

# Quantifying Sportswashing: A GDELT-Based Analysis of the Impact of LIV Golf's Launch on the Tone of Saudi Arabia News Coverage

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## Abstract

Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund financed and launched the LIV Golf League in 2022. This paper looks at LIV Golf as a classic case of sportswashing, wherein political leaders use sports to achieve a more positive image by deflecting attention from their human rights abuses or political problems. This paper examines whether LIV Golf has been successful for Saudi Arabia as a sportswashing endeavor by analyzing the impact that LIV Golf has had on the volume and tone of online news articles about Saudi Arabia. Sportswashing is an abstract concept that is difficult to evaluate concretely, but this paper employs quantitative content analysis to provide a first-of-its-kind assessment of LIV Golf's success in improving the portrayal of Saudi Arabia in the online news media. The paper finds that LIV Golf has been a successful sportswashing endeavor because it has increased the tone positivity of Saudi Arabia coverage from 2022 to 2025.

**Keywords:** sportswashing, LIV Golf, Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030, GDELT, quantitative content analysis, media tone analysis

## 1. Introduction

LIV Golf, a men's professional golf tour, held its first tournament in London in June 2022. It is controlled and financed by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, whose billions of dollars in funding allowed the new league to lure top golfers away from the previously dominant PGA Tour. During and after its launch, LIV Golf was widely characterized as a form of sportswashing (Davis et al., 2023), the idea being that the Saudi Arabian government, led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, was using the league to wash away its poor human rights reputation. Erasing this poor reputation is key to increasing foreign investment and tourism, which is a top priority under Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia's modernization plan (Winarni & Permana, 2022). Through LIV Golf, Saudi Arabia hopes to cleanse its reputation, paving the way for it to become a major player in the global economy.

Past analyses like Gilbertson & Sasser (2024) and Jephson et al. (2024) have examined what LIV Golf means for the game of golf, while others, such as Elshaer et al. (2024) and Almdoudi & Alalmal (2025), have focused on the impacts of sports

investments on the Saudi Arabian economy and tourism industry. Although LIV Golf is consistently classified as a sportswashing endeavor, there has been a lack of evaluation of that endeavor's success, since analyses have not focused on whether LIV Golf has improved Saudi Arabia's reputation.

This paper provides an empirical evaluation of the success of LIV Golf as a sportswashing endeavor. It uses the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT) to run a quantitative content analysis of the volume and tone of online news articles that mention Saudi Arabia. It examines how said volume and tone have been affected by the launch of LIV Golf. By analyzing LIV Golf's impact on news coverage of Saudi Arabia, this paper examines whether LIV Golf has given Saudi Arabia the reputation boost that sportswashing seeks to achieve. It finds that LIV Golf has produced this reputation boost by improving the tone positivity of online news articles about Saudi Arabia.

### **1.1. Understanding Sportswashing: Theory and Context for the LIV Golf Case**

This paper uses the theory of sportswashing put forth by Boykoff (2022), which defines sportswashing as “a phenomenon whereby political leaders use sports to appear important or legitimate on the world stage while stoking nationalism and deflecting attention from chronic social problems and human-rights woes on the home front.” The term was first used by human rights advocate Rebecca Vincent in 2015 to describe Azerbaijan's effort to distract from its poor human rights record by hosting the European Games. The term rose to prominence in the early 2020s thanks to major events like the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar (Boykoff, 2022). Although sportswashing is generally thought of as an authoritarian leader hosting a major sporting event to distract from human rights abuses, its applications are diverse and wide-ranging.

Sportswashing is most commonly used to improve a country's international reputation. For example, Qatar hosted the 2022 FIFA World Cup on the heels of international criticism over its treatment of migrant workers (Hernes, 2025). Hernes (2025) analyzed the volume and sentiment of mentions of Qatar in global online media before, during, and after the World Cup. The analysis showed that the volume and positivity of Qatar mentions increased around the time of the World Cup, which suggests that hosting the World Cup was a successful sportswashing endeavor for Qatar. However, the analysis also showed that the volume and positivity of Qatar mentions decreased again months after the World Cup, which raises questions about the long-term efficacy of the sportswashing campaign. Moreover, Boykoff (2022) notes that the World Cup brought increased scrutiny to Qatar's abuses, so much so that Qatar amended its infamous kafala labor system in September 2020 and set a minimum wage. Overall, the World Cup brought mixed results for Qatar, providing a temporary news coverage boost but also bringing international pressure that ultimately forced reforms.

Sportswashing can also target a domestic audience. For example, Vladimir Putin used the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi to build domestic support. The Games brought international scrutiny and criticism to Russia, but they also united the Russian population around a common sense of national pride. In fact, the Games turned many Russians against Western media outlets, which Russians felt were being unfair in their negative coverage of Russia (Boykoff, 2022). Putin capitalized on this boost in nationalism by invading Crimea right after the Olympics closed. In May 2014, three months after the Olympics and the invasion, Putin reached an all-time high approval rating of nearly 86%, which demonstrates the success of the 2014 Winter Olympics as a domestic sportswashing operation (Boykoff, 2022).

Sportswashing, as the Sochi Olympics example shows, can be a precursor to military intervention. Another example is the

1936 Berlin Summer Olympics. Adolf Hitler used the Games to achieve three main objectives: boost his international reputation, thus reducing scrutiny that could have impeded his war plans; foster nationalism within Germany, thus laying the groundwork for domestic support for war; and build support in future occupation areas (Boykoff, 2022). Hitler launched his first invasion in 1938, two years after the Olympics.

Additionally, sportswashing is not confined to authoritarian nations; democracies can also engage in sportswashing. For instance, the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City served as an opportunity for the United States to project strength and security in the wake of 9/11. Olympic media coverage's focus on counterterrorism also built support for the United States' War on Terror (Boykoff, 2022).

A new form of sportswashing is emerging, wherein authoritarian countries purchase teams or host events in democracies. Examples of this include Saudi Arabia using its Public Investment Fund to purchase the English Premier League team Newcastle United and to fund the breakaway LIV Golf League. In these situations, respected institutions and athletes in democratic countries become de facto ambassadors for authoritarian regimes, thus improving the regimes' reputations among sports fans (Boykoff, 2022).

In general, countries use sportswashing to shape public perception. The popularity of sports makes them a prime target through which parties can appeal to the public. However, the growing use of the term sportswashing, which has an inherent negative connotation, threatens to make sportswashing efforts backfire by directing critical attention towards the very issues that the countries are trying to draw attention away from.

## 1.2. The LIV Golf Case

LIV Golf, the Saudi-funded breakaway golf league that held its inaugural event in London in June 2022, has been widely described as a form of sportswashing (Davis et al., 2023). For example, an ABC News headline three days after LIV Golf's inaugural event read, "Saudi-backed LIV Golf tournament accused of 'sportswashing'" (Moscufo, 2022). Furthermore, in the lead-up to the inaugural event, Phil Mickelson, one of LIV Golf's highest-profile golfers, was asked if there was a danger that he was "being seen as a tool of sportswashing" (Schad, 2022).

Specifically, LIV Golf exemplifies the new type of sportswashing wherein an authoritarian regime buys a team or hosts events in democratic countries, thus turning respected institutions and athletes into de facto ambassadors. In the case of LIV Golf, the Saudi Public Investment Fund is financing golf events (both in democratic countries and in Saudi Arabia) through which the golfers, golf courses, broadcasters, broadcast companies, and spectators who participate legitimize and normalize the Saudi Arabian regime.

LIV Golf's business model supports the notion that it is a sportswashing endeavor. The league has paid top golfers millions of dollars in guaranteed money to join (Davis et al., 2023). In exchange, the golfers have acted as de facto ambassadors for the regime. Most LIV golfers, like Phil Mickelson, have dodged questions about the Saudi regime's sportswashing (Schad, 2022), but some, like Graeme McDowell, have voiced support for the regime's tactics. McDowell said, "If Saudi Arabia wanted to use the game of golf as a way for them to get to where they want to be and they have the resources to accelerate that experience, I think we are proud to help them on that journey" (Schad, 2022). Most notably, it appears that the Saudis "do not want or need" money from the league (Davis et al., 2023). They are willing to invest billions of dollars even if there is no clear path for that investment to be returned. This suggests that there is something else that the Saudis think they are



gaining from LIV Golf. Most likely, they view the endeavor as an investment in their reputation.

## 2. Background and Context

### 2.1. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030

Vision 2030 is Saudi Arabia's modernization plan. Its three main pillars are 1) becoming the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds; 2) building an investment powerhouse that diversifies the oil-based economy; and 3) becoming a global hub that connects Europe, Asia, and Africa (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016).

Vision 2030 came about for two main reasons. First was the potential for oil prices to plummet (Kosárová, 2020). The Vision's adoption in 2016 followed the 2014-2015 decline in oil prices. Furthermore, developments in renewable energy sources threatened oil's long-term viability. In his foreword to the Vision, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman wrote, "We will not allow our country ever to be at the mercy of a commodity price volatility or external markets" (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). The Saudi government recognized that, in order to achieve long-term economic stability and prosperity, it needed to reduce oil dependence. The second inspiration for Vision 2030 was the growing Saudi population. The Vision noted that over half of the Saudi population was under 25 (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Economic restructuring was necessary to support this growing population. The Vision emphasized that Saudi Arabia will "take advantage of this demographic dividend by harnessing our youth's energy and by expanding entrepreneurship and enterprise opportunities" (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016).

Saudi Arabia's government previously operated under a rentier state social contract, wherein the government subsidized basic needs and did not collect taxes in exchange for the support of its citizens (Kosárová, 2020; Almakaty, 2024). In the past, the Saudi government was able to uphold its end of the social contract because of its vast oil wealth. However, due to the volatile oil market and the burgeoning Saudi population, the government can no longer provide everything for its citizens through oil wealth alone (Rachman, 2019). In fact, the government removed fuel subsidies and implemented taxes on undeveloped urban land, tobacco products, e-cigarettes, sugary drinks, and airplane tickets (Kosárová, 2020). The regime risked undermining its legitimacy by raising taxes and cutting subsidies. Its tradition of authoritarianism does not afford Saudi citizens political participation and freedom (Rachman, 2019). Citizens tolerated a lack of political representation when there was no taxation, but the addition of taxes and the subtraction of subsidies created a need for representation (Kosárová, 2020). This need for representation is a threat to the authoritarian regime's power and could spark rebellion. Vision 2030 can be viewed as the regime's plan to keep the public on its side by securing post-oil economic prosperity.

From a domestic perspective, Vision 2030's main goal is to extract previously untapped economic value from Saudi citizens. In his foreword to the Vision, bin Salman promised to focus on "unlocking the talent, potential, and dedication of our young men and women" (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). From an international perspective, Vision 2030's main goal is to attract foreign investment and tourism, thus turning Saudi Arabia into a major player in the global economy (Winarni & Permana, 2022). In tourism, Saudi Arabia has gone from not allowing non-religious foreign tourists before 2020 to attracting 17 million in 2022 and aiming for 100 million by 2030 (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023). In terms of attracting foreign investment, the Vision explains that "improving the business environment" and "attracting the finest talent and the best investments globally" will "grow our economy" (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Extracting economic value from



citizens and playing a central role in the global economy were unnecessary in Saudi Arabia's oil-based economy, but they are now key facets of its post-oil economy.

In order to achieve both its domestic and international goals, Vision 2030 requires societal transformation (Almakaty, 2024). This transformation is centered around an embrace of the Western liberal principles of personal liberty, equality, and human rights. In order to get the most out of its citizens, the regime calculated that it needed to conform to such principles. Likewise, adopting such principles would improve the regime's international reputation, paving the way for it to secure international investment and tourism. There have thus been numerous reforms centered around personal liberty, equality, and human rights in Saudi Arabia since the adoption of Vision 2030.

For example, significant progress has been made in women's rights. Women are now allowed to drive cars. They are also now able to travel without approval from a male guardian. In a survey conducted by Alharbi (2022), Saudi women cited these changes as having a positive impact. Additionally, the government implemented new regulations targeted at improving labor conditions and alleviating worker exploitation (Almakaty, 2024). It also incorporated STEM education into the K-12 curriculum in order to give Saudi citizens more career opportunities (Almakaty, 2024). The government even made some progress on freedom of expression by removing religious police (Kosárová, 2020) and implementing legislation aimed at protecting journalistic freedom and reducing online censorship (Almakaty, 2024).

Although reforms since the adoption of Vision 2030 have brought Saudi Arabia closer to the liberal standards of Western states, there is still room for improvement. For example, the government continues to maintain control over major media outlets, censor politically sensitive discourse, and engage in online surveillance of citizens (Almakaty, 2024). Saudi censorship was exemplified when Jamal Khashoggi, a dissident journalist, was killed at the Saudi embassy in Turkey in 2018. The CIA concluded that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was responsible for the killing (Rachman, 2019). The regime also arrested prominent businessmen in Riyadh (Kosárová, 2020). These actions, taken together, demonstrated to the international community that Saudi Arabia was far from liberalization.

The Saudi regime's persistent authoritarianism is problematic not only from an ethical perspective but also for the realization of Vision 2030. Rachman (2019) asserts that the regime needs to recognize the basic human rights of its citizens in order to fulfill the Vision. This human rights recognition is necessary both to help Saudi citizens reach their full potential and to attract international investment. Alharbi (2022) notes that the impact of women's rights reforms in Saudi Arabia is limited because they stem from economic and political motives instead of a true desire for social development. For instance, Vision 2030 views Saudi women as a "great asset" (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016), but it is unclear if this view goes beyond the economic sense. Furthermore, the Saudi regime's persistent censorship and political violence contradict the Vision 2030 claim that, "We want to give everyone the opportunity to have their say so that the government can serve them better and meet their aspirations" (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). There is a gap between Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 rhetoric and its authoritarian practices. Vision 2030 identifies a need for political reform in order to secure future prosperity, but this need, despite some progress, has not been fully met.

## 2.2. LIV Golf and Vision 2030

Saudi Arabia's reputation investment through LIV Golf very much aligns with the goals of Vision 2030. Even if the Saudi regime cannot actually bridge the gap between reality and its Vision 2030 promises, LIV Golf can at least create the



perception that it is doing so. Through LIV Golf, the Saudi regime can soften its image in the minds of Western golf lovers. It can normalize itself as a valuable partner. This aligns with Vision 2030's emphasis on increasing international investment and tourism. Additionally, seeing Saudi relevance on an international stage can stir up national pride domestically, thus increasing support for the regime. Moreover, Kosárová (2020) explains that the Saudi Arabian government is investing in the domestic entertainment industry in order to compensate its citizens for lost subsidies. LIV Golf, which hosts some events in Saudi Arabia, boosts the domestic entertainment industry. Saudi Arabia seeks to sportswash its way to realizing Vision 2030 through the LIV Golf League.

Golf, in particular, lends itself to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 sportswashing goals because of its association with class-based ideals. Ever since its rules and etiquette were formalized in the 18th and 19th centuries in Scotland, golf's requirement of proper equipment and courses has made it an expensive activity (Ceron-Anaya, 2010). The industrial revolution created a wealthy managerial class that was just below the preexisting aristocratic class and in search of ways to differentiate itself from the working class. Golf clubs were established in order to give this group symbolic capital and distinction (Ceron-Anaya, 2010). Furthermore, rounds of golf served as forums through which wealthy people could exchange and reproduce assets. Due to golf's high-class audience, LIV Golf can improve Saudi Arabia's reputation among the people who have the social, political, and economic capital necessary to integrate Saudi Arabia into the global economy, as Vision 2030 aspires. Moreover, representatives of the Saudi Arabian government can network with these people at the LIV Golf tournaments themselves. This was demonstrated when golf-loving US President Donald Trump attended LIV Golf's April 2025 event in Miami, which was held at a Trump-owned golf course (McAllister, 2025).

Additionally, golf's emphasis on etiquette and integrity (golfers keep their own score and sometimes call penalties on themselves) created an assumption that it infused moral superiority into its players (Ceron-Anaya, 2010). By associating itself with such a game, Saudi Arabia can improve its poor moral reputation and become more attractive to the foreign talent, investors, and tourists that Vision 2030 seeks to attract. Golf's position as a high-class, gentleman's game makes it a uniquely suited means through which the Saudi Arabian regime can enhance its reputation.

However, it is unclear how effective this sportswashing effort has been and will be. Although LIV Golf could distract from Saudi abuses like the Khashoggi murder, it could also draw attention to them. Given the widespread accusations of sportswashing surrounding LIV Golf, the latter scenario seems plausible. In addition to undermining Vision 2030's objectives of increased international investment and tourism, international criticism could stir up domestic dissent. In this way, the LIV Golf investment could backfire.

### 3. Method

We used the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT) to complete our analysis. The GDELT Project collects all online news articles that are published every 15 minutes, machine-translates those articles into English, and codes each article by measuring factors such as theme, tone, location, and entity (Saz-Carranza et al., 2020).

Specifically, we used the GDELT Summary Tool to analyze the volume and tone of global online news articles about Saudi Arabia before, during, and after the launch of LIV Golf. Given that LIV Golf's first event took place from June 9, 2022, to June 11, 2022, we defined the pre-launch period as April 1, 2019, to June 1, 2022; the during-launch period as June 1, 2022, to July 1, 2022; and the post-launch period as July 1, 2022, to August 29, 2025. For each period, we used the GDELT Summary Tool to



run two analyses: one of the volume of articles that included the term “Saudi” over time (as a percentage of the total number of news articles) and one of the GDELT tone ratings for articles that included the term “Saudi” over time. We ran these analyses for all global articles as well as articles that came strictly from sources based in the United States.

We chose to separately analyze articles strictly from US sources because of the United States’ position as the leader of the global economy into which Saudi Arabia is seeking incorporation. The United States is the world leader in GDP at \$30.62 trillion, more than 1.5 times second-place China’s \$19.4 trillion and more than sextuple third-place Germany’s \$5.01 trillion (International Monetary Fund, 2025). The United States’ position as by far the world’s largest economy makes improving American perceptions of Saudi Arabia crucial to Vision 2030’s objective of attracting more foreign investment and tourism. Furthermore, Anyanwu (2024) highlights “the dominance of the United States over the flow of media products, shaping them, and at the same time, influencing consumer preferences.” The United States’ significant cultural influence means that changes in American perceptions of Saudi Arabia can percolate through other countries. Additionally, the United States is a prime target for Saudi reputational improvement because of the status quo of negative American perceptions of Saudi Arabia. Over 50% of Americans have had a mostly unfavorable or very unfavorable view of Saudi Arabia every year since 2010 (Gallup, 2025). The significant room for improvement in American views of Saudi Arabia, combined with the United States’ economic and cultural influence, makes the United States a crucial target for Saudi reputational improvement. Therefore, analyzing the impact of LIV Golf on US coverage of Saudi Arabia provides valuable insight into the success of LIV Golf as a sportswashing endeavor.

Our comparison of the tone ratings for articles that mentioned “Saudi” between the pre, during, and post-periods determined whether or not there was a correlation between the launch of LIV Golf and the positivity or negativity of Saudi Arabia mentions in online news media. However, it did not determine whether there was causation, since changes in the positivity or negativity of Saudi Arabia mentions could be attributed to factors other than the launch of LIV Golf. In order to evaluate causation, we compared the tone ratings of articles that mentioned Saudi Arabia to the tone ratings of articles that mentioned Saudi Arabia and LIV Golf. We reran all of the analyses, this time with two keywords: “Saudi” and “LIV Golf.” This revealed whether or not LIV Golf coverage was responsible for changes in the overall coverage of Saudi Arabia.

The GDELT tone ratings are calculated by an algorithm that identifies the number of positive and negative words in an article. The algorithm subtracts the number of negative words from the number of positive words, then divides the resulting difference by the total number of words in the article, and finally multiplies the resulting quotient by 100 (Saz-Carranza et al., 2020). The tone ratings can thus range from -100 to 100, but are typically between -10 and 10, with -10 indicating a very negative tone and 10 indicating a very positive tone. The tone ratings are based on the article as a whole as opposed to the “Saudi” keyword, but they are still useful for assessing the positivity or negativity of the contexts in which Saudi Arabia is mentioned. The ratings are, of course, limited because they rely on the algorithm’s interpretation of the subjective concepts of positivity and negativity. However, any tone analysis is similarly limited, and the algorithm at least has a consistent methodology that eliminates human variance. While not infallible, the GDELT tone ratings are effective in revealing tone trends over time for a high quantity of articles.

Our method conforms to the standards of quantitative content analysis. Riffe et al. (2005) define quantitative content analysis as “the systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods.” For both the volume and tone analyses, we used GDELT to assign the examined news articles a specific value for

each day of the chosen time period. For the volume analysis, this specific value was the percentage of total articles that contained the keyword(s). For the tone analysis, it was the average tone rating of the articles that contained the keyword(s). We then analyzed the relationships between those daily values by calculating an average for each time period. Specifically, our use of GDELT qualifies as computer-aided text analysis, a subset of quantitative content analysis wherein computer algorithms examine the symbols of communication and assign the numeric values (Neuendorf and Kumar, 2015).

Riffe et al. (2005) note that criticisms of quantitative content analysis have focused on its tendency to trivialize and ignore deeper and more complex meanings, but they reframe this tendency as a strength because it avoids the subjectivity inherent in analyses of complex meanings. They emphasize quantitative content analysis's replicability and ability to distill large amounts of data into understandable numbers. They further note that quantitative content analysis is especially useful and necessary when "The volume of material exceeds the investigator's individual capacity to examine." This was true for our analysis of every global online news article that contained the keyword "Saudi". By employing GDELT-based quantitative content analysis, we were able to produce a replicable and largely objective analysis at a scale that would have otherwise been impossible.

## 4. Analysis

In order to examine a potential correlation between the launch of LIV Golf and coverage of Saudi Arabia in global online news media, we compared data for the pre-, during, and post-launch periods. We considered both the volume (Section 1) and tone (Section 2) of Saudi Arabia coverage, with volume being measured as a percentage of total articles and tone being measured by GDELT's article-level tone ratings. The tone ratings convey whether LIV Golf has produced more positive portrayals of Saudi Arabia, and the volume percentages show how far-reaching LIV Golf's impact has been.

### 4.1. Volume

The average daily percentage of articles that included "Saudi" was 0.8577% for the pre-period, 0.7566% for the during-period, and 0.9938% for the post-period. The greater post-period percentage suggests that LIV Golf led to more media coverage of Saudi Arabia, but the lower during-period percentage suggests the opposite. It is counterintuitive that the month in which LIV Golf launched saw lower levels of Saudi Arabia-related media coverage.

This phenomenon can be explained if the volume of articles that include both "Saudi" and "LIV Golf" is taken into account. When analyzing such articles, the pre-period is not useful because of the relative lack of articles containing "LIV Golf" that were published before the league's launch. The average daily percentage of articles that included both "Saudi" and "LIV Golf" was 0.0254% for the during-period and 0.0052% for the post-period. Therefore, the percentage of articles that mentioned "Saudi" that also mentioned "LIV Golf" was 3.3571% for the during-period and 0.5232% for the post-period. LIV Golf coverage made up a small percentage of total Saudi Arabia coverage. Thus, variance in non-LIV Golf Saudi Arabia coverage was enough to produce lower overall Saudi Arabia coverage in the during-period despite the higher LIV Golf coverage.

This phenomenon holds up when articles are restricted to those that were published by US sources only. The average daily percentage of US articles that contained "Saudi" was 0.2316% for the pre-period, 0.1763% for the during-period, and 0.1382% for the post-period. It is once again counterintuitive that the during-launch and post-launch periods had less Saudi Arabia coverage than the pre-launch period. However, this can again be explained by turning to the articles that contained

both “Saudi” and “LIV Golf”. The average daily percentage of US articles that contained both “Saudi” and “LIV Golf” was 0.0134% for the during-period and 0.0034% for the post-period. Therefore, the percentage of US articles that mentioned “Saudi” that also mentioned “LIV Golf” was 7.6007% for the during-period and 2.4602% for the post-period. These small percentages mean that the increase of LIV Golf coverage in the during- and post-periods was not enough to produce total Saudi Arabia coverage increases in the United States.

It is notable, however, that LIV Golf accounted for a much higher percentage of Saudi Arabia coverage in the United States than it did globally. This difference, shown in Table 1, demonstrates that changes in LIV Golf coverage were more able to generate changes in overall Saudi Arabia coverage in the United States than they were globally.

**Table 1:** Percentage of Articles Containing “Saudi” That Also Contained “LIV Golf”

	Global Articles	US-Sourced Articles
During-Period	3.3571%	7.6007%
Post-Period	0.5232%	2.4602%

Overall, the volume results suggest that LIV Golf only marginally increased Saudi Arabia coverage in online news media. In the approximately 38-month post-period, LIV Golf accounted for a 0.5260% increase in global Saudi Arabia mentions and a 2.5223% increase in US Saudi Arabia mentions. Although there was considerably less LIV Golf coverage than other Saudi Arabia coverage, the creation of LIV Golf still produced a non-negligible increase in Saudi Arabia coverage, especially in the United States.

#### 4.2. Tone

GDELT’s tone ratings assign each news article an integer tone rating, with -10 indicating a very negative tone and 10 indicating a very positive tone. We had the GDELT Summary Tool calculate a tone rating average for every day in the pre-, during-, and post-periods. A given day’s tone rating average represents the average tone of all of the articles containing “Saudi” that were published that day. The average of all the daily tone rating averages was -1.1089 for the pre-period, -0.3788 for the during-period, and -0.1771 for the post-period (see Table 2). This shows that Saudi Arabia was covered in more positive contexts during and after the launch of LIV Golf than before.

The US-only numbers show a less definitive version of this trend. The average of all the US daily tone rating averages was -1.3255 for the pre-period, -1.0159 for the during-period, and -1.2020 for the post-period (see Table 2). Saudi Arabia was mentioned in more positive contexts in American news articles during and after the launch of LIV Golf than before, but this difference was smaller than it was for global news articles. Overall, the tone of US articles that mentioned Saudi Arabia was more negative than the tone of global articles that mentioned Saudi Arabia.



**Table 2:** Daily Tone Rating Averages for Articles Containing “Saudi”

	Global	US-Sourced Articles
Pre-Period	1.1089	1.2355
During-Period	0.3788	1.0159
Post-Period	0.1771	1.2020

It would make sense if the launch of LIV Golf accounted for the more positive tone ratings in the during- and post-periods, but the small percentage of total “Saudi” articles that “LIV Golf” articles comprised complicates this interpretation. Events that are unrelated to LIV Golf can have a disproportionate impact on the tone ratings. To illustrate, the graph in Figure 1 shows the daily tone rating averages for global “Saudi” articles in the post-period.

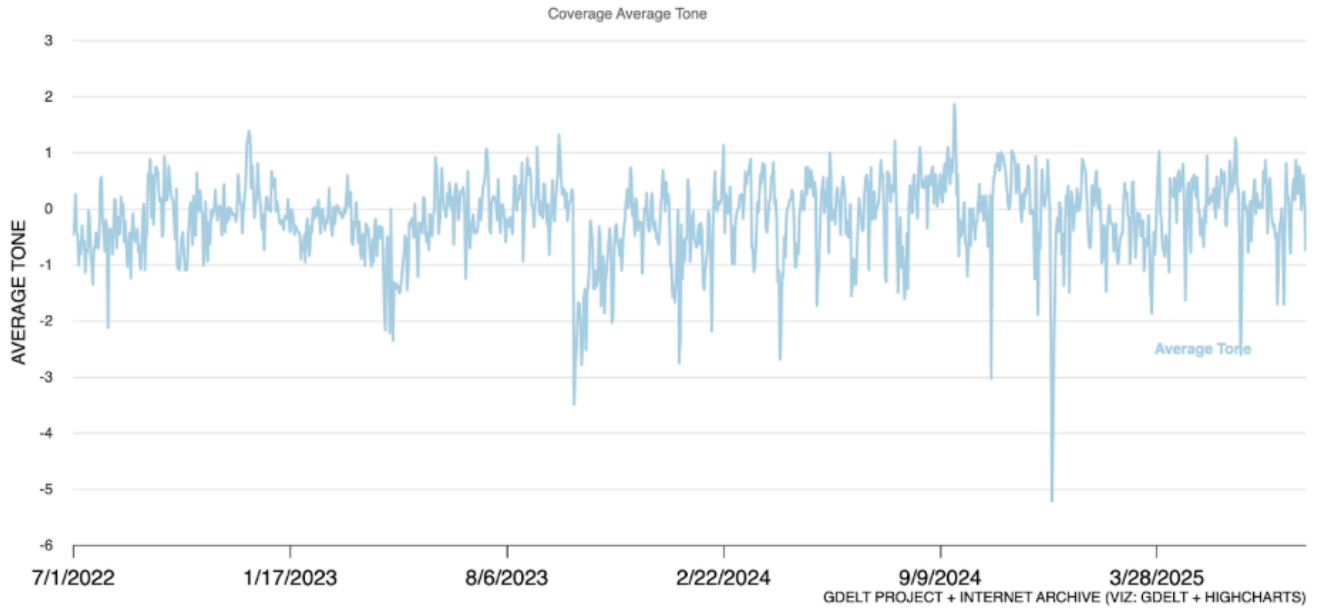
The daily tone rating average was at its lowest on December 21, 2024. That was the day after a Saudi Arabian man attacked a German Christmas market, killing six people and injuring at least 299, according to the BBC (“Magdeburg,” 2025). This event produced many articles with negative tones that mentioned Saudi Arabia, even though the Saudi regime was not the subject of the negativity. Even in the majority of cases in which the Saudi regime was the subject of either negativity or positivity, LIV Golf was not involved. Thus, simply examining average tone values for the pre-launch, during-launch, and post-launch periods is insufficient to understand whether LIV Golf has affected the tone of articles that mentioned Saudi Arabia.

To determine LIV Golf’s impact (or lack thereof) on the tone of overall “Saudi” articles, we turned to the tones of the articles that included both “Saudi” and “LIV Golf”. By comparing the tones of “Saudi” and “LIV Golf” articles to the tones of “Saudi” articles, we could assess LIV Golf’s impact. Figure 2 shows the average tone of global articles that contained “Saudi” and “LIV Golf” each day of the during-period. It is juxtaposed with Figure 3, which shows the average tone of global articles that contained “Saudi” each day of the during-period. Figure 4 shows the average tone of global articles that contained “Saudi” and “LIV Golf” each day of the post-period. It is juxtaposed with Figure 5, which shows the average tone of global articles that contained “Saudi” each day of the post-period.

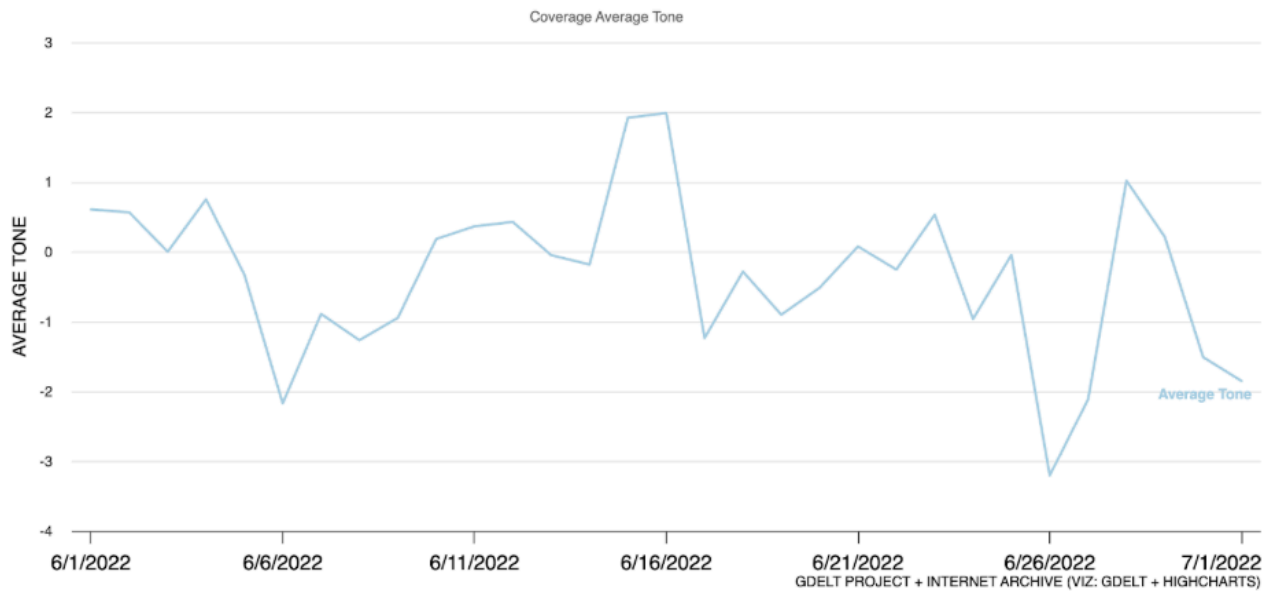
Figure 2 shows a higher average tone than Figure 3: the average of all the global daily tone ratings in the during-period for articles that contained both “Saudi” and “LIV Golf” was 0.0254, as opposed to -0.3788 for articles that contained “Saudi”. Figure 4 shows a higher average tone than Figure 5: in the post-period, the average was 0.3106 for articles that contained both “Saudi” and “LIV Golf” and -0.1771 for articles that contained “Saudi”. For both the during and post-periods, articles that mentioned both “Saudi” and “LIV Golf” had more positive tones than articles that mentioned “Saudi” (see Tables 3 and 4).

The same trend showed up even more definitively when we restricted the analysis to US articles. The average of all the US daily tone ratings in the during-period for articles that contained both “Saudi” and “LIV Golf” was -0.5344, as opposed to -1.0159 for articles that contained “Saudi”. In the post-period, the average was 0.1675 for US articles that contained both “Saudi” and “LIV Golf” and -1.2020 for US articles that contained “Saudi”. For US sources, there was an even wider discrepancy between the positivity of LIV Golf-related Saudi coverage and overall Saudi coverage than there was for global sources (see Tables 3 and 4).

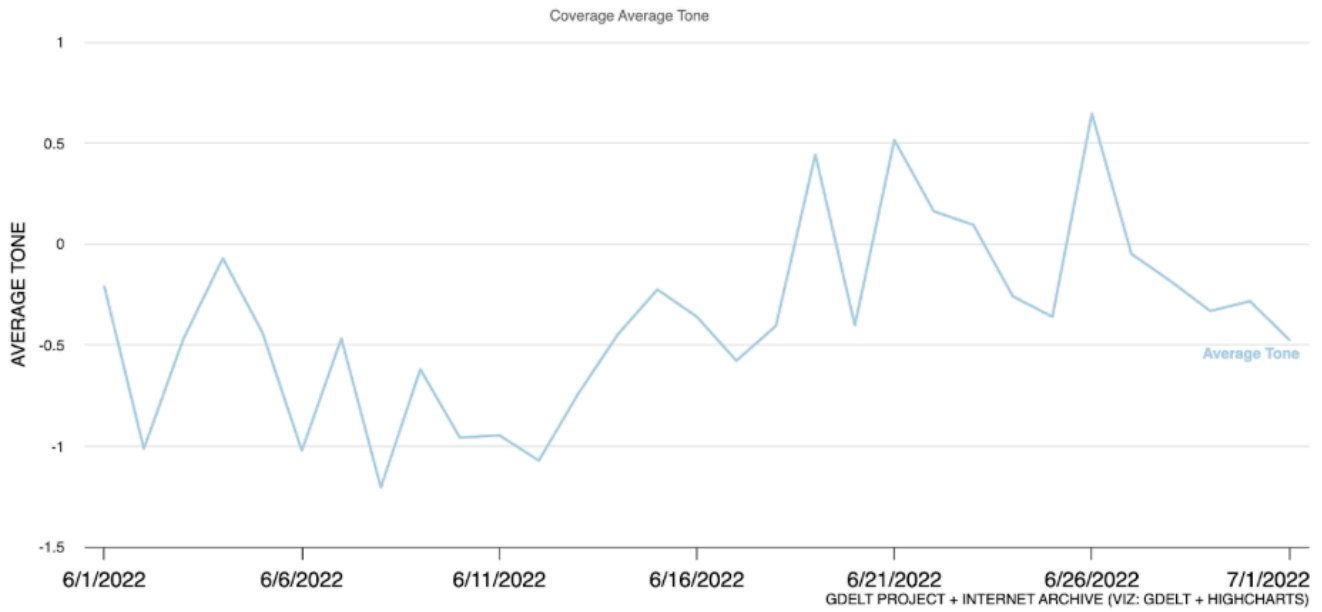




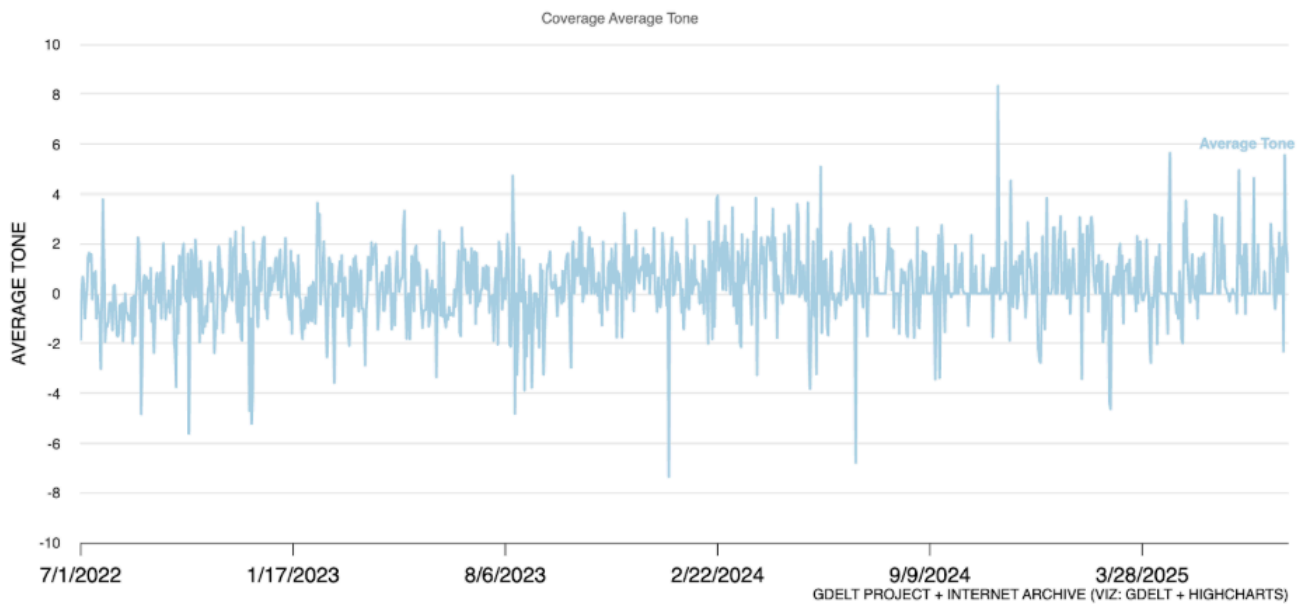
**Figure 1:** Post-Period Daily Tone Rating Averages for Global “Saudi” Articles



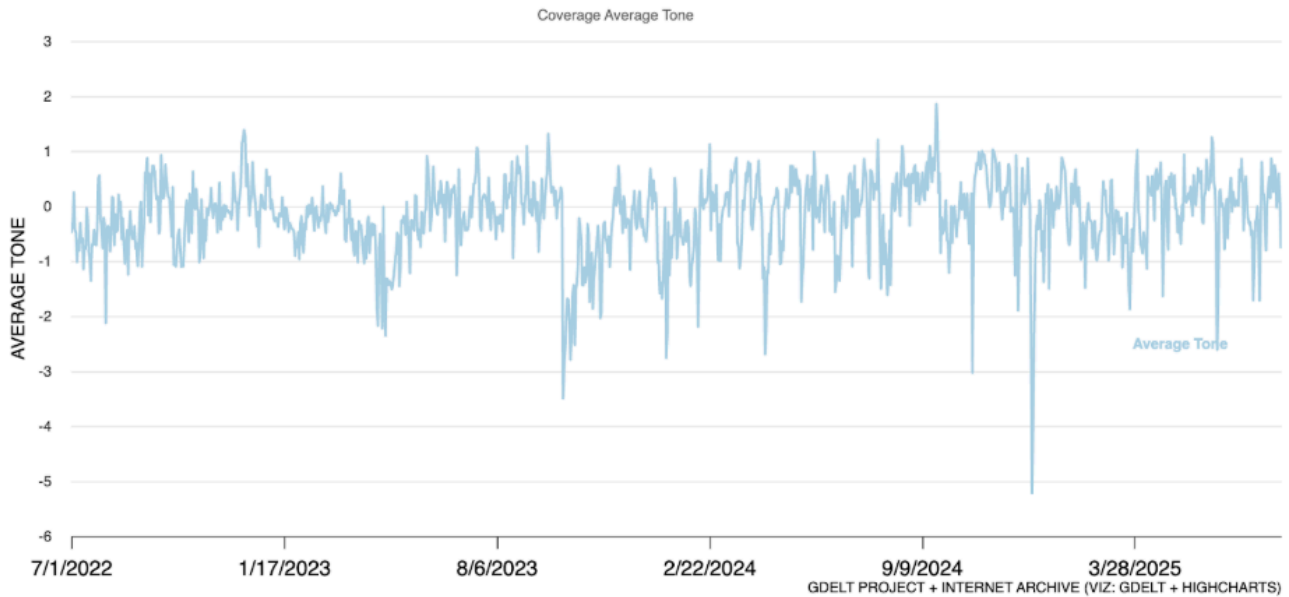
**Figure 2:** During-Period Daily Tone Rating Averages for “Saudi” and “LIV Golf” Articles



**Figure 3:** During-Period Daily Tone Rating Averages for “Saudi” Articles



**Figure 4:** Post-Period Daily Tone Rating Averages for “Saudi” and “LIV Golf” Articles



**Figure 5:** Post-Period Daily Tone Rating Averages for “Saudi” Articles

**Table 3:** During-Period Average of Daily Tone Ratings for Articles Containing “Saudi” vs. Articles Containing “Saudi” and “LIV Golf”

	Global Articles	US-Sourced Articles
“Saudi”	0.3788	1.0159
“Saudi” and “LIV Golf”	0.0254	0.5344

**Table 4:** Post-Period Average of Daily Tone Ratings for Articles Containing “Saudi” vs. Articles Containing “Saudi” and “LIV Golf”

	Global Articles	US-Sourced Articles
“Saudi”	0.1771	1.2020
“Saudi” and “LIV Golf”	0.3106	0.1675

Overall, the more positive tone ratings for LIV Golf-related Saudi articles demonstrate that the creation of LIV Golf improved the positivity of the contexts in which Saudi Arabia was mentioned in online news media. The fact that “Saudi”

articles had higher tone positivity ratings in the during- and post-periods than in the pre-period can be attributed at least in part to LIV Golf, although the modest share of “Saudi” articles that mention LIV Golf limits the extent to which the endeavor can impact the positivity of total Saudi Arabia coverage.

## 5. Discussion

The major findings from our analysis are as follows:

1. LIV Golf accounted for a very small percentage of global Saudi Arabia articles (0.5232% of articles for the post-period).
2. LIV Golf accounted for a still small but significantly greater percentage of US-sourced Saudi Arabia articles (2.4602% of articles for the post-period).
3. Global and US-sourced Saudi Arabia coverage had a more positive tone during and after the launch of LIV Golf than before.
4. LIV Golf-related Saudi Arabia coverage was more positive in tone than overall Saudi Arabia coverage for both global and US-sourced articles.
5. The positivity gain for LIV Golf-related Saudi Arabia coverage was greater for US articles.

The first finding demonstrates the limits of LIV Golf’s impact on total Saudi Arabian news coverage. It aligns with Chadwick’s (2018) contention “that sport is only ever one constituent part of the way in which most people conceive of a country.” Chadwick (2018) further suggests that “the need for sport-washing is as likely to be an ongoing process as it is a one-off occurrence,” since “it often takes more than a single wash to bring the sparkle back.” Therefore, Finding 1 suggests that Saudi Arabia will need to continue investing in LIV Golf in order to ensure that any associated reputation boosts are impactful and sustainable.

Although Finding 1 cautions against the conclusion that Finding 3 is attributable to LIV Golf, Finding 4 suggests that LIV Golf is at least partially responsible for Finding 3. It provides direct evidence that LIV Golf has increased the positivity of Saudi Arabia coverage, implying that LIV Golf has improved Saudi Arabia’s reputation. This idea relates to the findings of Gerschewski et al. (2024). They surveyed 14,000 European respondents about Qatar prior to its hosting of the 2022 World Cup. They found that respondents who were exposed to framing that emphasized Qatar’s organizational capacity had more positive attitudes about Qatar, while respondents who were exposed to framing that emphasized Qatar’s human rights issues had more negative attitudes. This showed that media framing influences public perception. We built on the results of Gerschewski et al. (2024) by finding that LIV Golf has improved media framing of Saudi Arabia and has thereby improved public perception of Saudi Arabia.

Findings 1 and 2 show that LIV Golf’s tone positivity boost only applied to 0.5232% of global Saudi Arabia articles and 2.4602% of US-sourced Saudi Arabia articles in the post-period, but such an impact is still valuable to Saudi Arabia. This rings especially true when the type of person who reads LIV Golf articles is taken into account. Due to golf’s upper-class audience, wealthy and powerful people are the ones reading LIV Golf articles. The more positive tone in LIV Golf articles thus allows the Saudi Arabian regime to make reputational inroads with the people who can weave them into the fabric of the global economy, helping them achieve the Vision 2030 priority of increasing international investment and tourism.



Findings 2 and 5 show that LIV Golf has had a particularly large positive impact on the tone of Saudi Arabia coverage in the United States. This further demonstrates the alignment of LIV Golf with Vision 2030, since the United States, with its sizable economic and cultural influence, is a prime target for increasing international investment and tourism. The United States' cultural sway, in particular, means that a more positive American perception of Saudi Arabia could even lead to more pride and support for the Saudi Arabian regime domestically.

LIV Golf increasing the positivity of Saudi Arabia coverage is certainly good for the Saudi Arabian regime, but what about for a Western democracy like the United States? On the one hand, LIV Golf could be covering for Saudi Arabia's human rights abuses. If the regime can escape criticism for its abuses, it would be less inclined to make a shift towards the Western liberal values that countries like the United States want to see adopted. On the other hand, LIV Golf could serve as the mechanism through which Saudi Arabia incorporates itself into Western liberal culture. Given the reforms that the Saudi regime has made under Vision 2030, perhaps a reputation boost is deserved and will further motivate an embrace of liberal norms. With that being said, this positive scenario relies on the reputation boost being conditional. In other words, potential continued abuses would have to be met with decreases in coverage positivity in order for the Saudi regime to have motivation to continue reforming. In order to understand how this might or might not happen, it is helpful to examine some excerpts from articles published in the post-period that contain both "Saudi" and "LIV Golf".

Typically, LIV Golf produces positive Saudi Arabia coverage by linking the success of LIV golfers to the success of Saudi Arabia. For example, in an ESPN article about LIV golfer Brooks Koepka's 2023 PGA Championship victory, Schlabach (2023) wrote, "It was a historic victory for Koepka and the LIV Golf League, the Saudi Arabian-financed circuit that reportedly paid him \$100 million in guaranteed earnings to lure him away from the PGA Tour in June. Koepka is the first LIV Golf League player to win a major championship." Achievements by LIV golfers are framed, either implicitly or (in this case) explicitly, as achievements for Saudi Arabia, creating a narrative of Saudi prosperity. The question is whether this narrative can be affected by potential abuses by the Saudi regime.

In some cases, achievements by LIV golfers can actually draw attention to the Saudi regime's abuses, thus producing negative coverage and motivating the regime to implement genuine reforms. For example, in a Yahoo Sports article about LIV golfer Bryson DeChambeau's record-breaking score of 58, Busbee (2023) wrote, "In the wake of the stunning agreement between the PGA Tour and LIV Golf's Saudi backers, DeChambeau made a disastrous appearance on CNN attempting to downplay Saudi Arabia's human rights atrocities." In this case, DeChambeau's achievement actually produced negative Saudi Arabia coverage by shining a spotlight on its human rights abuses. This aligns with Detchenique & Grolleau's (2025) assertion that media coverage of a sportswashing event can subvert the sportswasher's intention by raising awareness for the very cause that they are trying to deflect attention from. Johnson's (2024) survey of Americans highlights the detriment of this phenomenon to Saudi Arabia by finding that learning about sportswashing accusations produced anti-LIV beliefs in participants. LIV Golf articles that highlight Saudi abuses or bring up sportswashing accusations produce anti-Saudi sentiment. This sportswashing backfire would put pressure on the Saudi regime to actually alleviate the highlighted abuses.

While some LIV Golf articles draw attention to Saudi abuses, others do the opposite. For example, Sky Sports published an article describing the same Bryson DeChambeau 58 that the Yahoo Sports article described. The article's only mention of "Saudi" was the following: "The American's stunning performance was the lowest round in a LIV tournament, with the Saudi-backed league established in 2021" ("Bryson DeChambeau," 2023). This kind of mention gives the regime legitimacy. The Yahoo Sports article and the Sky Sports article described the same event, but one had a normalizing mention of Saudi

Arabia, while the other had a negative mention.

Whether Saudi Arabia's LIV Golf-induced coverage positivity boost furthers or undermines Western liberal values will be determined by which tack journalists choose if Saudi Arabia slows or reverses its progress towards liberalization. So far, the relative positivity of LIV Golf-related Saudi Arabia coverage suggests that journalists have taken the normalizing tack, but it remains to be seen what would happen if the regime moved towards abandoning its reforms. LIV Golf coverage could either hold the regime accountable or let it off the hook, with early returns favoring the latter scenario.

## 6. Conclusion

LIV Golf has been successful as a sportswashing endeavor for Saudi Arabia, since Saudi Arabia mentions in LIV Golf contexts have had more positive tones than the average Saudi Arabia mention. The extent of this success is limited by the small percentage of total Saudi Arabia coverage that LIV Golf coverage comprises. It follows that Saudi Arabia would want to continue to increase LIV Golf's profile. The more LIV Golf is covered, the more positive overall Saudi Arabia coverage will be. A high volume of LIV Golf articles can overshadow, or "wash out", negative articles about Saudi Arabia.

However, an opposite effect could unfold if the Saudi regime had another high-profile instance of immorality like the Khashoggi murder. LIV golfers would likely face intense questioning about such an incident, meaning that LIV Golf could amplify, rather than diminish, negative coverage of Saudi Arabia. It remains to be seen if this amplifying effect would actually occur in the face of a major Saudi controversy, but its potential at least provides an incentive for the regime to behave morally. Future research could examine whether the tone positivity of LIV Golf-related coverage changes at the time of high-profile, controversial events related to Saudi Arabia.

Overall, LIV Golf's coverage positivity boost improves perception of Saudi Arabia on the world stage, furthering its goals of increasing international investment and tourism under Vision 2030. This success serves as a model for other nations seeking acceptance from the liberal world. It shows that association with a respected sports entity can meaningfully improve a country's reputation. This could motivate more sportswashing in the future.

Sportswashing is a concept that is rapidly gaining prominence and is thus deserving of more research. This quantitative analysis of sportswashing will hopefully serve as a starting point for future analyses. Our method can be applied to other instances of sportswashing or even to other fields like music, art, or television to explore how involvement in popular culture can impact a country's reputation. Researching cultural activities like sports that are seemingly apolitical can illuminate surprising undercurrents of political motivation and influence.

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## Acknowledgements & Mentor Contribution Statement

I would like to thank my mentor, **Saadia Gardezi**, for her valuable guidance throughout the development of this paper. She helped conceptualize the idea of news article analysis, provided advice on structuring the paper in a logical and clear way, and offered feedback on drafts, identifying gaps that required more analytical rigor. However, all final decisions were mine alone. Likewise, I independently ran the entire GDELT analysis, interpreted the results, and wrote every word of the paper.

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