

Linguistic Constructions of Saudi Cinema in Global Media: Framing Reform and Representation in Film Review Discourse

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Abstract:

This study examines how Saudi cinema is discursively constructed in English-language media through film reviews, festival coverage, and cinema journalism published between 2017 and 2024. It argues that media discourse does not merely describe films or industry developments, but actively shapes their cultural meaning, symbolic value, and global visibility. Film criticism therefore functions as a discursive practice through which cinema, ideology, and transnational cultural power intersect. The study analyzes 63 English-language articles drawn from regional and international media outlets, including reviews, festival reports, and industry features. Methodologically, it combines four complementary frameworks: Critical Discourse Analysis, Appraisal Theory, Framing Theory, and Representation Theory. Quantitative linguistic data-such as lexical density, evaluative language, modality, and grammatical abstraction-were generated using Python-based corpus analysis tools in Google Colab and triangulated with close qualitative readings of selected texts. The findings reveal a predominantly positive discourse framing Saudi cinema as evidence of modernization, reform, and cultural openness. However, notable differences appear between regional and international coverage. Regional outlets tend to adopt celebratory and nation-building narratives that emphasize policy reforms and cultural transformation, whereas international media more frequently combine aesthetic appreciation with cautious sociopolitical critique. Across both contexts, film discourse contributes to normalizing a “catching up with modernity” narrative and reproducing global standards of artistic legitimacy. The study concludes that English-language media discourse plays a constitutive role in shaping the global image of Saudi cinema while also limiting interpretive possibilities through dominant festival and world-cinema frameworks. It calls for a more pluralistic and reflexive critical engagement with Saudi cinema as a diverse and evolving cultural field.

Keywords: Saudi cinema; media linguistics; discourse analysis; CDA; Appraisal Theory; framing; representation; festivals; Vision 2030

البناءات اللغوية للسينما السعودية في الإعلام العالمي: التأطير والتحول والتمثيل

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المستخلص:

تهدف الدراسة إلى تحليل الكيفية التي تُبنى بها صورة السينما السعودية في الخطاب الإعلامي المكتوب باللغة الإنجليزية من خلال مراجعات الأفلام، وتغطيات المهرجانات، والمواد الصحفية المنشورة بين عامي 2017 و2024. وتطلق من فرضية أن الخطاب الإعلامي لا يكتفي بوصف الأفلام أو رصد التحولات الصناعية، بل يشارك في إنتاج معناها الثقافي وقيمتها الرمزية وصورها العالمية؛ إذ تُعد مراجعات الأفلام ممارسة خطابية تتقاطع فيها السينما مع الأيديولوجيا والقوة الثقافية العابرة للحدود. بتحليل 63 مقالاً منشوراً في وسائل إعلام إقليمية ودولية باللغة الإنجليزية، تشمل مراجعات نقدية وتقارير مهرجانات و مواد صحفية متخصصة. وتستند إلى أربعة أطر نظرية: التحليل النقدي للخطاب، ونظرية التقويم، ونظرية التأطير، ونظرية التمثيل. واستُخدمت أدوات تحليل نصي حاسوبي لاستخراج البيانات الكمية المتعلقة بالكثافة المعجمية واللغة التقويمية والأنماط اللغوية، ثم دُعمت النتائج بقراءات نوعية معمقة للنصوص. لتكشف عن هيمنة خطاب إيجابي يقَدِّم السينما السعودية بوصفها مؤشراً على التحديث والإصلاح والانفتاح الثقافي. مع ظهور فروق واضحة بين الإعلام الإقليمي والدولي؛ إذ يميل الخطاب الإقليمي إلى الاحتفاء وربط السينما بالمشروعات الوطنية، بينما يجمع الخطاب الدولي بين الإشادة الفنية والنقد الاجتماعي والسياسي الحذر. وتسهم هذه الخطابات في ترسيخ سردية «الحاق بالحدث» وإعادة إنتاج معايير عالمية للشرعية الفنية والثقافية. وتخلص إلى أن الخطاب الإعلامي الإنجليزي يؤدي دوراً محورياً في تشكيل الصورة العالمية للسينما السعودية، مع الدعوة إلى مقارنة نقدية أكثر تعددية تراعي تنوع التجارب والسياقات المحلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السينما السعودية؛ الخطاب الإعلامي؛ التحليل النقدي للخطاب؛ التمثيل الثقافي؛ التأطير الإعلامي؛ مراجعات الأفلام.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Saudi Arabia's re-entry into public cinematic exhibition and the rapid expansion of film production have attracted unprecedented global attention. The lifting of the cinema ban in 2018, the establishment of new funding bodies and film commissions, and the launch of high-profile festivals have transformed what was once described as an "absent cinema" into a highly visible cultural field. International media outlets, festival circuits, and streaming platforms have responded swiftly, positioning Saudi cinema as one of the most intriguing developments in contemporary world cinema. (Alamri, 2022; Al-Rasheed, 2018; Alamri, 2024).

While existing scholarship has begun to document the industrial, regulatory, and policy dimensions of this transformation, considerably less attention has been paid to the role of media discourse in constructing the meaning and value of Saudi cinema for different audiences. Media coverage is never a neutral mirror of cultural production. Rather, it selects, frames, evaluates, and narrates phenomena in ways that shape public understanding and institutional legitimacy. In the case of emerging or previously marginalized cinemas, such discourse plays a particularly influential role in determining how films are interpreted, compared, and positioned within global cultural hierarchies. (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2001).

English-language film criticism occupies a strategic position in this process. It functions as a key site where local cultural products are translated for transnational audiences, assessed according to dominant aesthetic norms, and embedded within broader narratives of modernity, reform, and globalization. Reviews and features do not merely assess cinematic quality; they frequently operate as interpretive guides that link films to sociopolitical contexts, national identities, and moral evaluations. This is especially evident in coverage of cinema from politically sensitive or non-Western contexts, where films are often read as allegories of social change rather than as autonomous aesthetic objects. (Hjort, 2007).

Saudi cinema's global emergence has unfolded within a highly politicized media environment shaped by long-standing representations of the Middle East, Islam, gender relations, and state power (Alamri, 2022). As a result, reviews of Saudi films often carry a dual burden: they evaluate artistic merit while simultaneously situating films within narratives of reform, liberalization, or cultural exceptionalism. These narratives can generate sympathy and visibility, but they may also constrain interpretation by privileging certain themes—such as women's emancipation or resistance to conservatism—over others. (Said, 1978; Shohat & Stam, 1994).

Building on insights from media linguistics, cultural sociology, and film studies, this article examines how English-language regional and international media outlets linguistically construct Saudi cinema and what ideological work these constructions perform. Specifically, it asks how evaluative language, framing devices, and representational strategies shape the global image of Saudi cinema and mediate its cultural legitimacy. By integrating Critical Discourse Analysis, Appraisal Theory, Framing Theory, and Representation Theory, the study offers a multi-layered account of how micro-level linguistic choices connect to macro-level narratives of power, modernization, and cultural authority.

Through a corpus-based and qualitative analysis of 63 articles published between 2017 and 2024, the study contributes to broader debates on emerging cinemas, world cinema reception, and the politics of cultural representation. It argues that media discourse does not simply accompany the rise of Saudi cinema but actively participates in defining what that rise means, for whom it matters, and under what

conditions it is deemed legitimate.

2. Significance of the Study

This study holds both theoretical and practical significance in media studies, cultural studies, and Saudi/Gulf cinema research. As Saudi film production and exhibition have expanded since the late 2010s, there is a growing need to understand not only films as texts, but also the critical and journalistic discourses that frame them for regional and transnational audiences (Alamri, 2022; Almohaimeed, 2021). Media coverage does not simply reflect cinema—it constructs meaning, legitimacy, and cultural capital around it. By examining how Saudi films are discussed in regional and international English-language media, this research contributes to debates about cultural representation, media framing, and discourse power dynamics. Practically, the findings can inform filmmakers, critics, and policymakers by clarifying how recurring frames (e.g., reform/modernization, authenticity, gender) shape reception and perceived legitimacy (Entman, 1993; Hall, 1997).

3. Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks

Media discourse is best understood not as a transparent channel through which information passes, but as a carefully constructed form of communication shaped by institutional priorities, professional conventions, and ideological assumptions. As Reah (2002) and O’Keeffe (2006) noted, media texts are produced for audiences that are largely invisible to the writer, which makes them especially dependent on shared cultural knowledge and dominant interpretive frameworks. This is particularly relevant in the case of cultural journalism and film criticism, where evaluation, interpretation, and explanation are central to the genre.

Cinema occupies a distinctive position within media discourse because films are rarely treated as artistic objects alone (Hjort, 2007). Instead, they are often mobilised as evidence of cultural identity, political change, or social values—especially when they originate from regions that are perceived as culturally or politically “other”. In English-language media, films from the Middle East are frequently read as sociological documents rather than as cinematic texts, a tendency that shapes how they are framed, evaluated, and circulated globally. In this sense, Hjort (2007) stated that films are used to portray the culture of a society. To examine how Saudi cinema is constructed in English-language media discourse, this study draws on an integrated set of theoretical perspectives rather than a single framework. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Appraisal Theory, Framing Theory, and Representation Theory together offer complementary tools for analysing language, evaluation, narrative structure, and meaning-making. Rather than treating these approaches as separate analytical stages, this study treats them as overlapping analytical lenses that illuminate different dimensions of the same discursive process (Fairclough, 1995).

Media Discourse, Ideology, and Power

A central assumption of Critical Discourse Analysis is that language both reflects and produces social reality (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2001). According to Fairclough (1995), discourse is shaped by social structures while simultaneously contributing to their reproduction or transformation. Media discourse, in particular, plays a key role in normalising certain viewpoints and marginalising others. Van Dijk (2001) further emphasises that elite discourse—such as journalism, commentary, and cultural criticism—has disproportionate influence in shaping public knowledge and attitudes.

In the context of film criticism, this means that reviews do more than assess cinematic quality. They participate in broader ideological conversations about culture, morality, progress, and legitimacy (Alamri, 2022). It is assumed that the same applied to critics when writing about films from Saudi Arabia, they might do so within an already saturated discursive field shaped by decades of political reporting, cultural stereotyping, and geopolitical narratives. Even well-intentioned or sympathetic criticism may reproduce these frameworks, often unconsciously.

Fairclough's three-dimensional model is useful here because it links linguistic choices to broader social meanings. At the textual level, critics rely on evaluative adjectives, metaphors, and modal expressions. At the level of discursive practice, reviews draw on familiar genres of liberal commentary, human-interest storytelling, and festival journalism. At the social level, these texts contribute to ongoing debates about modernisation, gender, religion, and reform in Saudi Arabia. Seen in this way, film criticism becomes a site where cultural authority is exercised and negotiated.

Evaluation, Stance, and Appraisal

While CDA provides a broad critical orientation, it does not always offer sufficient tools for analysing how evaluation works at the level of grammar and lexis. This is where Appraisal Theory becomes particularly useful. Developed within Systemic Functional Linguistics, Appraisal Theory focuses on how writers position themselves in relation to what they describe and how they align readers with particular values (Martin & White, 2005).

Appraisal Theory distinguishes between affect (emotional responses), judgement (moral or ethical evaluation of behaviour), and appreciation (evaluation of objects, processes, or texts). In film criticism, appreciation is often expected to dominate, as critics are ostensibly evaluating narrative, performance, cinematography, and direction. However, studies have shown that judgement frequently enters film reviews when films are linked to social or political issues (Bednarek, 2006).

Film criticism is inherently evaluative, but the focus of evaluation can vary considerably. Critics may assess narrative coherence, acting, cinematography, and direction, or they may foreground a film's social relevance, political symbolism, or representational value. Appraisal Theory allows these differences to be mapped systematically by identifying where praise and criticism are directed and how strongly they are expressed.

Previous research on international film criticism suggests that evaluative language often reflects broader ideological positions. In coverage of cinema from the Global South, critics frequently shift attention away from technical or aesthetic concerns toward moral and sociopolitical interpretation, treating films less as cinematic artefacts and more as indicators of cultural progress, resistance, or reform (Higson, 2001).

In coverage of cinema, appraisal resources are often redirected away from cinematic craft toward broader social evaluation as discussed in above. Critics may praise a film less for its storytelling or technical execution than for what it represents symbolically. Conversely, negative appraisal may target social conditions, institutions, or traditions depicted in the film rather than the film itself. This redistribution of evaluative focus is one of the central concerns of the present study.

Framing and Interpretive Patterns

Evaluation does not occur in isolation but is organised through broader interpretive frames.

Framing Theory helps explain how media texts guide audiences toward particular readings by foregrounding some aspects of reality while backgrounding others. Entman (1993) describes frames as devices that define problems, attribute responsibility, and suggest moral evaluations and solutions.

In the context of film journalism and criticism, frames frequently revolve around themes such as national transformation, cultural breakthrough, resistance, or authenticity. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) argue that media frames function as “interpretive packages” that provide coherence and resonance by linking facts, metaphors, exemplars, and moral claims. For Saudi cinema, dominant frames in international media often include “cinema as reform,” “women breaking barriers,” or “art under repression.” While these frames can generate sympathy and visibility, they may also limit interpretive possibilities by reducing films to sociological case studies rather than artistic works (Alamri, 2022).

While these frames can generate interest and sympathy, they can also overshadow alternative readings. When a Saudi film is framed primarily as evidence of social reform, its aesthetic qualities may become secondary. The film risks being read less as cinema and more as a cultural signal. This tendency has been widely noted in scholarship on non-Western and postcolonial cinema, where films are often burdened with representational expectations Hjort (2007).

Representation and Postcolonial Perspectives

Representation Theory further complicates this discussion by emphasising that meaning is constructed rather than merely reflected (Hall, 1997). Representations are shaped by historical power relations and often rely on binary oppositions such as modern versus traditional or liberated versus oppressed. In Western media, representations of Arab and Muslim societies have frequently been criticised for their reductive and Orientalist tendencies (Said, 1978; Shohat & Stam, 1994).

Postcolonial and transnational film scholars have warned that even seemingly positive representations can reproduce hierarchies. Diawara (1992) and Naficy (2001), for example, argue that films from marginal or non-Western contexts are often read primarily through their cultural difference rather than their aesthetic strategies. Naficy’s notion of “accented cinema” highlights how such films are positioned as explanatory texts that teach global audiences about unfamiliar societies.

In the case of Saudi cinema, Alamri (2022) states that representation is further complicated by the country’s geopolitical visibility and its association with oil wealth, religious conservatism, and political power. As a result, Saudi films often carry a representational burden that exceeds that placed on films from more established Western industries.

Film Festivals, News Values, and Visibility

Film festivals play an important role in mediating the global circulation of Saudi cinema. De Valck (2007) argues that festivals function as cultural institutions that produce value through selection, awards, and critical attention. Festival exposure often determines which films receive international coverage and how they are framed. However, festival discourse is shaped by specific news values. Bednarek and Caple (2017) show that eliteness, consonance, and cultural proximity strongly influence media coverage. Films that align with dominant liberal-humanist narratives or that resonate with existing expectations are more likely to be highlighted. As a result, Saudi films that foreground themes such as women’s empowerment or social change tend to receive more attention than those that focus on less familiar or less legible topics.

This has implications for how Saudi cinema is globally positioned. While festival success can enhance legitimacy and visibility, it may also encourage a narrow range of stories and evaluative frameworks.

3.6 Linguistic Studies of Film Criticism and Saudi Cinema

A growing body of linguistically oriented research demonstrates how film criticism encodes ideology and stance through grammatical patterning and evaluative lexis. However, existing literature offers only limited insight into the Saudi context. Almohaimeed's (2021) focused case study of *Wadjda* is particularly relevant. Applying Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA alongside Appraisal Theory (Attitude), the study compared one Western (English-language) and one Saudi (Arabic-language) review of the film.

The findings revealed a striking divergence in evaluative focus. The Western review distributed positive and negative appraisal relatively evenly but directed much of its negative evaluation toward Saudi society rather than the film's craft. In contrast, the Saudi review contained a higher density of negative judgements and appreciations targeting cinematic elements such as dialogue, narrative coherence, and temporal logic, while offering selective praise for performances and cinematography.

Interpreting these patterns, Almohaimeed (2021) argues that Western appraisal is shaped by Eurocentric frames and entrenched media representations that position *Wadjda* as a symbol of social reform and women's empowerment. The Saudi critic's "insider" footing, by contrast, reduces sociological distraction and produces a more craft-oriented critique. This study reinforces broader claims that international criticism often outsources evaluative stance to sociopolitical narratives, while local criticism foregrounds production quality, genre conventions, and aesthetic standards.

Recent empirical scholarship has begun to examine the linguistic and ideological framing of Saudi cinema in media discourse. Almohaimeed (2021) conducted a comparative discourse analysis of Western and Saudi reviews of the film *Wadjda*, demonstrating that international criticism often shifts evaluative focus from cinematic craft toward sociopolitical narratives. Similarly, Alharthi and Almehmadi (2024) analyze the translation and reception of Saudi humor in the animated series *Masameer County*, showing how cultural meaning is reframed through linguistic adaptation and media discourse.

More recent work has also examined ideological representation within Saudi films themselves. Albuhayri and Elyas (2026) apply visual grammar analysis to the Saudi film *Night Courier* (Mandoob), revealing how cinematic language constructs narratives of gender transformation and social change. Killick (2025) further explores the politics of representation in contemporary Saudi cinema, arguing that international criticism frequently interprets Saudi films through broader narratives of modernization, reform, and cultural transformation.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that Saudi cinema is increasingly embedded within global discourses of cultural change and international legitimacy. However, existing research often focuses on individual films or limited case studies. Systematic analyses of how English-language media discourse constructs Saudi cinema across multiple outlets and journalistic genres remain relatively limited.

3.7 Synthesis and Research Gap

While previous scholarship has examined the representation of Saudi cinema and individual films

within global cultural discourse, relatively few studies have systematically analyzed how English-language media coverage constructs Saudi cinema linguistically across a broader corpus of journalistic texts. Existing research has largely focused on single-film case studies (Almohaimeed, 2021) or ideological representation within specific cinematic works (Albuhayri & Elyas, 2026). Consequently, there remains a need for corpus-based research examining how evaluative language, framing strategies, and representational patterns operate across a wider range of media outlets. By analyzing a corpus of 63 English-language articles published between 2017 and 2024, the present study addresses this gap and contributes to scholarship on media discourse, emerging cinemas, and cultural globalization.

4. Research Questions

- Linguistic and Discursive Strategies
 1. How do English-language media outlets linguistically and discursively construct Saudi cinema, particularly through stance-taking, appraisal, and framing devices?
- Regional vs. International Orientations
 2. In what ways do regional and international outlets differ in their evaluations of Saudi films, especially regarding cinematic craft, sociopolitical reform, and representation?
- Cultural and Institutional Consequences
 3. How do these constructions and evaluations shape the global legitimacy, visibility, and cultural positioning of Saudi cinema?

5. Data and Methods

5.1 Data

The corpus includes 63 English-language articles about Saudi films published between 2017 and 2024 in regional outlets (e.g., Arab News, Khaleej Times, Saudi Gazette, The National, Saudi Jeans, and AboutHer.com) and international outlets (e.g., Variety, The Guardian, Empire, The Hollywood Reporter, RogerEbert.com, and Time Out). Articles comprise festival dispatches, reviews, features, and interviews. Inclusion criteria required that the article centrally address a Saudi film, filmmaker, or Saudi cinema as a field; be in English; be non-duplicate; and be available in full text. Full data file is in Appendix 1.

5.2 Measures

For each article, the study computed document-level metrics: total word count; average sentence length; lexical density (content words divided by total words); counts of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs; and heuristic indicators of passives, nominalizations, evidentials (e.g., “according to...,” “reportedly”), and pronoun/deictic usage. Sentiment categorization (positive/neutral/negative/borderline) used a lexicon-assisted approach with manual verification. For qualitative analysis, the study extracted concordance-like snippets around gender, festival/reform references, and agency-bearing nominalizations to support close reading and triangulate the quantitative patterns.

5.3 Analytical Approach and Methods Precedent

The study combines corpus-assisted description with close reading. Quantitatively, the study summarizes distributional properties and visualize sentiment and temporal trends. Qualitatively, the data

are analyzed for stance and voice through Appraisal Theory; textual and intertextual strategies through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA); narrative packages through Framing Theory; and representational tropes through Representation Theory. The aim is not causal inference but patterned description of how linguistic choices cohere into cultural narratives. The design follows linguistically informed analyses of review discourse that pair CDA with Appraisal Theory, a combination shown to be productive in Saudi-cinema contexts. In particular, Almohaimeed (2021) operationalizes Fairclough's text-discursive practice-social practice model alongside Appraisal's Attitude system to separate grammatical resources that background agency and launder stance from evaluative meanings and their orientation. The study extends that dual lens from a two-review case to a multi-outlet corpus and adds Engagement and Graduation to capture monogloss/heterogloss and intensification patterns at scale.

5.4 Operationalizing the Frameworks

5.4.1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The study follows Fairclough's (1995) three planes—discourse-as-text, discursive practice, and social practice—augmented by van Dijk's (2001) attention to power and ideology. On the text plane, The study quantified grammar and lexis associated with institutional stance management: passives (a heuristic be + VBN filter with manual checks), nominalizations (suffix filters such as -tion, -ment, -ity with a curated list including reform, representation, censorship, modernization), evidentials (e.g., according to, reportedly, it seems, critics say, festival programmers), and deixis/pronouns (the study/the/ the study vs. they/them/their; demonstratives this/that/these/those) as cues to footing (O'Keeffe, 2006). On the discursive-practice plane, Data were coded intertextual references to festivals (Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Red Sea), streamers, funds, and policy initiatives as presence and salience (headline/lead/body), indexing gatekeeping and prestige alignment (Dayan & Katz, 1992; de Valck, 2007; Iordanova, 2012). On the social-practice plane, the study annotated explicit or implicit references to Vision 2030 and liberalization/infrastructure narratives as links between text and modernization discourses. A 20.6% stratified subsample ($n = 13$; by outlet and year) was double-coded; agreement exceeded $\kappa = .78$ for intertextual items and $\kappa = .72$ for reform references.

5.4.2 Appraisal Theory

Following Martin and White (2005) and Bednarek (2006), The study modeled stance via Attitude (Affect, Judgment, Appreciation), Engagement (monogloss vs. heterogloss), and Graduation (Force/Focus). Attitude items were identified through curated seed lists expanded by distributional neighbors and checked in context: Appreciation (e.g., poetic, assured, visually rich, nuanced), negative appreciation (e.g., flat, didactic), Judgment (e.g., brave, humane, exploitative), and Affect (e.g., moving, uplifting). Engagement coding distinguished closure markers (e.g., clearly, undoubtedly, without question) and categorical declaratives (monogloss) from attribution, concessive, dialogically expansive modals (may, might), and counter-expectancy markers (yet, however) as heterogloss. Graduation captured intensifiers and downtoners (e.g., indeed, certainly; somewhat, rather) and focus sharpeners/softeners (e.g., truly authentic; sort of minimalist). Densities were normalized per 1,000 words. Reliability on a 20.6% subsample ($n = 13$) was $\kappa = .75$ for Attitude polarity and $\kappa = .70$ for Engagement type after adjudication.

5.4.3 Framing Theory

Using Entman's (1993) four functions—problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation—together with Gamson and Modigliani's (1989) interpretive packages, Data were coded each function per article as present/absent and, when present, as dominant or supporting based on headline/lead placement and repetition. Typical instantiations include problem (late emergence/visibility gaps), cause (censorship/underinvestment/conservatism), moral evaluations (progressive/brave/urgent), and remedies (exposure/funding/education/regulatory reform). Agreement on function presence reached $\kappa = .77$.

5.4.4 Representation Theory

Following Hall (1997), the study treats representation as construction, supplemented by feminist and postcolonial lenses (Mulvey, 1975; hooks, 1992; Shohat & Stam, 1994). Data were coded metonymic scaling (films made to stand for “Saudi society” or “the Arab world”), authenticity/modernity/feminism labels, gaze/agency cues (who acts; who is quoted as authority), and concessive gender patterning (e.g., women ... but ... / even as ... however ...) flagged by concessive markers within ± 6 tokens of gender terms. The study also tracked who carried evaluative load (film vs. society/institutions) to capture stance-by-proxy. Reliability on representation tags was $\kappa = .72$.

5.5 Collocation and Diachronic Analysis

The study analyzed collocations using Pointwise Mutual Information (PMI), with a minimum frequency threshold of five occurrences for both the node and the collocate. This threshold was adopted to reduce noise and ensure that the identified associations represent recurring discourse patterns rather than isolated lexical coincidences (Baker, 2006; Hunston, 2002). The selected nodes—women, Saudi, censorship, and authenticity—were chosen because they frequently appear in international media discussions of Middle Eastern and Saudi cinema and correspond to recurring interpretive frames related to gender, national identity, cultural legitimacy, and sociopolitical regulation. The analysis therefore examined the leading collocational candidates surrounding these nodes in order to identify concessive or contrastive discourse patterns in the corpus.

Diachronic trends compiled yearly article-level metrics (2017–2024) to evaluate shifts in coverage volume, sentiment, lexical density, and stance profiles. Comparisons between source types (regional versus international) utilized normalized counts and mean values in order to allow meaningful comparison between sub-corpora of different sizes.

5.6 Computational Environment and Reproducibility

All quantitative analysis, collocation statistics, and visualizations were performed in Google Colab (Python 3). Data handling and consolidation utilized pandas/numpy; inter-annotator reliability (Cohen’s κ) was calculated using standard statistical tools; and graphs were created with matplotlib. Random seeds were set for reproducible sampling where applicable, and intermediate outputs (tokenized texts, counts, and figures) were archived to maintain a clear audit trail. Notebooks can be shared on request to facilitate replication.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 Quantitative Overview

The distribution of sentiment is skewed toward positive evaluation. of 63 articles, 35 are clearly positive (55.5%), 20 neutral (31.7%), 4 negative (6.3%), and 4 borderline/mixed, as shown in Figure 1 below. This predominance of praise is unsurprising in review genres, yet the degree of positivity is analytically meaningful: in CDA terms, it suggests a normative horizon within which reviewers evaluate Saudi films against an implicit telos of “arrival” on the global stage. That horizon is indexed by recurrent references to festival circuits, streaming platforms, and co-production infrastructures. The numerical skew thus corroborates the discursive patterning discussed below—visibility, legitimacy, and modernity often trump internal heterogeneity or conflict (Schudson, 2001). Borderline/mixed indicates texts that combine substantial praise and critique without a clear polarity in the overall evaluative trajectory, based on manual verification of the full article.

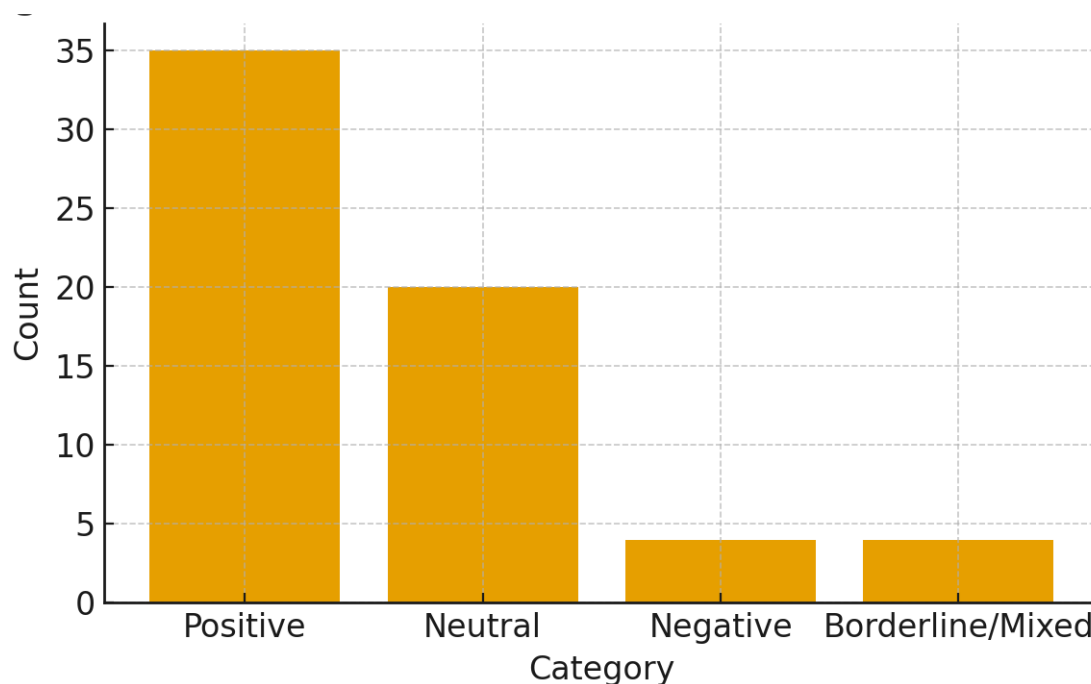


Figure 1. Sentiment Distribution Across All Articles (N=63).

Linguistically, as shown in Table 1, the corpus exhibits high informational and evaluative density. Mean lexical density is 0.608, mean sentence length is 23.5 words, and content-word counts are comparatively high (nouns $\approx$ 148, verbs $\approx$ 82, adjectives $\approx$ 75, adverbs $\approx$ 32). Reviews therefore resemble extended cultural criticism rather than brief entertainment reporting, often moving quickly from plot summary to thematic interpretation and contextualization.

Feature	Mean	Min	Max
Word Count	684.0	48.0	2625.0
Avg. Sentence Length	23.5	12.0	37.7
Lexical Density	0.608	0.474	0.793
Nouns	148.0	7.0	629.0
Verbs	82.0	8.0	306.0
Adjectives	75.0	5.0	338.0
Adverbs	32.0	2.0	130.0
Sentiment Score	0.108	-0.12	0.39

Table 1. Linguistic Summary of All Articles.

6.2 Critical Discourse Analysis: Text, Discursive Practice, and Social Practice

Textually, reviews rely on resources that systematically background agency and launder stance. Passivization (e.g., “is framed,” “was received,” “has been interpreted”) and nominalization (“reform,” “representation,” “censorship,” “modernization,” “liberalization”) compress dynamic, contested processes into abstract entities, detaching decisions, struggles, and power relations from named social actors. This grammatical reification exemplifies what Fairclough (1995) describes as ideology-through-form, wherein linguistic choices naturalize particular readings of social change. In the Saudi context, such abstraction is especially consequential: reforms are rendered as inevitable trajectories rather than nego-

tiated outcomes involving state institutions, cultural producers, religious authorities, market forces, and audiences (van Dijk, 2001; Kraidy, 2016).

The corpus reveals frequent use of evidential expressions that attribute evaluative judgments to external sources rather than to the reviewer directly. Examples include phrases such as “according to critics,” “reportedly,” “it seems,” and “has been read as.” These evidential constructions shift the source of evaluation to institutional actors—such as festival juries, programmers, critics’ collectives, or broader critical communities—thereby allowing reviewers to present evaluative claims while maintaining a degree of discursive distance and apparent neutrality (White, 1997; Reah, 2002). In coverage of Saudi cinema, such evidential references often point to Western or transnational arbiters of cultural value, positioning legitimacy as something conferred through international recognition rather than generated solely within local contexts. This observation aligns with broader scholarship on Saudi media discourse, which shows how international validation is frequently mobilized to authenticate cultural production within narratives of reform and global cultural integration (Al-Rasheed, 2018; Kraidy, 2016).

Pronoun patterns reinforce this alignment. The predominance of “they” over “we” situates the reviewer alongside external evaluative communities rather than local audiences, implicitly affirming the authority of transnational taste cultures (O’Keeffe, 2006; de Valck, 2007). Even when sympathetic, such positioning reproduces a center–periphery dynamic long noted in postcolonial media analysis (Shohat & Stam, 1994; Naficy, 2001). Discursively, more than 80% of the sampled pieces reference Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Sundance, the Red Sea International Film Festival, or major streaming platforms. These references embed Saudi films within infrastructures that confer prestige, framing legitimacy as a function of circulation through elite global nodes (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Iordanova, 2012; Bednarek & Caple, 2017). Saudi policy scholarship similarly notes how festivals and global platforms are leveraged as soft-power instruments aligned with Vision 2030’s cultural diplomacy goals (Al-Rasheed, 2018). In other words, repeated mentions of Cannes/Venice/Berlin or major streamers function as recurring evidentials of value, allowing reviewers to naturalize legitimacy as something conferred by globally recognized gatekeepers.

At the level of social practice, reviews articulate Saudi films to modernization narratives associated with Vision 2030—sometimes explicitly, often as a background assumption. Cinema is positioned as evidence of social opening, gender reform, and generational change. This normalization of a modernization meta-story sits uneasily with critiques of how reform discourse can sanitize complexity, depoliticize dissent, and subsume cultural production under developmentalist teleologies (Kraidy, 2016; Shohat & Stam, 1994). Saudi sociological research cautions that cultural liberalization is uneven, negotiated, and stratified by class, region, and gender—dimensions often flattened in international film discourse (Al-Rasheed, 2018; Le Renard, 2014).

6.3 Appraisal Theory: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation

Across the corpus, Appreciation dominates stance-taking, reflected in the high frequency of evaluative expressions describing cinematic qualities. The dataset contains 3,803 adjective tokens, many of which function as appreciative evaluations of cinematography, pacing, and mise-en-scène. Expressions such as “poetic,” “haunting,” “assured,” and similar aesthetic descriptors recur across reviews, indicating that critics frequently evaluate films through aesthetic description rather than through explicit

ideological judgment. This pattern mirrors findings in media discourse research where Appreciation resources are used to signal cultural value while minimizing overt political positioning (Bednarek, 2006; Bednarek & Caple, 2017).

Judgment appears in approximately one-third of articles, most often when films address gender relations, authority, hypocrisy, or generational conflict. Even then, judgment is frequently displaced onto characters or “society” rather than filmmakers or institutions, exemplifying stance-by-proxy (White, 1997). Affect is comparatively rare: a lexicon-based scan of the corpus finds explicit Affect lexis (e.g., moving, heartbreaking, emotional) in 16 of 63 texts (25.4%) and tends to cluster in festival communications, press releases, and promotional profiles rather than critical reviews, suggesting a professional norm of emotional restraint.

Engagement is notably monoglossic. Assertions such as “clearly,” “undeniably,” and “without question” restrict dialogic space and foreclose alternative readings. Where heteroglossic resources appear, they typically reinforce favored interpretations through concessive structures (“while some may argue..., the film ultimately...”) rather than opening genuine debate. Graduation resources—“increasingly,” “confidently,” “ultimately,” “finally”—construct cinema as a linear path of progress and maturation. Saudi cinema is thus narrativized as moving toward global competitiveness, echoing developmental framings common in policy discourse (Kraidy, 2016).

These appraisal patterns correspond with studies of evaluative language in cultural news, despite traditions in film criticism that valorize ambiguity and interpretive openness (Klinger, 1997; Gabler, 1998; Cotter, 2010). In the Saudi case, however, the preference for closure and progression also resonates with national narratives of reform, reinforcing a sense of historical inevitability.

6.4 Framing: Problem, Cause, Morality, and Remedy

A consistent narrative package appears in the data. Problems: delayed emergence and visibility issues. Causes: political conservatism, censorship, lack of investment. Moral evaluations: innovative, courageous, and pressing movies, particularly regarding women’s independence, social class tension, and generational disputes. Remedies: worldwide exposure, financing, educational initiatives, and regulatory changes—conformity with a contemporary screen-industry framework (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Comparative histories warn that these teleologies simplify particularities and tame unruly aesthetics (Diawara, 1992; Naficy, 2001; Shafik, 2007). Dissenting frames emerge but are not as prominent (Gitlin, 1980; de Valck, 2007). At the level of framing, a remarkably consistent narrative package emerges. Problems are defined as delayed emergence, limited visibility, or underdevelopment. Causes are attributed to political conservatism, censorship, or lack of infrastructure and investment. Moral evaluations celebrate films as innovative, courageous, and socially urgent—particularly when addressing women’s independence, class tension, or generational conflict. Remedies emphasize international exposure, financing, education, and regulatory reform, aligning Saudi cinema with a contemporary screen-industry paradigm (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

Comparative film histories caution that such teleologies risk simplifying local particularities and disciplining unruly aesthetics into legible narratives of progress (Diawara, 1992; Naficy, 2001; Shafik, 2007). While dissenting frames do surface—questioning festival dependency or reformist optimism—

they remain marginal relative to the dominant configuration (Gitlin, 1980; de Valck, 2007).

6.5 Representation: Construction, Gaze, and Authenticity

Representation in the corpus is predominantly constructionist (Hall, 1997). Reviews routinely extend meaning beyond the diegesis, invoking individual films to characterize “Saudi society,” “the Gulf,” or “the Arab world.” Terms such as “feminist,” “authentic,” and “modern” perform boundary work, delineating which narratives are deemed globally legible and worthy. While such framing can challenge stereotypes by foregrounding complexity, it can also reproduce othering through tropes of surprise or exceptionalism (Said, 1978; Shohat & Stam, 1994).

Structural constructivism, particularly around gender, positions women’s stories as crucibles of reform. Feminist media theory raises questions about whose gaze is centered and whose agency is foregrounded (Mulvey, 1975; hooks, 1992). Saudi gender studies underscore that women’s visibility in cinema carries symbolic weight but risks instrumentalization as proof of reform rather than as diverse lived experience (Le Renard, 2014; Al-Rasheed, 2018).

Authenticity emerges as both an emancipatory value and a marketable critical trope in the corpus. Rather than appearing only through the explicit word *authentic*, it is constructed through recurring evaluative descriptions of realism, everyday social life, and restrained cinematic style. For instance, one review observes that a film “grounds its resolution within realistic parameters, lending the story a bittersweet tone,” while another describes the narrative as portraying how “everyday Saudi citizens get by under social constraints.” Elsewhere, critics highlight stylistic restraint, referring to films as “quiet and observational” or emphasizing their focus on ordinary social interactions rather than spectacle. Such evaluative patterns frame minimalist aesthetics, social realism, and intimate coming-of-age narratives as signs of cultural authenticity. These interpretations align with festival expectations and cosmopolitan taste cultures that valorize realism and cultural specificity as markers of artistic legitimacy (Appadurai, 1996; Robertson, 1995; de Valck, 2007). At the same time, scholarship on world cinema and festival reception cautions that such expectations may privilege culturally legible difference and, in some cases, encourage self-exoticizing forms of representation (Berghahn, 2021).

6.6 Thematic Evolution and Reception

Thematically, early coverage concentrates on gender roles, mobility, and domestic constraint. Over time, the focus widens to encompass urban precarity, economic inequality, globalization, and institutional ambivalence. Representational palettes diversify, with binary oppositions (traditional/modern) giving way to more polycentric portrayals. Reception discourse grows increasingly confident; negative evaluations remain rare and tend to target over-explanation for international audiences or reliance on expository symbolism rather than outright failure.

7. Comparison across Years and Source Type

A diachronic reading (2017–2024), see figure 2, shows an upward trajectory in coverage volume and positivity. In 2017–2018, articles are sparse and neutral or cautiously skeptical, treating Saudi cinema as novelty. Coverage increases in 2019–2020, tracking regulatory change and festival launches; brief, descriptive formats predominate. The period 2021–2023 marks a peak in attention and approbation: over

four-fifths of sampled pieces are overtly positive, and films are framed as culturally consequential and globally competitive. In the 2024 slice, fewer articles appear in the sample, but tone remains optimistic and reform-aligned. Short descriptive pieces give way to longer critiques and profiles, consistent with institutionalization (de Valck, 2007; Iordanova, 2012; Bednarek & Caple, 2017).

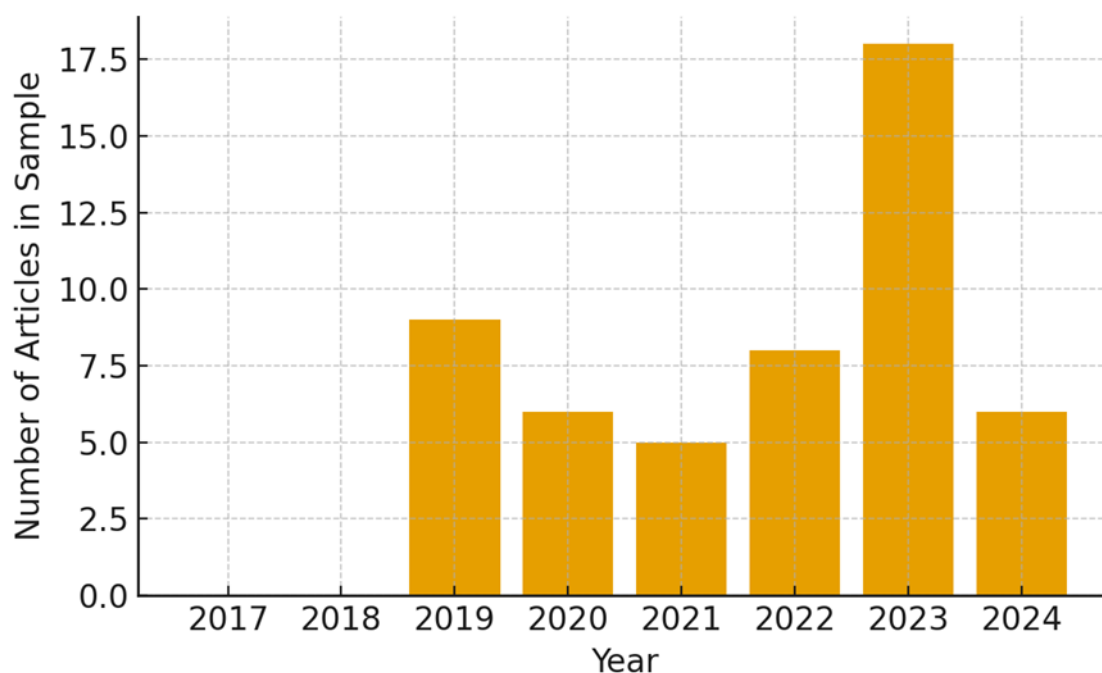


Figure 2. Coverage volume by year (2017–2024) in the sample.

Regional outlets (e.g., Arab News, Khaleej Times, Saudi Gazette, The National, AboutHer.com, and Saudi Jeans) serve Gulf-based or MENA-region audiences and function as intra-regional cultural fora. Approximately three-quarters of these articles (32 of the 42 regional articles; 76.2%) are overtly positive; negative sentiment is virtually absent, and even the neutral pieces conclude on an optimistic note. See figure 2 above. Thematically, they emphasize national pride, state initiatives, and a region-wide cultural renaissance. Linguistically, future-oriented modals and first-person plural deixis are routine; structurally, a celebratory problem–solution arc dominates. From an Appraisal perspective, high Appreciation and strong Graduation in monoglossic voice are typical; from a CDA perspective, this enacts nation-building through ritualized praise (Billig, 1995; Fairclough, 1995; Bednarek, 2006).

International outlets (e.g., Variety, The Guardian, Empire, The Hollywood Reporter, RogerEbert.com, and Time Out), while diverse in editorial orientation and critical style, display broadly comparable patterns in their coverage of Saudi cinema. Roughly one in five pieces introduces critical reservations—on narrative depth, gender representation, or festival tropes—while acknowledging craft. Focalization skews toward technique, auteur vision, and intertextuality; comparisons to Iranian New Wave, Italian neorealism, or contemporary arthouse idioms are frequent. Discourse is lexically and syntactically denser, with specialized terminology. Discursively, articles situate Saudi works within “world cinema,” recognizing and constraining simultaneously by translating through dominant frames (Shohat & Stam, 1994; Naficy, 2001).

In sum, the regional–international split underscores media’s dual role as translator and taste-maker.

Regional discourse consolidates internal identity and affirms policy narratives; international discourse applies external metrics of artistic legitimacy and critique. These poles interact: regional vocabularies of reform and pride circulate outward, while international consecration cycles back as proof of success—yielding a transnational circuit consistent with accounts of mediation by dominant institutions (Shohat & Stam, 1994; de Valck, 2007; Iordanova, 2012).

7.1 Micro-Case Alignment

The corpus-level observation that international outlets often praise Saudi films while relocating critical edge to social context resonates with Almohaimeed’s micro-study of *Wadjda*. There, the English review’s evenly split evaluation largely targets “society” rather than craft, exemplifying stance-by-proxy and the importation of external legitimacy frames; the Saudi review reverses the emphasis, scrutinizing filmic construction—dialogue, plausibility, temporal cues—and assigning selective credit to performances and technical teams. Read together, the case study and the corpus indicate a patterned division of labor: international criticism helps “world-cinema” legibility by embedding films in socio-political narratives, while regional criticism can act as quality control on cinematic technique. Notably, this complicates the generalization that regional coverage skews celebratory: the Saudi review stands as counter-evidence that locally situated criticism may be more exacting on craft even when it shares reformist horizons.

8. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Findings reflect the composition of the sample (English-language articles; festival-heavy coverage), which likely inflates positivity and privileges internationally visible works. Heuristic measures approximate constructs and should be complemented by hand-coding in larger studies and caution should be taken against over-reading grammar as ideology (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). Future work should expand Arab-language corpora, develop bilingual appraisal lexicons, and triangulate with practitioner interviews and audience ethnographies. The corpus is modest (N=63) and English-only, so findings should be treated as indicative of prominent anglophone discourse rather than exhaustive of reception.

Counter-evidence and nuance. While the sample shows regional outlets frequently adopting a promotional tone, prior work demonstrates that regional criticism is not uniformly laudatory. In a dual-review examination of *Wadjda*, the Saudi reviewer presents a distinctly critical evaluation of the craft—questioning dialogue quality, narrative coherence, and temporal consistency—while the Western reviewer shifts the negativity towards the sociocultural context. This discrepancy highlights the influence of outlet, genre, and critic habitus on appraisal and warns against fixing “regional” and “international” as tonal categories.

9. Conclusion

The study shows that reviews do more than describe Saudi films; they help co-produce what “Saudi cinema” means and why it matters. Across 63 articles (2017–2024), coverage is largely positive and repeatedly anchors legitimacy in festivals, global platforms, and reform narratives. Taken together, CDA, Appraisal, Framing, and Representation analyses demonstrate how apparently ‘neutral’ grammar, evaluative patterns, and interpretive packages can both expand visibility and narrow legibility by favoring particular themes and prestige routes. Future studies should expand bilingual corpora and triangulate

review discourse with filmmaker and audience perspectives.

These dynamics produce evident results. Reviews create cultural capital that can provide opportunities (visibility, distribution, funding) but can also limit them by favoring styles and themes tailored for festival circuits. A more robust critical ecosystem would preserve the achievements—visibility and serious artistic focus—while expanding interpretive possibilities: critics could engage in greater heterogloss (recognizing alternative interpretations), editors might commission craft-centered and divergent works, and policymakers could back criticism that is mindful of both local audiences and global juries. Future studies ought to expand bilingual corpora, monitor changes related to policy and festival milestones, and correlate review discourse with interviews of filmmakers and audience responses.

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Appendix 1. Available upon request.

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1aSKB8br2w6BfLQHqfZPx_Oc7JimHltbm/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=110394679026438857006&rtpof=true&sd=true

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