

Construction of International Football Player Transfers to the Saudi Pro-league in BBC Sport News: A Framing Approach to Media Discourse

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Abstract

This study examines how the international football player transfers to the Saudi Pro-league were framed in BBC Sport discourse during 2023. Drawing on a framing approach to discourse, thematic patterns, prominent social actors, and framing functions were investigated. The findings demonstrate that international football player transfers to the Saudi Pro-league were constructed through four main frames: Development and Change, Economic Investment, Sportswashing, and Threat and Danger. These frames are formed through the strategic allocation of voice to elite social actors, producing overlapping and sometimes contradictory evaluations of Saudi Arabia's investment in football. The study reveals that framing operates as a dynamic and contested process, reflecting broader tensions in Western media representations of non-Western modernization projects. By aligning the findings with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and soft power strategies, the article extends media framing research beyond Western contexts and offers insights into how national sports initiatives are negotiated and interpreted in international media discourse.

Keywords: Frames, Framing Theory, International Football Players Transfer, Media Discourse, Saudi Pro-league, Social Actors.

Introduction

Recently, Saudi Arabia has become a notable investor in global sports leagues, clubs, and athletes (Brannagan and Reiche, 2025). During 2023-24 season, a total of US\$957 million was spent by the Saudi Pro-league (SPL) clubs on international transfers positioning Saudi Arabia as one of the most active football markets in the world (Deloitte, 2023). High-profile international players such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar da Silva Santos Júnior have been transferred to the SPL, raising the league's international profile (The National, 2023).

The rapid international development of the SPL has been supported by the Public Investment Fund (PIF) aligning sport development with the country's Vision 2030 agenda. The remarkable investment

in sport has attracted the attention of the international journalists, who have covered the SPL in media discourse framing its expansion through narratives of ambition, soft power, and political influence.

BBC sport, as a leading global news outlet, plays an important role in constructing frames for the SPL's growth. Its discourse both reflects and constructs the meanings to be perceived by international audiences. Therefore, examining BBC Sport's framing of international player transfers to the SPL offers insight into media constructions on global sport and national image, revealing broader dynamics of power, identity, and globalization.

Literature Review

Sport activities in the Gulf States:

Research on sport in the Gulf States has explored dominant themes that interpret investment in sport activities in the region (Taylor et al., 2023). Most prominently, scholars argued that through activities taking place in the Gulf, sport is used as a soft power tool to enhance nations' global image and to exert influence on other states through economic and cultural power (Ettinger, 2023; Davis et al., 2023). Saudi Arabia, in alignment with Vision 2030, aims to position itself as a global leader by activating different diplomatic strategies, including investment in sport (Ettinger, 2023).

From a different perspective, Ettinger viewed the Kingdom's investment in sport as primarily oriented toward economic diversification and regime legitimacy within an evolving system of global capitalism (2023). This perspective frames investment in sport projects as a form of social reform embedded within the broader Vision 2030 transformation agenda. Media critics, however, argue that Gulf nations initiate such activities to deflect attention of human rights concerns through what they term 'sportswashing', understood as a strategic use of sport to mitigate negative perceptions related to human rights. It is also suggested that Gulf countries utilize sports to boost tourism and showcase their global offerings (Davis et al., 2023; Brannagan and Reiche, 2025). Conversely, domestic Gulf media tend to frame the same events more positively, focusing on progress, national pride, and global recognition.

Sports and international football player transfers in media discourse:

Media coverage of sport plays a central role in shaping public perception of sporting moves through the process of framing, whereby journalists select and emphasize specific aspects and underrepresent others (Entman, 1993; Price et al., 1997). Instead of reporting on the factual details of sporting events activities, fees, contract timing, or club plans, media discourse often frames sport events in terms of political issues, financial power or national significance (McCombs, 2004). International high-profile athletes are therefore framed as international representatives of social or political entities rather than as athletic professionals. The selectively constructed frames shape how audiences interpret and evaluate sporting events, including football player transfers. These frames in turn, influence perceptions, attitudes and behavioural intentions, extending to fan loyalty and media consumption (Price et al., 1997).

Within the media framing of sports and football transfers, international football player transfers (IFPT) to the SPL have been increasingly covered as aspects of broader political, economic and cultural transformation in world football. In this regard, international media- particularly Western outlets such as BBC Sport- emphasise themes of financial power and challenges to the dominance of the traditional European leagues, positioning SPL within contested narratives about globalization and legitimacy in sport (McCombs, 2004). The signings of high-profile players are frequently framed as symbols of economic and political influence, linking football transfers to narratives of soft power and nation branding (Boykoff, 2022; Brannage and Reiche, 2025). Beyond sporting and commercial considerations, IFPT may also be framed as ethical and political behaviour. Western media and journalism often focus on themes of moral controversy and political aims or ideologies. Within this frame, when player transfers are linked to state-supported leagues, thus providing discursive conditions for sportswashing to emerge (Entman, 1993; Boykoff, 2022; Grix and Brannagan, 2024). In other words, high-profile player mobility is not represented as sporting or commercial decisions, but as acts of nation branding or reputation management. These constructed frames indicate that IFPT are not merely reported as sporting events. Rather, it is discursively constructed through selective emphasis and strategies of meaning-making, raising such sport issue particularly suitable to analysis through framing theory.

Framing theory:

In media and communication studies, framing is recognised as a communicative strategic process through which reality is constructed rather than simply reflected (Davies, 2018). This process includes selecting what to convey, highlighting or obscuring certain aspects of a topic, and employing specific communication strategies to portray an intended image. The concepts of ‘frames in communication’ or ‘media frames’ (Chong and Druckman, 2007) originally stem from (Entman, 1993: 52) definition of framing, which is widely adopted by media framing researchers:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral valuation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.

According to this definition, frames are recognised in media discourse through the selection of language features that make topics salient within the text. As a journalistic convention, media elites select, filter, construct and share the news they want to communicate (Misener, 2013). In doing so, they employ the cognitive device of framing to encode and interpret information with a specific effect (Pan and Kosicki, 1993: 58). In discourse, framing is attained by using the textual features like keywords, catch phrases, quotations and stereotypical images. Pan and Kosicki (1993: 58) further argue that “every news story contains a dominant theme which functions as the central organizing idea and constitutes the frame of the story”. In discourse analysis, this means that identifying the theme is the primary step in exploring the framing process.

In terms of analysing frames, there are methods to investigate the processes that underpin the construction of frames and how they are used to present information. In several studies, the most widely used approach in framing research is Entman's framing functions (1993). Other studies have applied the 'media package' approach (Gamson and Modigliani's, 1989) which combines the investigation of framing functions with the analysis of language and communication strategies to contextualise a particular issue.

Concerning sports developments in the Arabian Gulf, existing literature has explored this topic through themes of soft power, commercialisation, and geopolitical influence (Taylor et al., 2023). Despite this growing body of research on framing sports in the Arabian Gulf, limited attention has been paid to see how different dimensions intersect in Western media (Boyle, 2006, Boykoff, 2022) to construct Saudi investment in football. In other words, there is a lack of empirical research that integrates framing theory with the analysis of international discourse on football player transfers. Addressing this gap, the present study aims to examine how IFPT to the SPL are constructed in BBC Sports coverage during 2023 using framing theory, which provides a useful analytical toolkit to answer the research question. By exploring football players transfers discourse, the study contributes to understanding how media representations shape power relations, legitimacy, and meaning-making in contemporary football, where high-profile player transfers are closely tied to social and political narratives.

Therefore, the study aims to answer the following research question:

How were international football player transfers to Saudi Pro-league constructed in BBC Sport discourse?

This question is unpacked into the following sub questions:

- RQ1. What social actors and themes are identified in BBC Sport discourse?
- RQ2. What frames are constructed? And how they are framed in the examined discourse?

Data and Methodology

The analysis draws on a small, specialised corpus, compiled from news articles published by BBC Sport in 2023. This period was particularly chosen because it marked a critical point in the internationalisation of the SPL, characterised by an influx of high-profile international football players. This expansion generated extensive global media coverage, making it particularly suitable for examining media framing. The dataset was collected from The BBC Sport section, which constitutes a rich, accessible global source for sports news. In addition, it is considered one of the most influential news outlets, known for its perceived neutrality in the UK and internationally (Nielsen et al., 2025). Using the search terms "Saudi Pro-league", "Saudi football transfer", and "international football transfer to Saudi", an online search was conducted on the BBC Sport website to generate all subject related articles published between 1 January and 31 December 2023. Duplicate articles, links, images, advertisements, and reader comments were removed from the compiled data.

This resulted in 25 articles comprising 12, 907 words. The corpus was then uploaded to Sketch Engine (Kilgariff et al. 2004) to conduct a preliminary corpus analysis.

Method:

The analysis proceeds through three phases. First, a corpus investigation is conducted to underscore and analyse social actors. In the examined content, social actors are the included people and entities, who contribute to construct the frames based on their different positions (Snow, 2008). Second, the data was analysed and coded for the main themes, which are the central ideas that form the frames of the narratives (Pan and Kosicki (1993). Third, a qualitative framing analysis is employed to explore the processes through which frames are constructed in discourse.

To identify the social actors and gain a preliminary understanding of the articles' dominant themes, a corpus analysis using Sketch Engine was conducted. Identifying the social actors and themes is important both for recognising the co-text and for investigating the construction of frames, in which these actors play significant roles (Gamson and Lasch, 1983; Snow, 2008). The main corpus methods employed for this purpose include frequency wordlists and concordance lines (Baker, 2006). A list of the most frequent words excluding function words was produced using Sketch Engine. This method helps to identify references to the involved social actors and enable categorising them.

To gain an initial insight into the dominant topics and themes within the examined corpus, the wordlist was checked to identify the most frequent lexical patterns referring to specific subject areas, and then semantically categorise them. The results were triangulated by a close reading of the articles and their titles to cross-validate the proposed thematic categories. During the reading process, the corpus is coded for the main topics and themes that constitute the central focus of the discourse.

Having identified the social actors and prominent themes, a qualitative framing approach was employed to analyse the discourse. Unlike many previous studies of media framing, which rely primarily on quantitative methods, the present study adopts a predominantly qualitative approach for two reasons. First, the relatively small size of the corpus limits the feasibility of statistical quantitative analysis. Second, the research questions focus on the mechanism through which frames are constructed, rather than the quantification of framing patterns in media coverage.

The study draws on the following definition of framing: 'To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text' (Entman, 1993: 52). Within this conceptualisation, it is assumed that particular aspects of reality are selected to achieve specific functions. To examine this assumption, the process of how themes were framed and made prominent in discourse needs to be analysed. The analysis was conducted by integrating Entman (1993) framing functions with Gamson and Modigliani's (1989) 'media package' approach to investigate the thematically categorised concordance lines. These lines were explored in terms of four framing functions: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993). Subsequently, the in-text framing devices were examined as expressed through

metaphors, concepts, keywords, catchphrases, and other language features in the narratives (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). This combination allows for the identification of framing devices and the analysis of linguistic features used to summarise information and to assign interpretations to the issue (Gamson and Lasch, 1983).

Analysis and Results

Social Actors:

By checking the word frequency list in Sketch Engine, a total of 454 references distributed across five categories of social actors were identified: 1- Saudi Arabia (72), 2- Pro-league (70), 3- clubs (108), 4- players (57) and individual international players (99), and 5- sport managers (48). Within the examined discourse, clubs and players are most frequently covered actors. However, other social actors play a more influential role in shaping the frames, as explained in the framing analysis below.

Besides being represented as a powerful social actor, Saudi Arabia is constructed in terms of a place to which players 'go', 'move', 'are lured', 'leave for', 'arrive'. In other instances, this social actor is metaphorically portrayed as a market, which sells and buys players. It is also nominated in its political names, as well as other nominations, e.g., 'country' and 'gulf nation'. These references are linked to economic and financial terms such as 'loans', 'funds', 'billions', 'investment', 'invest', 'investing a huge amount of money', 'fund', 'buy', 'sell', 'market', and 'businesses'.

The Pro-league is constructed as a collective entity which includes sub-groups of clubs and teams. It is presented as an active actor in the data which 'has', 'includes', 'offers', 'lures', and 'attracts players'. References to this actor are framed as powerful agents having predominant roles in the process of the player transfers.

In some instances, 'clubs', in its plural form, was used interchangeably with the pro-league to refer to all Saudi teams and is used in its singular form to refer to specific teams, e.g. Al-Hilal. The main Saudi clubs that form the SPL and which are repeatedly mentioned and reported on in the data are Al-Nassr, Al-Hilal, Al-Ittihad, and Al-Ahli. Clubs are represented as agents interacting with players as patients. They 'buy', 'sell', 'sign', 'include' and 'lure' players. They are also linked to terms related to money and economy, 'e.g., 'spend', 'paid', 'spree', and 'money'.

'Players' are presented in the plural form to generally refer to the international players who joined the Saudi clubs. Some are referred to using collective noun forms, e.g. 'players', whereas others are individually referred to, either using their personal names, pronouns, role categories, or by describing them with social features such as nationality or age (e.g., the Portuguese, the 31-year-old). The players who have received interest in the reports are Ronaldo, Benzema, Neymar, and Mahrez. With more focus on Ronaldo, those players are evaluated positively in the data by describing them as 'star', 'legend', 'super star', 'winner', 'striker', 'best', 'captain', 'high profile' and 'international'. These features constructed their identities as high-profile international players, who are represented as valuable assets within the Pro-league transfer market.

The category of 'bosses' consists of references to club executives including chiefs, managers, bosses, chairmen, who lead and organize Saudi and international teams. This category is analytically significant because the included actors are frequently quoted in the data and play a central role in frame construction. They are frequently represented through their professional titles as 'boss', 'manager', 'chief', 'chairman'. The most frequently referenced in this category are Arteta, Gerrard, Al-Khelaifi, Emenalo and Hutton.

Themes:

The first examination of the wordlist suggests several semantic categories. Frequent lexical items referring to different subject areas are identified and grouped into categories based on their shared semantic denotation. This results into different semantic groups including references to games, money, change, entertainment and power. This exploratory step is supported by a manual investigation involving close reading of the full articles and coding them according to the most salient topics and subjects. It is found that the overarching theme encompassing all other themes is Sport and Leisure, which recurs throughout the discourse. Within this broad theme, frequent patterns refer to development, investment, change and numerical values. On this basis, four main frames related to IFPT to the SPL were identified:

1. Development and Change
2. Economic Investment
3. Sportswashing
4. Threat and Danger

In the following section, the construction of the four frames is qualitatively examined as articulated in thematically selected and organised concordance lines that are extracted from Sketch Engine.

Frames:

Development and Change:

Many examples in the data include lexical items that articulate meanings of change, improvement, and progress, therefore, contributing to construct Development and Change frame (see examples 1 and 2, where Saad Allazeez, the SPL's interim chief executive and vice chairman, is quoted):

- 1- "Every club in the Saudi Pro-league will get the opportunity to improve their squad through this innovative new model, and Michael is the perfect man for the job
- 2- All clubs can benefit from 'innovative new model' The new strategy aligns with the Saudi Arabian Football Federation's youth programme and aims to "foster young Saudi talent alongside securing the best international talent and improving the governance of all clubs for long-term success".

The framing functions in examples 1 and 2 express a positive evaluation of IFPT to the SPL, which are constructed as beneficial activities within Development and Change frame. The use of key words such as 'innovation', 'new opportunity', 'create avenues', 'new/innovative modal', 'development and improve' contributes to the positive construction of player transfers as a process of development and change. In examples 1 and 2, the catch phrase 'innovative new model' and the key phrase 'new strategy' contribute to framing IFPT as a planned initiative aimed at improving the performance of 'every' club and its players. The reason behind this movement is stated in example 2, i.e., developing Saudi talent, attracting global players, and improving club governance. The movement is evaluated as a long-term success in the improvements and achievements of the Saudi Clubs. In these two examples, the SPL's interim chief executive is quoted to convey the meaning. Michael Emenalo, in his influential role as a director at the SPL, is quoted in the examples 3 and 4 to reinforce the same positive stance and to actively participate in the framing process.

- 3- "The Saudi Pro-league offers a new opportunity first and foremost for the entire industry, and I think will create avenues for good competition and for more development of young talent."
- 4- "Intrigued by the audacity" of its new acquisition and youth development strategy. Emenalo will lead a player acquisition centre of excellence to provide a centralised approach to luring more "world-class international players".

The transfers movement is described in example 3 as a new opportunity for 'the entire industry' that creates chances for both 'good competition and development'. Emenalo's viewpoint on IFPT is conveyed by quoting his phrase "intrigued by the audacity", which reflects his impression to the bold and ambitious initiative. His role in the transfer process is framed as attracting football players described by the catch phrase "world-class international players". Quoting sports executives is also demonstrated in examples 5 and 6.

- 5- Hutton believes the government's involvement in the SPL could be a template for other countries in terms of bringing together the academies, women's league, men's league, and football federation to "create a roadmap for growth which is interlinked, not people fighting for territory".

Hutton's words are inserted to the text to contribute to portraying the SPL as a unique model for development that should be followed by other countries. The keyword 'interlinked' suggests a positive evaluation of the SPL planned movement as a strategic plan that is carefully woven to include all social categories and to improve all fields. In example 6, the holistic change taking place in the country is referred to by quoting the British director who serves on the league's board.

- 6- "So you see that as evidence of change, and women's football development as part of societal change. That for me is the real attraction of this project. "It's not just about headline players

and big transfer fees and wages. It's also about the whole Saudi football infrastructure, whether that be women, youth football, creating a whole pyramid that really transforms the sport in the country."

The three sentences in example 6 highlight improvements in national football infrastructures and positions IFPT within broader sport development. Key terms such as 'template', 'societal development', 'attraction', 'transform', 'roadmap for growth' in examples 5 and 6 contribute to framing the IFPT as a development and change issue. Hutton's words in 7 are quoted to introduce his wife as an exemplar and legitimate significant social change in the society in general and women's issues in particular.

- 7- "My wife works in women's football in FIFA, she was aware of what was happening in the kingdom. And you see that change, you see how much joy they're bringing to the local community".

In all the above examples, the framing function is positive evaluation, mainly expressed quoting powerful actors. However, other instances reflect a contrasting evaluation. Exemplar of the Chinese Super League experience has been frequently mentioned through the data and compared to the SPL efforts towards development and change (Examples 8 and 9).

- 8- The SPL's rise has drawn comparisons with the big-spending Chinese Super League, which declined after a rapid start.
- 9- Čefrin feels the Chinese Super League made the same mistakes and said "that's not the right way to do it. They bought players at the end of their careers by offering them a lot of money. Chinese football didn't develop and didn't qualify for the World Cup afterwards".

in example 9, The president of European football's governing body is quoted to suggest the possibility of the SPL's failure in achieving change and development.

Economic Investment:

In several instances, the IFPT to the SPL is framed as economic investments. Within these instances, players are portrayed as valuable assets traded in the international market, bought and sold by clubs and leagues. Although they are not represented as agents, nor do they discursively contribute to frame construction through quotation, they are positioned as constituents of the Economic Investment frame. Throughout the examined discourse, the IFPT are framed as commercial transaction in the international market, involving the buying and selling of elite clubs and high-profile players.

- 1- The Saudi Pro-league's financial power has "changed the market" for transfers and elite clubs "need to be aware of what is happening", says Pep Guardiola.

In the above example, the investment process is framed as a problem in the transfer market. This problematisation is indicated by the catch phrase "changed the market" and by quoting

Manchester City boss to expresses his worries about the situation. More positive viewpoints, however, are expressed in examples 2, 3 and 4.

- 2- Saad Allazeez said: "There is much potential for new talent arriving in Saudi Arabia and a central function providing control and strong governance will ensure our investments are smart and benefit all in the league moving forward.
- 3- The Saudi Pro-league's "remarkable" spending spree on players is set to continue, according to one of its leading executives. "I think the budgets are in place for a number of years - you know, I don't see this slowing down," said Hutton
- 4- "This project has been in the making for a while," added Emenalo, the SPL director

In example 2, the SPL's interim chief executive is quoted to evaluate the transfer of the international players as a smart investment for the league's development. In the third example, the catchphrase "remarkable" is used as a device to explain huge expenditure on transferring players. Hutton's and Emenalo's words in 3 and 4 are inserted into the texts to describe the investment project as a planned and continuous process. In the above examples, items like 'investment, project, potential, remarkable spending spree, acceleration, budgets' contribute to constructing the frame. In addition to presenting personalised social actors of executives and directors to contribute to framing, institutional actors like the Public Investment Fund (PIF) are also employed to construct this frame:

- 5- The country's Public Investment Fund (PIF) has also taken over of the SPL's leading clubs as the league aims to become one of the top five in the world
- 6- Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) led the takeover of Newcastle United last year and launched LIV Golf.

In examples 5 and 6, the powerful social actor is the PIF which is represented as leading the action of taking over leading clubs. The idea communicated is that the takeover is achieved through buying clubs as a part of state-led investment in sport. Other examples discuss large financial figures spent on player transfers as presented in in 7, 8, and 9:

- 7- The Saudi Pro-league had the fourth highest overall transfer spend this summer, exceeding Spain's La Liga and the German Bundesliga. Saudi Pro-league clubs have so far spent £691m.
- 8- Saudi clubs' spending this summer on international transfers was second only to the Premier League, whose teams spent just under £1.6bn on overseas deals, according to figures from football governing body Fifa.
- 9- Saudi Pro-league clubs have so far spent £691m. BBC Sport has been told there is funding guaranteed for a decade, suggesting the Gulf nation intends for its competition to become one of the world's foremost in the coming years.

In these examples, the social actor Pro-league/clubs are positioned as the main investor. Within the three examples comparisons are constructed using superlative and comparative expressions such as 'highest', 'second' and 'foremost' to measure the expenditure. In 7 and 8 the expenditure is compared to European leagues, framing the SPL investment in IFPT as internationally competitive and exceeding these leagues. In 9, the country, identified as 'Gulf nation', is framed as a serious international competitor aiming to become one of the leading countries. In other examples, individual and collective football players are depicted as marketized athletes in the transfer market. These instances express the state's broader strategy of attracting players through financial incentives:

- 10- The league has lured many high-profile players to Saudi Arabia over the last year, offering lucrative contracts and paying substantial transfer fees.

In 11 and 12, names of two high-profile players are mentioned as the first traded players in the sport market.

- 11- Cristiano Ronaldo's move from Manchester United has kick-started Saudi Arabia's spending spree.

- 12- Neymar joined Al-Hilal in a transfer window that saw Saudi clubs spend more than £700m on overseas players.

In 10, 11 and 12, items such as 'offering lucrative contracts', 'spending spree', 'paying substantial transfer fees' and 'spend more than £700m' indicate the high budgets allocated to IFPT. To achieve framing, diverse linguistic devices are used including metaphor, the use of superlative and comparative forms, using key items such as 'lured', 'lucrative', 'high profile players', 'substantial'. These devices collectively contribute to framing IFPT as Economic Investment managed by powerful actors in the country.

Sportswashing:

The IFPT is also framed as a national political issue. The following examples contextualise IFPT to SPL as a branding tool aimed at improving the country's image among the international audiences. The key terms 'sportswashing' and 'reputation' are repeatedly used throughout the data to interpret the motivation behind large-scale investment in sport in general, and in player transfers in particular.

1. The Premier League club's green and white third kit last season resembled the Saudi Arabia national team kit and, at the time of its release, Amnesty International said it was "clear evidence" of sportswashing.

In example 1, human rights organisation frames the Premier League's first release through national symbolism. The notion of 'sportswashing', which means improving national reputation, is emphasised as the central reason behind its launch as indicated by the catchphrase 'clear evidence'.

In examples 2, an accusation is overtly stated. The country is referred to through its political designations at regional level, namely 'Gulf nation' and 'Saudi Arabia'.

- 2- The Gulf kingdom has been accused of investing in sport and using high-profile events to improve its international reputation. Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) led the takeover of Newcastle United last year and launched LIV Golf.

Here, the accusation is advanced by the journalist, with the underlying reason framed as image improvement. The opening sentence of example 2 is followed by the identification of the means through which this image enhancement is pursued, namely, investment in sport activities such as the takeover of Newcastle United. The subsequent examples then present the reaction of the kingdom's authorities to this accusation:

- 3- But Saudi authorities reject those accusations and say investment in sport is a key part of the 'Vision 2030' strategy.
- 4- "If sportswashing is going to increase my GDP by 1%, then we'll continue doing sportswashing," Bin Salman said. He said "I don't care [about the term]. I have 1% growth in GDP from sport and I am aiming for another 1.5%. "Call it what you want - we are going to get that 1.5%."

In examples 3 and 4, the sportswashing frame is rejected and reframed. Investment in sport is repositioned as a key component of the Vision 2030 plan. Although these statements respond to sportswashing accusations, they contribute to constructing Development and Change and Economic and Investment frames. The main actor is Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who reframes investment in sports as a strategy of national growth. The primary framing function here is causal interpretation. Throughout the data, a key item referring to a generic frame is repeatedly invoked, namely human rights:

- 5- "Saudi Arabia's acquisition of high-profile sports businesses like Newcastle United or the PGA Tour are as much about sportswashing the country's appalling human rights record as they are about adding one or two per cent to national GDP," said Felix Jakens.
- 6- Human rights campaigners say sport is being used by the Saudi government to distract from long-standing reputation issues.
- 7- The huge amounts of Saudi money currently sluicing through football and other sports are creating most of the headlines but, behind the drama of these transactions, the Saudi authorities are busily cracking down on human rights.

Referring to generic frames is a common journalistic convention in media reporting, as it helps to attract the attention of a general audience. In examples 5-6, Saudi Arabia's involvement in sporting activities is framed as a strategy to improve its image regarding human rights

concerns, supported by quotation from a human rights activist from Amnesty International UK and the metaphorical expression ‘sluicing’.

Threat and Danger:

Interestingly, a specific frame has been identified for Saudi Arabia’s investment in IFPT, namely Threat and Danger. IFPT to the SPL is framed as a potentially dangerous development and a source of threat throughout the discourse using metaphorical concepts such as ‘threat’ and ‘danger’ as framing devices to conceptualise the risks associated with the competitive situation.

In examples 1-4, the transfer is framed as a real danger posing a threat to the other European leagues. European football managers are quoted in these examples to frame IFPT as a competitive threat. The SPL is constructed as a strong league supported by both financial power and ambition. Accordingly, the primary function of this frame in these examples is problem definition, whereby the issue is framed as heavy financed recruitment of high-profile European players, combined with an extended transfer window, which is longer than that of other countries.

- 1- “It is not about the threat, it is a reality,” Guardiola added. “They want to create a strong league and so far, they are the league who can do it. “The Premier League spent more than the others because the organisation of the Premier League is better and the broadcasts and the sponsors are higher than the other leagues, so the clubs can spend what they have. “Right now, the Saudi league, I don’t know how long they will sustain it, but the feeling is that they will stay. The players want to take this experience to play in that league and they are able to do it.”

In example 1, a series of statements by Pep Guardiola are extensively quoted to frame IFPT to the SPL, articulating the causes and motivations behind this perceived threatening movement. The final sentence of example 1 states that international players seek the opportunity to play in the league, which constitutes an additional element in defining the problem. The names of the high-profile European players who joined the SPL are mentioned in example 2 and are described as ‘top’, ‘big-name’, and ‘footballers’.

- 2- It is a competitor now, I think we have to change that,” Arteta said. Deadlines differ from country to country across the world, but this is one of the first times a league outside of Europe has been able to attract top players. Saudi clubs have signed a host of big-name footballers this summer, including Ballon d’Or winner Karim Benzema from Real Madrid, the from Paris St-Germain, Liverpool captain Jordan Henderson and Wolves skipper Ruben Neves.

In example 3, words such as ‘lured’, ‘many’, ‘high-profile players’, ‘lucrative contracts’, and ‘substantial fees’ are used to define the nature of the problem.

- 3- The league has lured many high-profile players to Saudi Arabia over the last year, offering lucrative contracts and paying substantial transfer fees. Čefrin says.

In example 4, the catch phrases ‘protect, and ‘vulnerable’ are used to express the perceived weakness of European leagues in facing a threatening opponent, namely the Saudi Pro-league.

- 4- Klopp, (Liverpool Boss) says Saudi Pro-league is more of a threat than not Close Liverpool boss Jurgen Klopp urges Uefa to “protect” football as European leagues are “vulnerable” facing the financial might of the Saudi Pro-league.

In the above examples, the use of figurative language portrays the situation as a confrontational scenario, in which threat and danger are directed from one side towards the other, while the intended meaning is implied through the broader discursive context. However, this image of threat and danger, associated with the SPL, is framed differently in other instances (see examples (6-8).

- 6- Asked how big a threat the SPL is to the established powers in football, Hutton said: "The investment from Saudi is remarkable. It's certainly been a big acceleration. "This doesn't necessarily mean that Europe isn't going to be as strong in world football going forward. But I would say that's not necessarily a bad thing. It's good that football has strength around the world."
- 7- Al-Khelaifi added: "We believe in ourselves. "We have the best and biggest competitions and the best players. It is not for me to judge what is happening outside of Europe. But listen, most of the clubs sold players to them. If we are not happy, why do we sell our players to them? That's the truth. "Is it dangerous? I told you my opinion. If there is a danger, the European clubs will not be quiet. So far, I don't see any danger."
- 8- European football is not in danger from the vast Saudi Pro-league recruitment drive, say senior figures at the influential European Club Association. However, European sides want alignment over when the Saudi transfer window opens and closes.

In examples (6-8), IFPT to the SPL are negotiated discursively as either a threat or non-threatening. In example 6 a neutral evaluation was given by Hutton, whose response to the question of danger is quoted within an interview context. For him, although player transfers to the SPL are notable, they will not weaken other leagues. The framing function here evaluates Saudi investment in football as globally beneficial. However, in example 7, Al-Khelaifi, the Paris Saint-Germain president, is quoted to present an alternative viewpoint. He contrasts European leagues with others using superlative forms such as ‘best’, ‘biggest competitions’ and ‘best players’. He then identifies the cause of the perceived problem as the sale of players to the Saudi League. The interrogative structure is used here to downplay the perceived threat. A similar stance is presented in example 8 by senior figures within the influential European Club Association. In 9 and 10, the SPL is evaluated through an analogy with the Chinese football experience:

- 9- Saudi Pro-league is 'not a threat ' and is 'similar to China', says Uefa president Aleksander Ceferin Last updated on 31 August 2023 31 August 2023. The Saudi Pro-league has been dismissed as a competitive threat by Aleksander Ceferin, president of European football's governing body Uefa.
- 10- "It's not a threat, we saw a similar approach in China," he told L'Equipe "They bought players at the end of their careers by offering them a lot of money. Chinese football didn't develop and didn't qualify for the World Cup afterwards.

The discursive device of using the exemplar of China's failure to qualify for the World Cup is used to question the future success of the transfer drive, influencing in this way the audience perception.

In sum, the above examples related to Threat and Danger present different perspectives through which IFPT is framed as a source of danger. Key lexical items, metaphors and analogy are used to frame IFPT to the SPL as unfavourable practice and more importantly as a threat.

Discussion

The analysis addresses IFPT to SPL in 2023 are discursively constructed in BBC News. The findings show that framing operates through thematic organisation and the strategic allocation of voice. In particular, the prominence of football managers as the most frequently quoted social actors positions them as authoritative framing agents whose institutional credibility legitimises specific interpretations of IFPT. Through their recurrent engagement with key themes, these actors are constructed as reliable authorities capable of defining the meaning and significance of player transfers. Their discursive agency extends beyond individual representation, contributing to the construction of broader entities such as the Pro League and Saudi Arabia as powerful, economically competitive, and ambitious actors. At the same time, high-profile players and European clubs are predominantly represented as marketized assets, reinforcing the market-driven logic behind the global football economy. These patterns indicate that media framing is not merely a matter of thematic emphasis, but also of meaning making and voice selection, whereby journalists rely on particular social actors to construct and legitimise specific meanings (Gamson, 1992; Snow, 2008).

Building on this, thematic analysis serves as a link between identifying social actors and interpreting framing processes by organising recurring topics into meaningful structures. While corpus-based methods facilitate the identification of recurrent patterns, the relatively small dataset necessitates further close reading and manual coding. This combined approach reveals how units of meaning are organised into coherent interpretative structures, demonstrating that themes are strategically constructed within discourse. In this sense, the analysis shows how thematic construction underpin the process of framing, thereby providing an interpretative basis for understanding how meaning is structured and communicated.

Regarding the second research question, the findings reveal four dominant frames—Development and Change, Economic Investment, Sportswashing, and Danger and Threat—through which IFPT to the SPL are constructed. These frames collectively organise the interpretation of transfer activity, simultaneously promoting narratives of modernisation and economic ambition while introducing critical evaluations related to reputation and risk. From Entman’s framing perspective, the Development and Change and Economic Investment frames define IFPT to the SPL as a developmental and economic opportunity. Causality is attributed to state-led investment strategies aligned with Vision 2030, in which sport functions as a vehicle for diversification and global glocalization (Dorsey, 2015; Grix & Lee, 2019). Through positive evaluative language and the privileging of elite voices, these frames construct a favourable moral evaluation that normalises large-scale investment in football as both rational and progressive.

In contrast, the Sportswashing and Danger and Threat frames introduce competing problem definitions and moral evaluations, reflecting a broader tendency in Western media discourse to question non-Western modernisation projects. Operating within irregular global media power relations, BBC Sport mediates Saudi Arabia’s sporting initiatives for international audiences through multiple, and at times conflicting, evaluative positions (Thussu, 2006). Importantly, these frames do not simply oppose the development narrative; rather, their coincidence reveals an underlying ideological tension between recognising sport as a tool of soft power projection and questioning its legitimacy (Boykoff, 2022; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018). In this sense, framing emerges not as a fixed representation of reality but as a site of ideological negotiation, where competing interpretations are simultaneously articulated.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the framing of IFPT in the Saudi context is characterised by the coexistence of development-oriented and critical narratives, producing a complex and contradictory discursive construction rather than a singular evaluative stance. This distinguishes the Saudi case from other contexts, where sport is more commonly framed in terms of entertainment, nationalism, or commercialisation. More broadly, the analysis shows that football is discursively positioned as part of Saudi Arabia’s wider modernisation and soft power strategy, aligned with Vision 2030 objectives of economic diversification and global engagement. In doing so, the study contributes to framing research by highlighting how media discourse constructs emerging sporting projects through overlapping and contested frames, thereby shaping global perceptions of national transformation.

Conclusion

This study examined how IFPT to the SPL was framed in BBC Sport coverage during 2023. Drawing on a corpus-assisted framing analysis, the findings show that transfer activity was constructed through the coexistence of development-oriented and critical frames framed by the prominence of elite social actors and asymmetrical global media power relations. The analysis shows that football is discursively

represented as more than a sporting or commercial activity. It is functioning as a site where narratives of development, economic objectives, and soft power are negotiated and contested.

By exploring the Saudi context, the study extends media framing research beyond Western settings and highlights how non-Western development projects are mediated through both legitimising and problematising frames in international news discourse. From a practical perspective, the findings offer insights into how national sports strategies aligned with Vision 2030 are interpreted and evaluated in global media coverage.

This study is limited to a single media outlet and a specific sport phenomenon, based on a small, specialised corpus designed for qualitative analysis. While this scope restricts generalisability, it provides a focused analytical foundation for further research. Subsequent studies could extend this work through comparative analyses across multiple media organisations, sports events, and geopolitical contexts, as well as by incorporating multimodal data such as images, audio, and video. Building larger corpora would also enable more representative and reliable statistical examinations of media framing in sport.

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