Saudi Arabia to perform belonging on the global stage — not by showcasing its unique identity, but by visually blending into a world of prestige and modernity. The power of this spectacle lies in what it makes feel obvious: that Saudi Arabia is already part of the club.

The Saudi Grand Prix video creates a sense of belonging — not by showing Saudi culture, but by blending in visually with global F1 content through polished, familiar aesthetics. Whether people believe it or not depends more on how they see it than on what Saudi Arabia says.

Beyond the language of speed and modernity, Saudi Arabia's communication also emphasizes a narrative of progress shaped around its youth. The following section explores how young people are positioned as symbols of national transformation.

4.2.2 Youth and Future Orientation

Another layer of Saudi Arabia's Formula 1 communication strategy focuses on youth and future orientation. This theme works hand-in-hand with the country's wider Vision 2030 narrative, which frequently emphasizes education, innovation, and generational change. In the context of the Grand Prix, youth become both a subject and a symbol - featured not only as participants in media content but also as markers of national development. They are positioned as the inheritors of a future shaped by progress, modernity, and global connection.

A standout example is the August 6, 2024 post¹² by @SaudiArabianGP, which reads: "From biodiversity initiatives to inspiring future generations, we're driving positive change in Saudi Arabia." Accompanied by images of children and students engaging in activities around the racetrack, the post connects the race directly to educational and ecological goals. Though the post is short, its message carries a strong sense of ambition — and this isn't an isolated case, suggesting a deliberate effort to elevate Formula 1 as something beyond its pure and initial nature— or at least to sell this idea: Formula 1 as a learning platform meant to inspire young Saudis and shape how they (and international viewers) imagine the country's future.

¹² <https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1820798752921121116>



Post



Saudi Arabian GP

@SaudiArabianGP



So much more than just a race! 🌱

From biodiversity initiatives to inspiring future generations, we're driving positive change in Saudi Arabia.

#F1 #ESG #SaudiArabianGP 🏎️ @F1



F1 Media @F1Media · Aug 6, 2024

Replying to @F1Media

Saudi Arabia (@SaudiArabianGP)

🌱 Biodiversity programme that took place in the Paddock will contribute to the 50,000m2 of landscaping at the circuit....

[Show more](#)



2:27 PM · Aug 6, 2024 · **2,293** Views

As stated just now, this type of communication isn't unique to one post. It appears again in a tweet ¹³ tied to World Youth Day (August 12, 2024), where the Saudi GP account celebrates "fueling young dreams and driving the next generation," and in others showing school visits to the Jeddah Corniche Circuit, the launch of the eKarting competition for kids ¹⁴, and STEM-related activations like the Future Roadshow truck ¹⁵. These moments — all real, all documented — suggest a consistent effort to make youth part of the Grand Prix story.

Textual Practice

The language used in these posts ¹⁶ is noticeably optimistic and forward-looking. Words like "future," "next generation," "young dreams," and hashtags like #OvertakeTheFuture and #WorldYouthDay are emotionally charged. They invoke a sense of movement — not just on the track, but in society. The rhetorical pattern across these posts is similar: youth are cast as central players in the Kingdom's transformation.

But this kind of language also tends to be vague. While there are mentions of workshops, roadshows, and events, there is little detail about long-term educational outcomes, partnerships with schools, or follow-up on these programs. Like with other themes, the storytelling leans on the symbolic rather than the structural. As Fairclough (2003) notes, promotional discourse often thrives on impression over precision, relying on repetition and emotionally resonant terms to shape public perception.

Thompson and Quilliam (2024) also emphasize how Saudi communication strategies around youth tend to highlight national ambition rather than youth participation — young people are often talked about as future assets, not active participants. This aligns with the tweets' language, which is more about promise than engagement.

Discursive Practice

Talking about the discursive practice, these posts reflect broader trends where youth are increasingly represented as agents of change. In sustainability campaigns, development agendas, or even corporate branding, young people are often portrayed as the face of a better future. Saudi Arabia taps into this familiar frame and links it to Formula 1.

What's also interesting is how the posts visually echo global education and tech branding — children in STEM activities, smiling in branded shirts, participating in structured events. The presence of the Future Roadshow truck, the involvement of F1 teams in education days, and the use of terms like "global platform" signal

¹³ <https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1823064416218202466>

¹⁴ <https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1503310359045804035>

¹⁵ <https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1759202619992510543>

¹⁶ <https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1622201445360586754>

<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1823064416218202466>

<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1461059357026754573>

interdiscursivity. These are not just Saudi posts; they are stylistically aligned with how global institutions frame youth engagement.

This borrowing of style is important: it signals that the Kingdom is not just trying to promote its own future, but to do so in a way that's instantly recognizable to external audiences — a kind of strategic familiarity. And again, it's notable what is missing: there's no mention of challenges youth might face, like access to opportunity or inequality: the story is clean, bright, and uncomplicated.

Thompson and Quilliam (2024) note that while youth are featured prominently in Saudi media narratives, these portrayals often avoid discussing real systemic challenges like job market competition, education quality, or political participation. The same pattern is visible here.

Social Practice

At the social level, this focus on youth plays a specific role in Saudi Arabia's image-making. By linking children and education with Formula 1, the state offers a version of itself that is hopeful, active, and invested in its people. These posts suggest that the country is building not just infrastructure, but minds — training future engineers, racers, and innovators. It's a flattering story that international audiences are likely to welcome.

Still, it's hard to ignore how top-down this whole narrative feels. Like other parts of Saudi Arabia's Formula 1 messaging, the youth angle seems tightly controlled. Everything is well-organized and polished, from the events to the language used — but there's not much sign of young people speaking for themselves or shaping the message. Instead, the posts give off the impression that the future is being delivered to them, not built with them, fitting with the previously named "managed modernization" of Satish et al. (2025). In this case, young people are branding tools: their smiles, uniforms, and participation become a kind of visual proof that Vision 2030 is working.

Thompson and Quilliam (2024) support this interpretation, suggesting that young Saudis are often portrayed in official messaging as "passive beneficiaries of state-driven transformation," rather than as citizens with a voice in shaping their futures.

Complementing the youth narrative is a deliberate focus on entertainment and celebrity presence. The next section analyzes how star power and pop culture function as tools of soft power in Formula 1 discourse.

4.2.3 Celebrity culture

In Saudi Arabia's Formula 1 communication strategy, celebrity presence and entertainment events play a critical role. More than add-ons to the racing experience — they are central to the image being projected. With high-profile musical

performances, celebrity guests, and branded content, the Grand Prix becomes a space where glamour and soft power meet. This strategy aligns closely with the logic of symbolic power described throughout this chapter, where meaning is built through aesthetics, affect, and association.

The promotional post from March 2025 announcing performances by Jennifer Lopez, Peggy Gou and Partynextdoor for the F1 Saudi Arabian Grand Prix stands out as a key example¹⁷. Rather than promoting the sport itself, the post emphasizes the concert lineup — turning the Grand Prix into a full-scale entertainment spectacle. This use of celebrity is not incidental. It is a deliberate attempt to associate Saudi Arabia with global cultural icons and to reframe the country's image in the eyes of international and domestic audiences alike (Arabianbusiness.com, 2025).

Another example of this strategy is again at F1 Jeddah Grand Prix weekend, where global celebrities like Tom Brady, Will Smith, and Didier Drogba were not just attending — they were team owners. The narrative built around these appearances was one of innovation, marine preservation, and global relevance (TCA Regional News, 2025). These celebrities become co-authors of the Saudi soft power story, lending their prestige to a broader strategy of image transformation.

Textual Practice

The language in the celebrity-focused posts is promotional, energetic, and global. Hashtags like #JLoAtJeddah or phrases such as "world's biggest stars" aim to position the event — and by extension, the country — as culturally vibrant and globally connected. These posts focus less on the race and more on who is there and what else is happening. This shift in focus reveals a lot: it is not just a motorsport event; it is an international spectacle.

There is also a strategic layering at work: by placing these artists and athletes at the forefront of their content, the promoters bypass more controversial associations and push an aspirational message: Saudi Arabia as a destination of entertainment, talent, and lifestyle. As Fairclough (2003) might argue, this is not just about what is said, but what is repeatedly framed and reinforced — creating a version of reality by choosing what to show and what to ignore.

Discursive Practice

From a discursive standpoint, these posts align Saudi Arabia with a global celebrity economy — one that thrives on recognition, relevance, and reach. The spectacle seems to be used to blur lines between East and West, tradition and modernity. Saudi Arabia is not positioned as different, but as already included in the elite circuits of entertainment and global sport.

This practice draws from what Couldry (2003) describes as the "myth of the mediated centre," where societies position themselves as the center of global cultural production by showcasing access to celebrity. In this case, inviting global

¹⁷ <https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1912244235606147404>

artists and giving them a platform within the Saudi Grand Prix is a way to symbolically claim cultural centrality — a place in the spotlight.

At the same time, there is very little local cultural representation in these entertainment posts. Saudi music, artists, or heritage are not front and center. Instead, the aesthetic is international, sleek, and recognizable. The implication is that the Kingdom's path to legitimacy is through global standards of entertainment — not through the promotion of its own cultural uniqueness.

Social Practice

At the level of social practice, celebrity appearances and international concerts serve as tools of image softening. They create a story of openness, youth appeal, and cultural integration — crucial for a nation trying to diversify its economy and improve its reputation abroad.

But this strategy also raises questions. As Thompson and Quilliam (2024) point out, cultural diplomacy through events like concerts and sports can appear inclusive while remaining carefully controlled. These forms of branding do not necessarily reflect structural change but operate more as performances of change.

Moreover, there is a political dimension to the choice of celebrities and events. Stars with global appeal and apolitical profiles are ideal for avoiding controversy. They signal modernity without touching sensitive issues. It's not just about who is featured, but why they are chosen — and what their presence helps to obscure.

Conclusion

Celebrity culture and high-profile entertainment are not side elements in Saudi Arabia's Formula 1 strategy — they are central to how the country is branding itself. The posts build a polished, global image that focuses on who is seen at the events rather than what is happening within society. Through music, fame, and international spectacle, Saudi Arabia positions itself as open, exciting, and plugged into global culture. Yet, beneath this star-studded exterior lies a strategic form of communication — one that elevates visibility while sidestepping deeper social and political questions.

Rounding out this category, the final theme looks at how national culture and artistic expression are woven into the Formula 1 event, offering a more localized but equally symbolic layer of meaning.

4.2.4 Cultural Identity and Artistic Expression

Alongside celebrity culture, Saudi Arabia's Formula 1 communications also focus on promoting the country's culture and creativity. While the first analyzed posts are clearly about diplomacy and investment, these others highlight national traditions, art, and heritage. These messages form a softer form of branding — one that tries to link Saudi identity with values like creativity, openness, and tradition.

Posts¹⁸ from @SaudiArabianGP on X show this well. For instance, during one event, each driver's name was written in both English and Arabic above their garage.



This simple design choice sends a message of cultural pride. It's a way of saying that Saudi identity can exist alongside global events like Formula 1, without being overshadowed. As the UAB report notes, local identity can be blended into

¹⁸ <https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1465621629182963713>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1498256129213833217>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1546547990491537412>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1587006470024937472>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1711772889450516829>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1766026059793760646>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1766533521743434173>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1435559322256302080>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1682042686902087680>

international platforms in a way that enhances rather than hides cultural uniqueness (UAB, 2023).

Hospitality is another key theme. Several tweets¹⁹ from 2024 invite visitors to “experience Saudi culture,” using photos of local dishes, traditional clothing, and welcoming hosts. These posts go beyond promoting services — they suggest that hospitality itself is part of the national identity. Compared to older representations of Saudi Arabia, which often focused on politics or religion, these messages present a more personal and engaging image.

Textual Practice

The words used in all the posts around this theme — like “culture,” “heritage,” “art” “hospitality” — help shape this narrative. Unlike the more technical tone of investment posts, this language feels warmer and more inviting. Hashtags like #OvertakeTheFuture and #SaudiCulture suggest that Saudi Arabia is both modern and rooted in tradition.

This effort to blend traditional and modern elements aligns with findings from the AAU semester project “Disparities in Soft Power Potential” (2024), which emphasizes that Gulf States often use a mix of traditional culture and modern.

The “Race Through Art” initiative, (an art competition inviting Saudi artists to design artworks reflecting the Kingdom's culture, with winning pieces displayed at the Jeddah F1 Grand Prix) reflects this approach by creating culturally inspired designs for the racetrack, turning a global sporting venue into a platform for local expression (Arabnews, 2025).

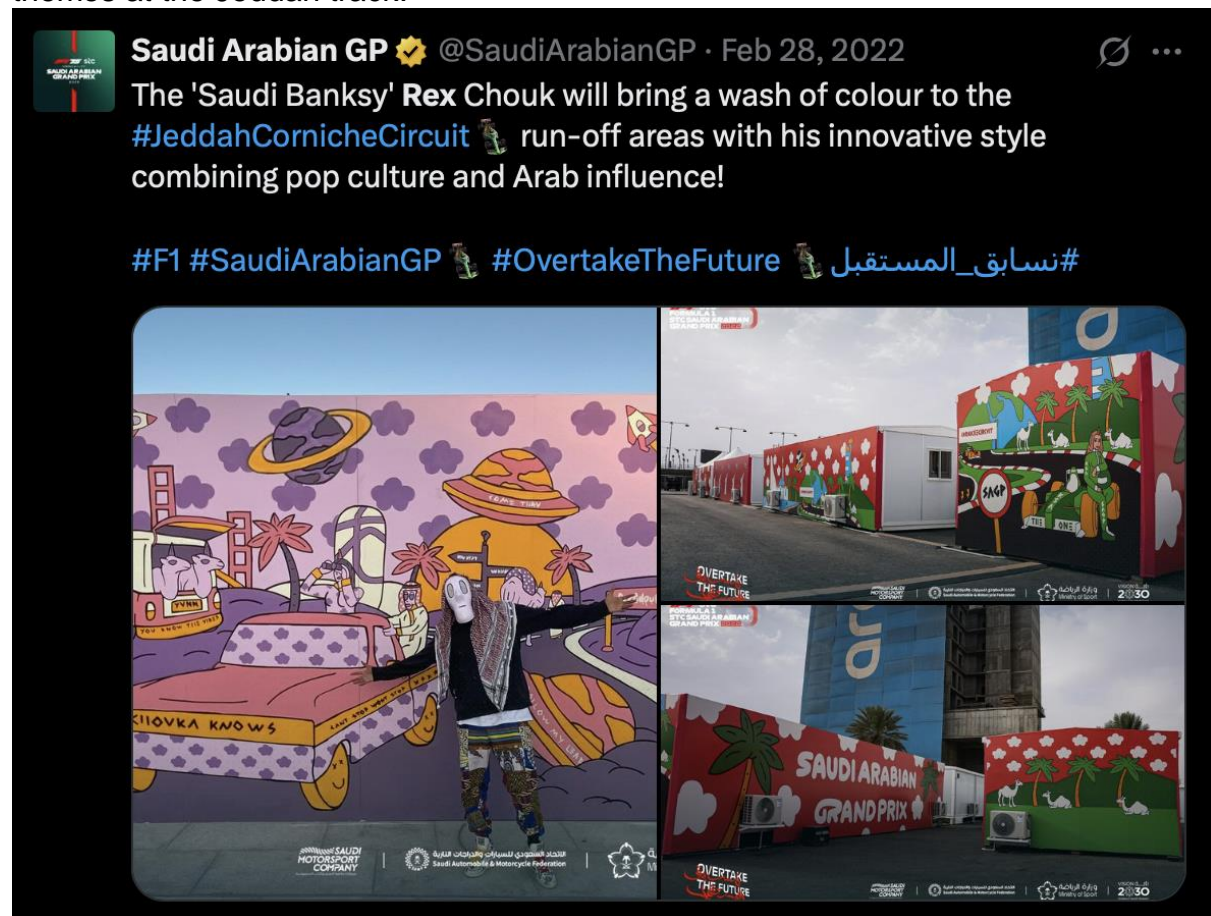
This brought together national identity and global visibility in a creative way and let Saudi Arabia present itself not just as a host, but as a participant in shaping the cultural side of the event.

Discursive Practice

Instead of long descriptions, many of these posts use photos and videos. Images of murals, drone light shows, Arabic script, and art installations do the work of telling a story. Bou Mansour (2023) explains that this kind of visual communication is now common in public diplomacy. Rather than trying to argue a point, the goal is to create a strong visual impression.

¹⁹ <https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1848741203774234925>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1892980404602200420>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1912965324443685113>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1913132775844032890>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1641485442028802051>
<https://x.com/SaudiArabianGP/status/1724819549688889692>

One example is the work by artist Rex Chouk, who combined pop art with Arab themes at the Jeddah track:



These kinds of installations make the Jeddah Grand Prix a place where culture is put on display. This doesn't mean spectators suddenly understand Saudi culture in depth, but it does offer a different lens through which to view the country. It adds texture to the usual global event format.

Social Practice

Socially, this approach fits into what Nye's (2004) vision of soft power — influencing others through appeal rather than pressure. The use of cultural images and stories helps Saudi Arabia show another side of itself. It supports the bigger goal of shifting how the country is seen internationally.

The inclusion of Jeddah's heritage in the context of the F1 weekend reflects this approach. It suggests that progress doesn't have to come at the expense of tradition. As the UAB article points out, keeping a connection to local history can actually strengthen a country's image in the long term (UAB, 2023).

So while these cultural messages might seem secondary, they are part of a larger rethinking of how Saudi Arabia presents itself. Instead of focusing only on what might appeal most to international audiences, the posts include local styles, language, and themes. Whether it's Arabic lettering or traditional art, the emphasis is on giving global events a local feel.

Conclusion

Even if they aren't as explicitly political as investment summits or diplomatic meetings, these cultural posts are still doing important work. They help paint Saudi Arabia as creative, welcoming, and proud of its heritage.

In terms of language, they use words that evoke tradition and emotion. Visually, they rely on strong images to tell the story. And socially, they build soft power by giving people a way to connect with Saudi identity. Within the broader Vision 2030 plan, these efforts show how art and culture are key tools in shaping the nation's story.

5. Discussion

The analysis suggests that Saudi Arabia's use of Formula 1 extends beyond promoting a sporting event and can be interpreted as part of a broader communication strategy.

5.1 Formula 1 as Strategic Communication

While the Grand Prix is clearly a major sporting and entertainment event, the way it is communicated through official posts hints at broader goals. Themes like economic partnerships, gender inclusion, and sustainability are often highlighted, which points to an effort to align with the Vision 2030 reform agenda and project a modern, future-oriented image. At the same time, this doesn't mean every message is purely strategic. Some posts may genuinely reflect positive developments or national pride in hosting such a global event. However, much of the content remains general and polished. For instance, sustainability messages do use some tangible actions, but they often use buzzwords like "clean energy" or "green future" but rarely explain what actions are actually being taken, without supporting data. In a similar way, posts about gender inclusion tend to focus on symbolic moments, like a woman driving an F1 car, rather than discussing long-term social or legal change. This reflects what Fairclough describes as discourse shaping reality — not just reporting facts but building a certain version of them. Through repeated use of certain words, images, and themes, Saudi Arabia presents itself as open, advanced, and aligned with global values. Whether this image fully reflects reality or not is open to interpretation, but the strategy seems to be about making that version visible to an international audience.

5.2 Performance and Perception

The second group of themes focused more on image and emotion than on policy. Posts about spectacle, youth, celebrity culture, and art created a feeling of excitement and modernity. These messages didn't try to explain reforms or provide evidence — instead, they worked by creating a strong visual impact. Aerial shots of the Jeddah track, dramatic lighting, music events, and global celebrity appearances helped build a version of Saudi Arabia that feels connected, exciting, and culturally relevant. This kind of messaging aligns with the idea of soft power — trying to influence how others see a country through attraction rather than pressure. The visual style of many posts resembled content from other Grand Prix hosts like Monaco or Singapore. This wasn't accidental. By using similar formats and aesthetics, Saudi Arabia appears to position itself as part of the same global circle — not just as a host, but as a country that belongs in the world of elite, high-tech events. However, the focus on international appeal sometimes meant that local culture was pushed to the background. While some posts featured Arabic script, art, or food, these were not always central to the message. The strategy seemed to be about blending in with global expectations rather than standing out with a distinct identity, supporting Fairclough's concept of interdiscursivity. In this case, it seems that Saudi Arabia uses global visual and narrative styles to present itself as familiar and modern. Whether this reflects reality or is just a polished performance depends on the viewer, but the goal appears to be building international legitimacy through visual storytelling.

5.3 Strategic Silence and Selective Visibility

One of the most noticeable patterns in the posts was not just what was shown, but what was left out. While there were many posts about inclusion, innovation, and sustainability, there was very little mention of challenges or controversies. For example, while women were occasionally featured in F1 content, there was no mention of the broader legal system, such as the guardianship laws. Similarly, sustainability was often discussed in positive terms, without addressing issues like oil dependency or carbon emissions. This kind of strategic silence is not unusual in promotional communication. As both Fairclough (2003) and van Dijk (1998) point out, power in discourse often works through omission — by deciding what not to talk about. In this context, silence becomes a tool: it allows Saudi Arabia to promote a positive image while avoiding more difficult or controversial topics. This doesn't mean the messages are dishonest, but it does show how communication can be used to control the narrative. By focusing on certain ideas and leaving out others, the messaging becomes more appealing to global audiences who may not be familiar with the country's internal situation. This selective visibility plays a key role in shaping international perception — especially in a world where images often matter as much as facts.

5.4 Balancing Reform and Image

The contrast between reform-focused posts and symbolic, emotional ones reveals an important tension in Saudi Arabia's communication strategy. On one hand, there is a clear attempt to show the country as serious about reform — through investment deals, sustainability efforts, and inclusion campaigns. On the other hand, much of the messaging relies heavily on style, emotion, and performance — designed more to create an impression than to explain policy, creating a kind of balancing act. The country wants to appear as forward-looking and progressive, but without attracting

too much criticism or attention to unresolved issues. This can be seen in the way global celebrities are featured in posts, or how high-profile partnerships are announced without going into much detail. The goal seems to be creating a strong, clean, and exciting image that supports Saudi Arabia's place in global conversations — especially around sport, economy, and culture. At the same time, this strategy is not without risks: International media and human rights organizations have raised concerns about “sportswashing” — the idea that sporting events are used to distract from political or human rights issues. Whether or not this label is fully fair, it shows how public perception is complex and shaped by many different forces; what one audience sees as progress, another may view as reputation management. Still, Formula 1 gives Saudi Arabia a unique opportunity to tell its story — or at least, the version of it that it wants the world to see. And as this thesis has shown, that version is crafted through careful use of language, visuals, and narrative framing. The result is a form of discursive branding, where communication becomes a tool not just for promotion, but for shaping how a nation is understood.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

This thesis explored how a global sporting event — the Formula 1 Grand Prix — becomes more than just entertainment when framed through state-driven discourse. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the event offers a communicative opportunity: a space where narratives of reform, modernity, and global relevance are promoted to an international audience. Through the application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the project examined how carefully selected language and imagery are used to support broader national ambitions. Rather than treating the posts as isolated messages, the analysis viewed them as part of an ongoing, strategic effort to position the country within a specific global narrative — one tied to openness, development, and prestige. What emerged from the study was a pattern of communication that balances substance with image. Messages often blended policy references with promotional tone, suggesting that reputation-building is not a separate task from governance, but part of it. This reveals the increasingly blurred lines between soft power, media performance, and state identity in a globalized digital landscape. One of the key takeaways is that meaning in such communication is not only shaped by what is shown, but also by what remains silent. Omission, in this case, is not a lack but a technique — a way to manage complexity in favor of clarity and control. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for critically engaging with any nation's image in the age of digital diplomacy and spectacle.

7.Future Research

This study focused only on state-generated messages. Future research could explore how audiences — both domestic and international — respond to or interpret these posts. Another direction could involve comparing Saudi Arabia's use of sport as a communication platform with that of other states engaging in similar strategies. For example, while this thesis has focused specifically on Saudi Arabia's strategic use of Formula 1 for international image-making, it is important to acknowledge that similar nation branding strategies are being employed across the Gulf region — most notably by Qatar. A promising direction for future research would be to conduct a comparative study between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, particularly looking at how

both states use sports mega-events to project soft power, enhance national reputation, and manage international perception.

Qatar's organization of the 2022 FIFA World Cup stands as a landmark example of strategic sports diplomacy. The event was designed not only to promote Qatar as a modern and globally connected nation but also to elevate its position within regional and international politics (Kerry et al., 2024). Like Saudi Arabia, Qatar used sports as a soft power tool to shift attention from political criticisms toward an image of progress, openness, and development. However, the approach and execution differ significantly, offering a useful point of comparison for scholars interested in the relationship between sport, discourse, and international branding.

A comparative study could examine several important dimensions. For instance, Qatar opted for a single, high-stakes event, pouring immense resources into the FIFA World Cup as a one-time opportunity to capture the world's attention. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, appears to be pursuing a longer-term strategy, spreading its efforts across multiple events including Formula 1, LIV Golf, and its bid for future Olympics and World Cups — all nested within its broader Vision 2030 framework (France 24, 2020). This difference in temporal structure — one immediate and concentrated, the other gradual and sustained — would allow researchers to assess how the longevity or intensity of sports diplomacy affects global reception and narrative control.

Moreover, future research could also analyze how each country's media environment and institutional context shape their communication strategies. Qatar benefits from the global influence of Al Jazeera - state-funded international news organization based in Qatar -, which has become a key player in shaping the Middle East's media narrative, while Saudi Arabia relies more heavily on centralized state-controlled outlets and international partnerships to promote its vision. (Al Jazeera Media Network) This distinction could lead to different dynamics in how each country handles international critique, audience engagement, and reputation management.

Equally interesting would be a comparative exploration of public and media reception — particularly in the West — where both countries have faced accusations of “sportswashing” (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015). While Qatar received widespread criticism over labor conditions and human rights in the lead-up to the World Cup (The New Yorker, 2022), Saudi Arabia continues to encounter international skepticism regarding gender equality, civil liberties, and freedom of expression. A comparative discourse analysis of international press coverage, NGO statements, and public reactions would offer deeper insight into how effective these sports mega-events really are at shaping perception versus reinforcing suspicion.

In addition, such a comparative study could also explore the symbolic elements of each country's branding strategy — including the language, imagery, and values promoted during their events. Qatar emphasized hospitality, Arab culture, and inclusiveness during the World Cup, often in response to cultural stereotypes. Saudi Arabia's messaging around Formula 1 leans more heavily on aesthetics of modernity, speed, infrastructure, and global relevance. An analysis of these representational choices would provide insight into how national identity is selectively performed for foreign audiences.

Ultimately, while this thesis focused only on the Saudi case for reasons of scope and coherence, a broader comparative approach would yield a more comprehensive understanding of how authoritarian states in the Gulf are navigating the complex terrain of global perception and legitimacy. It would also provide a clearer picture of the strengths and limitations of using sport as a vehicle for international image repair in the absence of substantial political change.

By expanding the lens to include Qatar — and potentially other emerging sports hosts like the UAE — future research could contribute meaningfully to the literature on authoritarian branding, strategic communication, and soft power. This would not only deepen academic understanding but also help policymakers and journalists assess the real implications of high-profile sporting investments in global governance, diplomacy, and reputation-building.

Another aspect to consider is the method: this thesis focused mainly on the analysis of official communication, but future research could take the topic further by including more diverse methods. For example, interviews with people working in communication, marketing, or event planning could give a clearer idea of how these messages are created and what goals they are meant to achieve. It would also be interesting to conduct surveys with international audiences — especially in Western countries — to better understand how Saudi Arabia's Formula 1 messaging is actually received. This could help measure whether the intended image of modernity and reform really comes across. Another useful addition could be the study of social media engagement data, to see which kinds of posts or messages get the most attention or support. Including these kinds of methods in future research would give a more complete view of how sport is used for nation branding, both in terms of production and audience reaction.

8.BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AAlshuwaikhat, H. M., & Mohammed, I. (2017). Sustainability matters in national development visions—Evidence from Saudi Arabia’s Vision for 2030. *Sustainability*, 9(3), 408.
- AAU. (2024). *Disparities in Soft Power Potential: A Comparative Analysis of Cultural Diplomacy in the Gulf*. Aalborg University 8th Semester Project.
- Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain. (2025, February 25). *F1 & the issue of sportswashing: What can be done?*
- Amnesty International. (2021, December 3). *Saudi Arabia: Grand Prix must not deflect attention from dismal human rights record*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/12/saudi-arabia-grand-prix-must-not-deflect-attention-from-dismal-human-rights-record/>
- Anholt, S. (2007). *Competitive identity: The new brand management for nations, cities and regions*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Arab News. (2019, September 22). Rise and fall of the Saudi religious police.

- Arabianbusiness.com. (2025, April 15). *F1 Saudi Arabian Grand Prix 2025 returns to Jeddah: Dates, record-breaking speeds, concert lineup*. <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/f1-saudi-arabian-grand-prix-2025-returns-jeddah/docview/3190097941/se-2?accountid=8144>
- Bayle, E. (2025). *Governance, regulations and strategic narratives in mega sporting events*.
- Berman, N. (2023, July 13). *Saudi Arabia's Investments Raise Questions of 'Sportswashing'*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/saudi-arabias-investments-raise-questions-sportswashing>
- Bou Mansour, Y. (2023). *Disparities in Soft Power Potential: A Comparative Analysis of Cultural Diplomacy in the Gulf*. UAB Repository
- Brannagan, P. M., & Giulianotti, R. (2015). Soft power and soft disempowerment: Qatar, global sport and football's 2022 World Cup. *Leisure Studies*, 34(6), 703–719.
- Chong, D., & Druckman, J. N. (2007). Framing theory. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 10, 103–126.
- Couldry, N. (2003). *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*. Routledge.
- Czornik, K. (2024). The role of soft power in shaping Saudi Arabia's regional and global position. *Przegląd Strategiczny*, 17(1), 147–160. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ps.2024.1.9>
- Davis, L., Plumley, D., & Wilson, R. (2023). For the love of 'sportswashing'; LIV Golf and Saudi Arabia's push for legitimacy in elite sport. *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 30(2), 188–206.
- Dinnie, K. (2008). *Nation branding: Concepts, issues, practice*. Elsevier.
- Dubinsky, Y. (2023). *Nation branding and sports diplomacy: Global communication in a multipolar world*. Springer.
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58.
- Ettinger, A. (2023). Saudi Arabia, sports diplomacy and authoritarian capitalism in world politics. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 15(3), 531–547.
- Fan, Y. (2010). Branding the nation: Towards a better understanding. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 6(2), 97–103.
- Fairclough, N. (1992) *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1996). A reply to Henry Widdowson's "Discourse analysis: a critical view." *Language and Literature*, 5(1), 49–56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/096394709600500105> (Original work published 1996)
- Fairclough, N. (2001) *Language and Power*. Pearson Education.
- Fairclough, N. (2003) *Analysing discourse: textual analysis for social research*. London ; New York: Routledge.
- Fairclough, N. (2010) *Critical discourse analysis: the critical study of language*. 2. Harlow: Longman (Book, Whole).
- Fairclough, N. (2013) 'Critical discourse analysis and critical policy studies', *Critical Policy Studies*, 7(2), pp. 177–197.

- France 24. (2020, January 2). Saudi uses sports ‘soft power’ as lever of influence. *France 24*. <https://www.france24.com/en/20200102-saudi-uses-sports-soft-power-as-lever-of-influence>
- Folkenflik, D. (2021, December 4). *Formula 1 race in Saudi Arabia draws accusations of 'sportswashing'*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2021/12/04/1061539864/formula-1-race-in-saudi-arabia-draws-accusations-of-sportswashing>
- “Formula 1: Saudi Arabia Declares School Holiday for Jeddah Grand Prix 2025.” *Arabianbusiness.Com*, 2025.
- Gilley, B. (2012). Authoritarian environmentalism and China's response to climate change. *Environmental Politics*, 21(2), 287–307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2012.651904>
- Grix, J., & Brannagan, P. M. (2024). Sports mega-events as foreign policy: Sport diplomacy, soft power, and sportswashing. *American Behavioral Scientist*.
- Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., van Ruler, B., Vercic, D., & Sriramesh, K. (2007). Defining strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1(1), 3–35.
- Human Rights Watch. (2021, December 2). *F1 under pressure to speak out against Saudi human rights abuses*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/12/02/f1-under-pressure-speak-out-against-saudi-human-rights-abuses>
- Ibnuyasa, Abiyu & Rasyidah, Resa. (2023). Upaya Arab Saudi Menggapai Saudi Vision 2023: Nation Branding via Event F1 Tahun 2020-2022. *Jurnal Hubungan Internasional*. 16. 510-527. [10.20473/jhi.v16i2.41698](https://doi.org/10.20473/jhi.v16i2.41698).
- Kerry, L., Medina Aguerrebere, P., Burgess, S., & Chadli, L. (2024). Branding countries through multicultural events: A quantitative analysis of the impact of the FIFA World Cup 2022 on Qatar’s brand. *Frontiers in Communication*, 9.
- Khan, M. H. (2020). Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030: Strategic framework for economic diversification. *Defence Journal*.
- Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (2016). *Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*. Retrieved from <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa>
- Murray, S. (2018). *Sports diplomacy: Origins, theory and practice*. Routledge.
- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. PublicAffairs.
- NPR. (2021, November 29). *From Formula One to Olympics, nations are accused of sportswashing their image*. <https://www.npr.org/2021/11/29/1058048696/saudi-arabia-formula-1-china-olympics-human-rights-sports>
- Petersen-Smith, K. (2023). Saudi Arabia's LIV Golf League is sportswashing at its worst. *Foreign Policy in Focus*.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
- Satish, Krishna, et al. “Football and Nation Branding: A Case Study of Saudi Arabia’s Strategy for Global Football Recognition.” *AdComunica*, 2024, pp. 27–52, <https://doi.org/10.6035/adcomunica.7776>.
- SMC. (2023, January 31). SMC announces changes to Jeddah Corniche Circuit ahead of March F1 race. *ME Construction News*. <https://meconstructionnews.com/55691/smc-announces-changes-to-jeddah-corniche-circuit-ahead-of-march-f1-race>
- Swart, K., & Hussain, U. (2023). FIFA World Cup in Qatar: Under the gaze of Western media. In *Mega-events in Asia* (pp. 97–111). Springer.

- TCA Regional News. (2025, January 16). *Teams owners Tom Brady, Will Smith and Didier Drogba prepare for E1 Jeddah Grand Prix*.
- The Guardian (2017). *Saudi cleric banned after claiming women have 'a quarter of a brain'*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/23/saudi-cleric-saad-al-hijri-banned-woman-driving-cars-quarter-brain>
- The New Yorker. (2022, November 22). Qatar's tarnished World Cup. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/qatars-tarnished-world-cup>
- Thompson, M., & Quilliam, N. (2024). *Soft Power and Nation Branding in the Gulf: Communication, Identity and Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Online websites

- [FIA Women in Motorsport Commission member, Aseel Al Hamad, behind the wheel of an F1 car \(BWT Alpine F1 team\) in Saudi Arabia | Federation Internationale de l'Automobile](#)
- Al Jazeera Media Network. (n.d.). *About us*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/about-us>
- [F1 & the issue of sportswashing: what can be done? | Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain](#)
- <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa>
- https://www.arabnews.com/node/1558176/saudi-arabia?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- <https://doi.org/10.6035/adcomunica.7776>.
- <https://doi.org/10.1177/096394709600500105>
- <https://meconstructionnews.com/55691/smc-announces-changes-to-jeddah-corniche-circuit-ahead-of-march-f1-race>
- <https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/teams-owners-tom-brady-will-smith-didier-drogba/docview/3156059980/se-2?accountid=8144>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/23/saudi-cleric-saad-al-hijri-banned-woman-driving-cars-quarter-brain>
- [Cop 16 in Riyadh – A New Outlook and a Water Focus – WUAB](#)
- [UNCCD 16th session of the Conference of the Parties | UNCCD](#)
- [UNCCD COP16 - Crop Trust](#)
- <https://www.jeddahcentral.com/en/news-and-media/news/2022/09/20/08/08/jcdc-and-cruise-saudi-sign-an-mou-to-develop-the-design-for-the-jeddah-central-project>