

Personal Brand and the Role of Mohammed bin Salman in Shaping the Modern Political Landscape of Saudi Arabia

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15421/172482>**Didyk Oksana**Ph.D. Student¹, Research Assistant², <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0491-3395>, didykthestrategist@gmail.com¹*H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University (Kharkiv, Ukraine)*²*Institute of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen (Copenhagen, Denmark)*

Abstract

This study aims to critically examine the strategic construction and utilization of Mohammed bin Salman's (MBS) personal brand, analyzing its impact on Saudi Arabia's domestic and international stance, particularly in the framework of Vision 2030. The **relevance** of this research stems from the rising importance of personal branding in political leadership, especially in modern autocracies where leaders like MBS navigate reformist objectives within authoritarian structures. While previous studies have explored various facets of MBS's leadership, the **purpose** of this research uniquely assesses the role of his personal brand in consolidating power, nurturing nationalism, and rebranding Saudi Arabia globally.

Using an innovative combination of branding theories and political science frameworks, the article explores how MBS's image is deliberately crafted for diverse audiences. The analysis covers domestic and international strategies, from media manipulation and historical symbolism to promoting hyper-nationalism and economic diversification under Vision 2030.

Results reveal that MBS's brand substantially aids in consolidating authority within Saudi Arabia, promoting national pride, appealing to youth aspirations, and aligning modernization with traditional values. Despite Western critiques, his brand repositions Saudi Arabia as a major global actor internationally. This dual nature – reformist yet authoritarian, modernizing yet tradition-bound – creates a potent tool shaping both internal governance and external diplomacy.

Among its **conclusions**, the study underscores MBS's personal brand as a crucial force in Saudi Arabia's internal transformation and evolving foreign relations, offering valuable insights into the influence of leadership branding on national modernization efforts.

Keywords: political branding, personal brand, brand strategy, Middle East, Saudi Arabia, authoritarian regime, modernization, nationalism, geopolitics, political landscape

Особистий бренд та роль Мохаммеда бін Салмана у контексті формування сучасного політичного ландшафту Саудівської Аравії

Дідик Оксана*Харківський національний педагогічний університет ім. Г. С. Сковороди (Харків, Україна)**Інститут міжкультурних та регіональних досліджень Копенгагенського Університету (Копенгаген, Данія)*

Анотація

Дослідження має на меті проведення критичного аналізу стратегічного формування та використання особистого бренду Мохаммеда бін Салмана (МБС) і його впливу на внутрішню та міжнародну позицію Саудівської Аравії в рамках програми Vision 2030. **Актуальність** цієї роботи обумовлена зростаючою роллю особистого брендингу в політичному керівстві, особливо в сучасних автократіях, де лідери, як-от МБС, поєднують прагнення до реформ із авторитарними методами управління. Попередні дослідження розглядали різні аспекти керівництва МБС, проте саме цей аналіз унікально оцінює вплив його особистого бренду на консолідацію влади, розвиток націоналізму та ребрендинг Саудівської Аравії на глобальній арені.

Застосовуючи інноваційне поєднання теорій брендингу та політичних наукових підходів, стаття досліджує, як цілеспрямовано формується імідж МБС для різних аудиторій. Аналіз охоплює як внутрішні, так і міжнародні стратегії – від маніпуляцій медіа та використання історичних символів до просування гіпернаціоналізму та економічної диверсифікації, що є частиною Vision 2030. **Результати** свідчать, що бренд МБС значно сприяє зміцненню влади всередині Саудівської Аравії, стимулює національну гордість, відповідає на прагнення молоді та гармонійно поєднує модернізацію з традиційними цінностями. Попри критику з боку Заходу, його імідж сприяє утвердженню Саудівської Аравії як вагомого гравця на світовій арені.

Серед **основних висновків роботи** – визнання особистого бренду МБС як важливого чинника у процесі внутрішньої трансформації Саудівської Аравії та у зміні її зовнішньополітичних відносин. Дослідження надає цінні інсайти щодо впливу особистого брендингу лідера на національні зусилля з модернізації та на роль держави у глобальному контексті.

Ключові слова: політичний брендинг, особистий бренд, брендова стратегія, Близький Схід, Саудівська Аравія, авторитарний режим, модернізація, націоналізм, геополітика, політичний ландшафт

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Introduction.

The emergence of Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) as a key figure in Saudi Arabia's contemporary political landscape represents a significant shift in the kingdom's governance and its global standing. MBS's ascent to power has been marked by bold reforms, ambitious policies, and an assertive international posture, which have drawn significant attention from global media, policymakers, and scholars alike. However, beyond these tangible actions lies the intricate construction of MBS's brand – a curated image central to his influence within and beyond Saudi Arabia. This article explores how this personal brand, more than any other single factor, has significantly shaped perceptions of his leadership and, by extension, the direction of Saudi Arabia's political and economic reforms. The role of the audience in shaping MBS's brand is crucial, as their recognition and acceptance of his desired identity is what ultimately determines the success of his brand. In this paper, by personal brand, we take the definition by Waller, stating that a personal brand is the public representation of an individual's core identity, combining how they present themselves with the value they offer to their target audience. It involves deliberately crafting a desired identity that aligns with one's values and goals while managing the audience's perception of that identity (Waller, 2020, p. 20). Once established, this brand identity can be actively shaped to maintain a positive and impactful image that resonates with the intended audience.

Examining MBS's brand offers a unique perspective on the ongoing changes in Saudi Arabia. Unlike traditional analyses that might emphasize historical context, leadership theory, or the role of charisma, studying MBS's brand allows us to see how modern media strategies, image management, and power projection converge in the digital age. MBS's image as a reformer and modernizer, juxtaposed with his authoritative governance, reveals the dual nature of his brand – one that seeks to appeal to both progressive aspirations and traditional power structures. This duality makes his brand particularly potent in a region where image and perception are crucial in legitimizing authority, especially as Saudi Arabia navigates a path toward greater openness and international recognition.

Furthermore, studying MBS through the lens of personal branding is particularly relevant in an era where global leaders increasingly employ sophisticated public relations tactics to manage their images. MBS's strategic media use, from high-profile interviews to a staged public appearance, has helped him craft a narrative that resonates with domestic and international audiences. This narrative advances his political objectives and positions him as a figure capable of bridging the gap between Saudi Arabia's conservative traditions and the demands of a rapidly changing world. His brand has also played a crucial role in fostering a renewed sense of nationalism in Saudi Arabia, aligning the kingdom's youth with his vision

of modernization and national pride. Understanding this aspect of his leadership provides insights into how modern autocrats use branding to maintain power in an age of mass communication and social media.

The controversies surrounding MBS – including the kingdom's involvement in the Yemen conflict – add complexity to his brand. These incidents have tested his image as a reformer while highlighting the balance he must maintain between domestic pressures and international scrutiny. Simultaneously, his efforts to promote a more open Saudi society and his ambitions for the kingdom's greater integration into the global economy have become central elements of his brand. This blend of assertiveness, openness, and a push for international recognition illustrates the multifaceted nature of his leadership. By analyzing the construction and impact of MBS's personal brand, this article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between image, power, and politics in the 21st century.

In the context of authoritarian states, the personal brands of leaders take on distinct characteristics that reflect the unique challenges and opportunities these leaders face. Modern political science must evolve to incorporate brand analysis techniques when studying these regimes, moving beyond the colonial and stereotypical views that reduce authoritarian leadership to mere tools of repression and coercion. Leaders in the Gulf countries, including Mohammed bin Salman, have demonstrated that personal branding consolidates power and is a critical strategy for uniting society and transforming the national image. By creating a brand that resonates with domestic and international audiences, these leaders can redefine their countries' global standing, attract foreign investment, and foster a sense of national pride.

A strong country brand is crucial in today's interconnected world as it influences everything from diplomatic relations to economic development. For leaders in authoritarian regimes, a well-managed personal and national brand can mitigate the negative perceptions often associated with such governments, allowing them to project a narrative of modernization, stability, and growth. This shift in branding can pave the way for greater international recognition and support, which is essential for achieving long-term strategic goals. By analyzing the personal brands of these leaders, scholars can gain a more nuanced understanding of how power is exercised in contemporary authoritarian states, moving beyond outdated notions that overlook the sophisticated and often subtle methods of influence employed by modern autocrats.

In the article, the following research questions are of primary interest:

1. How has Mohammed bin Salman's personal brand been constructed and maintained, and what strategies have been employed to project this brand domestically and internationally?

2. How does the personal brand of Mohammed bin Salman contribute to the consolidation of power within

Saudi Arabia, particularly in terms of societal cohesion and the promotion of nationalism?

3. *What role does Mohammed bin Salman's personal brand play in reshaping Saudi Arabia's international image, and how does this influence the kingdom's diplomatic and economic relationships?*

4. *How does the controversial nature of Mohammed bin Salman's personal brand, mainly as Western media have critically addressed it, compare with its general perception within Saudi Arabia and its intended image under Vision 2030?*

The subject of this research is the strategic use of personal branding by political leaders in authoritarian states, with a specific focus on Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). The object of the study encompasses the various components and strategies that constitute MBS's personal brand and the subsequent socio-political and international implications of this branding. This research seeks to unravel the mechanisms through which MBS's personal brand has been meticulously constructed and maintained, examining these strategies' broader impact on domestic governance and international diplomacy.

The article aims to critically analyze the construction of MBS's personal brand, explore its implications for Saudi society, and evaluate its influence on the kingdom's global standing. Specifically, the research aims to elucidate how MBS's brand contributes to the consolidation of power within Saudi Arabia by fostering nationalism and societal cohesion and aligning public sentiment with its modernization agenda. Moreover, the study will assess the extent to which this personal brand has been instrumental in reshaping Saudi Arabia's international image, enhancing its diplomatic relations, and attracting foreign investment. These goals underscore the importance of understanding personal branding as a strategic tool in contemporary political leadership, particularly within authoritarian regimes.

To achieve these objectives, the research will employ qualitative content analysis, case studies, and discourse analysis. Qualitative content analysis, introduced by Phillip Mayring (Mayring, 2021), will examine media reports, public speeches, and staged appearances to deconstruct the narrative and visual elements that form MBS's brand. This approach will provide insights into how his brand is communicated to domestic and international audiences. Using the methodology by Laure Paquette (Paquette, 2002, pp. 54-63), the case study method will be employed to offer a detailed examination of MBS's branding efforts, with comparisons to other Gulf leaders where relevant, to identify the unique characteristics of his approach. Discourse analysis (Hamilton et al., 2018, pp. 310-319, 408-414) will further explore the language and rhetoric used by MBS, focusing on how these elements are employed to frame his image and policy initiatives in ways that resonate with different audiences.

Additionally, the study will incorporate insights from interviews with ten experts, with the inspiration of the methodology by A. Bogner, B. Littig, W. Menz (Menz et al., 2009), from leading branding and public relations firms in the Gulf region. These interviews will provide expert perspectives on the communication strategies, image-building techniques, and brand positioning of Mohammed bin Salman. Including these expert insights will be critical in understanding the sophisticated and nuanced methods employed in constructing MBS's personal brand. The research thus aims to contribute to a broader academic understanding of how personal branding functions in authoritarian contexts, challenging traditional views that often reduce such regimes to mere exercises of power and repression. Through this lens, the study will highlight the importance of personal and national branding in consolidating political power and transforming a country's global image, emphasizing the significance of these strategies in the 21st-century geopolitical landscape.

Analysis of previous research and publications.

The article focuses on various academic areas, including the concept social change and modernization, transformation of leadership in modern autocratic regimes in Gulf countries, and the concept of personal brands in politics.

Modernization Science: The Principles and Methods of National Advancement by Chuanqi He (He, 2014) outlines a scientific and systematic general approach to national development, focusing on economic diversification, technological innovation, and governance reform. It emphasizes the importance of integrating modern technologies, advancing social structures, and enhancing global competitiveness to foster sustainable growth. The book advocates for a holistic modernization strategy that addresses political, social, and economic challenges, driving nations toward long-term prosperity and stability. Talking precisely about Saudi Arabia, the article "Vision 2030: Saudi Arabia's Modernization" by Nadiya Azahra Hidayat, Yon Machmudi, and Siti Rohmah Soekarba focuses on how Vision 2030 blends economic diversification with social reforms, balancing modernity with traditional Islamic values. The study emphasizes rapid social changes, such as increased women's participation and economic liberalization, while using modernization theories to analyze the shift in Saudi Arabia's historically conservative society, also questioning whether Saudi society can fully integrate such reforms without significant backlash from conservative factions (Hidayat et al., 2022). The article "Determinants of Patriarchy in The Middle East: Hope for the 2030 Vision in a New Saudi Arabia" examines the factors perpetuating patriarchal structures in the Middle East and explores the potential for gender reforms and social change under Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 (Soekarba, 2019). Among the credible analytic reports, the ones by Pacific Council (Smith & Al Homoud, 2019)

and the AbuSulayman Center for Global Islamic Studies at George Mason University (Hammond, 2021), much attention is given to the religious changes in society and the central aspect is the fundamental nature of the MBS's reforms towards modernization and dealing with Wahhabism.

Many publications on Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the region's social changes focus on narrow, specific aspects like economic diversification or women's rights, often revisiting similar themes. While valuable, these studies leave a research gap in understanding the systemic changes in Saudi Arabia's political structure. This article aims to address that gap by providing an updated analysis focusing on the political system shifts under Vision 2030, offering new insights into the evolving governance landscape.

Critical works on the political innovations introduced by MBS, such as "Vision or Mirage: Saudi Arabia at the Crossroads" (Rundell, 2020) and "MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman" (Hubbard, 2021), emphasize the tension between ambitious modernization goals and the preservation of traditional power structures, particularly in consolidating MBS's personal authority. In contrast, this article focuses specifically on how MBS's personal brand is crafted and leveraged to support these transformations.

Highly resonant books "Behind the Kingdom's Veil: Inside the New Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman" (Koelbl, 2020) and "Blood and Oil: Mohammed Bin Salman's Ruthless Quest for Global Power" (Hope & Scheck, 2020) focus on political intrigue, power dynamics, and the sometimes-controversial methods used by MBS to consolidate control. While these works highlight the strategic maneuvering behind the scenes, this article offers a more measured analysis, concentrating on MBS's personal brand and its role in shaping both domestic governance and international perceptions, without delving into conspiratorial or sensational narratives.

"Leadership in Saudi Arabia: A Multifaceted Phenomenon" examines the complexity of leadership in Saudi Arabia, focusing on the blend of traditional, religious, and modern styles that shape the kingdom's governance. In contrast, this article provides a more focused perspective by analyzing how Mohammed bin Salman's personal brand, specifically under Vision 2030, reshapes both domestic leadership dynamics and Saudi Arabia's international image, offering new insights into contemporary political branding in an autocratic state. There are works examining the effect of appearance of celebrities (Gunter, & Wykes, 2008) and political candidates (Carrión-Yaguana, & Carroll, 2022) that shed light of how the audience positively react to the leaders who are considered more attractive physically. On the contrary, analytical article "Looks Matter, Even in Politics," research reveals that while physical appearance plays a role in political success, candidates ranked as

"more attractive" actually fared quite poorly in their respective elections, challenging the assumption that good looks guarantee electoral victory (Gunn, 2016). Such opposite assumptions encourage further investigation into whether physical appearance similarly influences the perception of non-elective leaders like Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), a figurehead of an autocratic state. Therefore, examining the role of physical attractiveness in shaping MBS's public image can provide insight into how appearance influences leadership perception in non-democratic regimes along with the related public relations solutions.

Results.

Saudi Arabia's modernization, particularly under Vision 2030, is a strategically critical initiative driven by the need to diversify the economy and reduce dependence on oil revenues. Vision 2030 is Saudi Arabia's ambitious blueprint for transforming its economy and society, aiming to reduce the kingdom's dependency on oil, diversify its economy, and develop public service sectors such as health, education, infrastructure, recreation, and tourism. While the initiative represents a bold and necessary step toward modernization, it faces significant challenges that warrant critical scrutiny.

One of the primary concerns is the feasibility of achieving the outlined goals within the set timeline. Vision 2030 aims to reshape an economy and society heavily dependent on oil revenues for decades. The scope of this transformation is vast, requiring not just economic reforms but also cultural and social shifts that take time to achieve in a short period. Critics argue that some targets, particularly those related to economic diversification and job creation in the private sector, may need to be more optimistic given the structural and bureaucratic challenges inherent in the Saudi economy. Another critical aspect is the social impact of Vision 2030, particularly in a society where conservative values are deeply entrenched. The plan's push towards liberalization, including expanding entertainment options, women's rights, and social freedoms, has been met with support and resistance. While these changes are crucial for modernization and aligning with global norms, they risk alienating population segments who may view these shifts as too rapid or conflicting with traditional values. Balancing these societal changes with maintaining social cohesion is a delicate challenge that Vision 2030 must navigate.

Additionally, the financial sustainability of Vision 2030 has been questioned, especially in light of fluctuating oil prices and global economic uncertainties. The success of many of the initiative's projects, such as the ambitious NEOM megacity, depends on substantial foreign investment and sustained economic growth. However, geopolitical tensions and investor skepticism could impede the flow of necessary capital. Moreover, the government's ability to fund these projects while managing the economic transition away from oil poses a significant financial challenge. With global energy

markets shifting, Saudi Arabia recognizes the urgency of developing new economic sectors, such as tourism, technology, and entertainment. The kingdom's Islamic identity plays a vital role in this, not only as a cultural and spiritual foundation but also as a significant economic asset. As the epicenter of the Muslim world, Mecca draws millions of pilgrims annually, generating approximately \$12 billion in revenue. This economic boost is vital as Saudi Arabia seeks to maintain and grow its economy through religious tourism, positioning itself as a global leader beyond its oil wealth. The timing of this modernization is crucial from both a geopolitical perspective and the personal brand of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). Geopolitically, as regional dynamics evolve, Saudi Arabia must adapt to remain relevant and assert its leadership, particularly in the Muslim world. This modernization is not merely about preserving tradition but enhancing the country's economic stability and global influence.

Furthermore, this initiative is closely tied to MBS's personal brand. It represents a new generation of leaders focused on systemic change rather than relying on traditional leadership styles or mere charisma. MBS embodies a younger, more globally connected Saudi population, driving long-term, sustainable reforms. His emphasis on modernization reflects a response to internal demands for economic diversification and an effort to reposition Saudi Arabia as a forward-looking and influential player on the global stage.

Compared to other Gulf states like the UAE, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait, Saudi Arabia's approach to modernization is distinct due to its careful balancing of religious identity and economic innovation. While these other states also navigate the tension between tradition and modernity, their approaches differ significantly due to their socio-political contexts. Saudi Arabia's emphasis on religious identity and economic diversification through religious tourism sets it apart, making its path to modernization both inevitable and strategically innovative.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia's concept of hyper-nationalism further distinguishes its modernization efforts from those of its Gulf neighbors. This *hyper-nationalism*, centered around loyalty to the ruling family, religious identity, and the vision of MBS, reinforces Saudi Arabia's position as the global leader of the Muslim world. Unlike other Gulf states, where nationalism is often linked to economic achievements or global influence, Saudi nationalism under MBS has embraced a more assertive, ideologically driven focus. MBS has actively fostered a sense of national pride through state-controlled narratives that tie Saudi identity closely to his leadership, as well as religious stewardship of the holy sites of Mecca and Medina. Regardless of different aspects of modernization, a reduced focus on religious identity might present unique challenges, particularly in terms of symbolism. The Saudi flag, for instance, prominently

features the Islamic declaration of faith, or *shahada* (the Islamic testimony of faith declaring belief in the oneness of God and the prophethood of Muhammad): "There is no god but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God" (لا إله إلا الله محمد رسول الله). This phrase is a central tenet of Islam, underscoring the country's deep-rooted religious foundations. The presence of the *shahada* on the flag makes an effort to reduce the emphasis on religious identity technically and symbolically complex, as altering the flag would require navigating both national pride and Islamic sensitivities, given that the *shahada* holds profound spiritual significance for Muslims worldwide.

This hyper-nationalism, particularly under MBS, involves efforts to stoke national pride by focusing on Saudi exceptionalism, which serves both to consolidate internal loyalty and to position the kingdom as a distinct leader in the Arab and Muslim world. As noted by Bernard Haykel, MBS has mobilized nationalism to legitimize his reforms, particularly in areas where they conflict with more traditional elements of Saudi society (Haykel, 2023). This blend of economic modernization, religious leadership, and strong nationalist rhetoric shapes Saudi Arabia's unique path, making it crucial to consider both geopolitical factors and MBS's brand in understanding the kingdom's ongoing transformation.

Saudi Arabia's modernization under Vision 2030 differs from other Gulf states like the UAE, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait due to its unique socio-political context and focus on balancing tradition with innovation. While the UAE has rapidly modernized, particularly in cities like Dubai, positioning itself as a global business and tourism hub, Saudi Arabia has been more cautious about opening up its society and economy.

Historically, Saudi Arabia was not seen as a secular tourist (not pilgrimage) destination due to its strict laws, cultural restrictions, and weak international brand. The country's image was shaped by its religious identity, and there was little awareness of its potential as a travel destination. Vision 2030 aims to transform this by developing infrastructure, urban spaces, and tourism, making the kingdom more attractive to global visitors. Projects like NEOM, a futuristic megacity on the Red Sea coast, reflect Saudi Arabia's ambitions to modernize and diversify its economy.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia has traditionally been more passive in cooperating with Western countries in many strategic areas, including the defense industry. However, Vision 2030 marks a shift towards greater engagement and innovation, seeking to elevate Saudi Arabia's role on the global stage. While the kingdom's approach contrasts with the UAE's aggressive pursuit of global influence, it represents a calculated effort to secure economic stability and international relevance through modernization that carefully integrates tradition with progress.

In comparison, Qatar and Oman have taken different paths. Qatar has leveraged its wealth for global influence, particularly in media and sports (Amin et

al., 2024, p. 365). The country focuses on soft power rather than the deeply rooted religious nationalism seen in Saudi Arabia. With its conservative and gradual modernization, Oman prioritizes social harmony and stability (Pappas Funsch, 2015, pp. 67-69). With its relatively open political system, Kuwait has focused on maintaining political stability without the large-scale modernization projects seen in Saudi Arabia. These differences highlight how each Gulf state balances tradition and modernity according to its unique socio-political context and strategic goals.

The following is a detailed examination of the strategies employed by Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) in reshaping the political system of Saudi Arabia. The analysis includes an evaluation of which strategies represent new approaches that diverge from those utilized by previous leaderships, highlighting the innovative aspects of MBS's governance compared to traditional methods in the kingdom:

1. Centralization of Power:

MBS has significantly consolidated power within the royal family, centralizing authority around himself. MBS has strategically utilized his popularity to engage directly with the Saudi population, particularly the youth (Dickey, 2020). This marks a departure from previous leaders, who maintained a more distant relationship with the public and relied heavily on the conservative establishment. By aligning his personal brand with modernization efforts under the already mentioned Vision 2030, MBS has consolidated power and influence in a way that previous rulers could not achieve, gaining broad support for his ambitious reforms.

2. Reduction of Clerical Influence:

MBS has significantly curtailed the influence of Saudi Arabia's religious establishment, reducing its role in governance, a sharp break from the approach of previous Saudi rulers who relied heavily on clerical support for political legitimacy (Dadouch, 2021). His reforms to modernize the kingdom have minimized the clergy's traditional power, allowing MBS to centralize authority under his leadership. This represents a shift from the balance of power that characterized earlier regimes, which relied on the religious establishment to maintain their rule.

3. Economic Reforms:

Through Vision 2030, MBS has aggressively pushed for economic diversification, shifting the kingdom's reliance away from oil dependency. While prior leadership discussed diversification, MBS's approach is more systematic and ambitious, targeting sectors such as tourism, entertainment, and technology. However, these aggressive reforms have raised concerns about the kingdom's economic stability, especially given the potential social and political risks associated with rapid transformation and global market dependencies (Arezki, 2024).

4. Social Reforms:

Implementing social reforms, such as allowing women to drive and join the labor market (Alharbi, 2022, p. 67), and promoting entertainment and cultural activities, marks a significant departure from the past. Social liberalization at this scale was previously unheard of, as Saudi Arabia had long adhered to conservative interpretations of religious law that limited public life for women and restricted entertainment sectors. These reforms, while widely praised, have also faced backlash from conservative factions, highlighting the delicate balance MBS must maintain between modernization and traditional values.

5. Anti-Corruption Campaigns:

MBS launched high-profile anti-corruption campaigns, leading to the detention of high-ranking officials and businessmen. Recently, it announced the law of whistleblowing protection (the protection of individuals, especially employees of corporations, etc., who report on economic wrongdoing they have witnessed) in 2024-issued corresponding law (Saber, 2024). Previous leadership avoided public purges, maintaining stability within the elite.

6. Suppression of Dissent:

Under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), it is widely believed that there has been a marked increase in the targeting of critics and opposition figures, both within Saudi Arabia and abroad, in an effort to suppress dissent. While suppression of political opposition has historically been part of Saudi governance, the methods allegedly employed under MBS appear more assertive and expansive. Amnesty International has reported numerous instances where activists, journalists, and dissidents have been detained, with some facing severe legal consequences. Though these claims have been met with varying degrees of confirmation, the overall perception is that there is a heightened effort to curtail dissent, particularly in high-profile cases that have garnered international attention (Defying Saudi Arabia's Kingdom of Repression, n.d.).

7. Leveraging Technology for Surveillance:

MBS has increasingly turned to advanced surveillance technologies to monitor and control the population, reflecting a broader global trend toward digital governance. The scale and sophistication of surveillance under his leadership, mainly through projects like NEOM and The Line, are unprecedented in Saudi Arabia. The Line, a high-tech city being developed under Vision 2030, has raised concerns about the potential use of personal data for surveillance purposes. Reuters notes that the city will rely heavily on data collection, with individuals possibly asking to "sell" their data for enhanced services (Farouk, 2022). Although Vision 2030 is ongoing and the full extent of these technologies has yet to be analyzed, the potential for mass surveillance through such initiatives suggests a new era of data-driven governance in Saudi Arabia.

8. Control of the Media:

MBS has exerted significant influence over media outlets to shape public perception and maintain control over the narrative. This practice has long been part of Saudi governance. However, this control has intensified under his leadership, particularly with the consolidation of major media organizations under state-aligned entities. According to a BBC report, Saudi authorities have tightened their grip on both domestic and international media, employing censorship, restricting press freedom, and, in some cases, detaining journalists (BBC News, 2023). The government also controls how its image is portrayed abroad, influencing media coverage to present MBS's modernization efforts positively while suppressing reports critical of his policies.

9. Assertive Regional Influence and Foreign Policy:

Under Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), Saudi Arabia has adopted a more assertive and proactive approach in its regional foreign policy, particularly exemplified by the ongoing intervention in Yemen. This shift towards greater militarization marks a significant departure from the kingdom's previous strategies, which were often more restrained and defensive. MBS's approach, driven by a desire to counter Iran's regional influence, has led to deeper involvement in conflicts across the Middle East, notably in Yemen where the Saudi-led coalition has faced criticism for its humanitarian toll. According to Crisis Group, MBS's foreign policy is characterized by both an attempt to consolidate Saudi influence in the region and a readiness to take bolder actions that previous leadership might have avoided (Understanding Saudi Arabia's Recalibrated Foreign Policy, 2023). This aggressive stance has extended beyond Yemen to areas like Lebanon, where Saudi Arabia's diplomatic influence has become more forceful. The decision to engage militarily while aiming to strengthen Saudi Arabia's geopolitical position has come at a significant cost, both financially and in terms of international criticism regarding the humanitarian impact of these conflicts.

10. Strategic Alliances with Non-Western Powers:

Strategic Alliances with Non-Western Powers: Under Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia has increasingly sought to diversify its geopolitical partnerships by building stronger relationships with non-Western powers such as Russia and China. This marks a significant shift from the kingdom's traditional reliance on Western allies like the United States and Europe. By engaging with global powers beyond the West, Saudi Arabia aims to broaden its strategic options, reduce its dependence on Western influence, and assert more independence in its foreign policy. The kingdom's deepening ties with China are evident through increased energy cooperation and strategic investments, with Saudi Arabia playing a pivotal role in China's Belt and Road Initiative. Meanwhile, its growing relationship with Russia, particularly in the energy sector through OPEC+ collaborations, has strengthened Riyadh's geopolitical influence in global oil

markets. According to the German Marshall Fund, Saudi Arabia's recalibration of alliances is part of a broader strategy to position itself as a "global swing state," capable of engaging with multiple centers of power to enhance its regional and global influence (Alliances in a Shifting Global Order: Saudi Arabia, 2023). This rethinking of alliances reflects MBS's desire to navigate the evolving global geopolitical landscape while leveraging Saudi Arabia's energy dominance and strategic location.

These strategies illustrate how MBS is reshaping Saudi Arabia's political landscape, often using unprecedented methods to maintain control, modernize the country, and increase its global influence.

In analyzing the personal brand construction of Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), focus was placed on several vital aspects that collectively shape his public image domestically and internationally. Emphasis was given to his efforts toward modernization, mainly through Vision 2030, which positions him as a progressive leader committed to transforming Saudi Arabia into a modern state. Simultaneously, the projection of the already mentioned hyper-nationalism was explored, highlighting how MBS fosters a strong sense of Saudi identity and sovereignty, which consolidates domestic support. His strategic use of media and public appearances was also examined, showing how carefully crafted communication strategies reinforce his global and local image. Additionally, attention was paid to his leadership style and public engagement, where efforts to appear accessible and relatable, especially to the younger generation, were noted. The duality of his brand, balancing modernization with traditional nationalism, was recognized as a central feature that creates a complex and sometimes contradictory image, contributing to the controversies surrounding his brand.

Before delving into Mohammed bin Salman's (MBS) personal brand and its implications for Saudi Arabia, it is essential to understand the concept of *cobranding or brand alliance* between a politician's personal brand and the policies they introduce. As a term, cobranding comes from product marketing, where two brands ally to introduce a new product or benefit from cooperation via bringing shared brand equity (Cornwell et al., 2023, p. 319). Here, in the case of politicians and policy, *the cooperation of MBS's brand and Vision 2030 is to form the new political landscape of modern Saudi Arabia*. In other words, the relationship between Mohammed bin Salman and Vision 2030 can be seen as cobranding rather than traditional brand sponsorship. In co-branding, two entities – here, MBS's brand and the Vision 2030 initiative – are closely linked to create a unified image that enhances the credibility and appeal of both. MBS's image as a reformist and modernizer is intricately tied to the success of Vision 2030, while the vision relies on his leadership and personal brand to gain legitimacy and public support. This symbiotic relationship strengthens the overall branding strategy, making it a clear case of co-

branding. This strategy involves aligning the politician's identity with specific policies or initiatives, creating a strong association between the leader and their reforms. Such an approach can enhance the credibility and appeal of both the politician and the policy, as the success of one often reflects positively on the other.

However, this case of cobranding strategy has advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, it allows for a more cohesive narrative, where the politician's personal values and goals are directly linked to their policy initiatives. This can build trust and loyalty among supporters, as they see the leader as personally invested in the success of the policies. On the downside, it also means that any failures or controversies related to the policy can directly impact the politician's brand, potentially leading to a loss of credibility or support.

Such a strategy is particularly relevant in the case of MBS and Vision 2030. By closely associating his personal brand with the ambitious reforms of Vision 2030, MBS has positioned himself as the face of Saudi Arabia's modernization efforts. While this has helped to rally support for the initiative, it also means that any setbacks or criticism of Vision 2030 could have significant repercussions for his brand. MBS is one of many political figures who employ such a strategy in modern politics. Still, his approach is uniquely impactful, given the scale and scope of the changes he is pursuing in Saudi Arabia.

In modern global politics, brand sponsorship between a politician's brand and the policies they introduce has become increasingly prevalent. Several leaders have successfully tied their personal image to national initiatives, leveraging their identity to promote and legitimize key reforms and strategies.

Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, has designed his personal brand as a dynamic, decisive leader, closely aligning it with initiatives like "Make in India," "Digital India," and "Swachh Bharat" (Clean India initiative). His reputation as a reformer and strong leader has been instrumental in positioning India as a global economic powerhouse. Modi's global engagements, including speeches at international forums, reinforce his brand, making him a key figure in advancing India's ambitions on the world stage and enhancing its appeal to foreign investors.

Similarly, Xi Jinping, the President of China, has developed a personal brand centered around the "China Dream," which aims for national rejuvenation, economic prosperity, and global leadership. His robust and visionary leadership style is deeply intertwined with major policy strategies like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Xi's brand drives these initiatives and strengthens China's image as a powerful and ambitious nation. The "China Dream" reflects both Xi's ambitions and China's national goals, showcasing how his leadership is essential to the country's branding.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President of Turkey, has built a personal brand characterized by strong leadership,

religious conservatism, and assertive nationalism. His brand is crucial in shaping Turkey's domestic policies and assertive regional and international affairs stance. Erdoğan's emphasis on protecting Turkey's sovereignty and Islamic identity is central to his foreign policy decisions and domestic reforms. His leadership, which often challenges Western norms, positions Turkey as an independent power in the region, with his brand reinforcing the country's national narrative both domestically and globally.

Emmanuel Macron, the President of France, has crafted a personal brand focused on reform, innovation, and France's leadership in Europe and the world. His brand emphasizes modernity, progressive values, and multilateralism. Macron's brand has driven significant domestic reforms, such as changes to the labor market, and has promoted France's leadership in international diplomacy, particularly within the European Union. His image as a young, dynamic leader bridging traditional political divides has been central to enhancing France's global influence.

Mohammed bin Salman's brand as a young reformist leader is closely tied to the ambitions of Vision 2030, similar to how Modi, Xi, Erdoğan, and Macron use their brands to advance their national strategies. In each case, the leader's image is not merely a reflection of their leadership style but a strategic tool to sponsor and promote their country's broader policy objectives and international branding. These leaders shape domestic and global perceptions, enhancing their countries' strategic positioning on the world stage.

One additional dimension of Mohammed bin Salman's (MBS) cobranding strategy involves his deliberate use of the image of his great-grandfather, King Abdulaziz Al Saud, the founder of Saudi Arabia. By recreating iconic photographs, such as the one of Abdulaziz in traditional attire, MBS aligns his modern leadership with the legacy of his revered ancestors. This connection reinforces MBS's image as both a modernizer and a guardian of Saudi traditions, appealing to a wide range of the Saudi population, from youth eager for change to conservative elements who value historical continuity. A similar strategy can be observed in Iran, where Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the political establishment frequently reference Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. By invoking Khomeini's image and ideology, Iranian leaders maintain a connection with the country's revolutionary roots, reinforcing the legitimacy of the current regime. This association allows them to present themselves as protectors of Khomeini's vision while adapting to modern political challenges.

Such cobranding steps are effective because they invoke the authority of a foundational figure, helping current leaders strengthen their legitimacy while introducing new reforms. In MBS's case, by linking his leadership to Abdulaziz, he is able to modernize Saudi Arabia while assuring the public that these changes

are consistent with the kingdom's historical values and legacy.

The decision to focus on the controversy surrounding *Mohammed bin Salman's personal brand* has been driven by the complex task of appealing to four distinct audiences: the conservative elites close to the king, including influential family members and oligarchs; the younger generation seeking social liberalization and a more open society; traditional autocratic states like Egypt and the United Arab Emirates; and liberal republics such as the United States and France. This balancing act has resulted in a brand identity that could be more consistent and present significant long-term challenges.

For instance, conservative elites might view MBS's modernization efforts as too radical, threatening the traditional power structures they aim to preserve. Conversely, the youth might perceive the reforms as insufficient, leading to frustration. Internationally, close ties with autocratic states may bolster MBS's image as a strong leader within those circles but simultaneously alienate liberal Western audiences who emphasize democratic values and human rights.

These opposing demands have already impacted MBS's brand, creating varied perceptions among different audiences. While some see MBS as a visionary reformer, others regard him as an authoritarian whose reforms consolidate power more than bring genuine change. This could undermine the effectiveness of his brand, weakening his political base and limiting his credibility on the global stage.

If the expectations of any one group are not met, the risk of alienation increases, potentially weakening MBS's overall position. However, if successfully navigated, this complex brand management could solidify MBS's legacy as a leader capable of bridging significant divides between tradition and modernity, autocracy and liberalism. Therefore, the focus on the controversy within MBS's brand provides critical insights into the complexities and challenges of modern political leadership in a rapidly evolving global context.

To gain deeper insights into the personal brand of Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), expert interviews were conducted with ten branding professionals – comprising five females and five males – from leading agencies in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries (Qatar, UAE). It is important to note that the opinions expressed by these experts reflect their personal views, not those of the agencies they represent. Due to the subject's sensitivity and the individual nature of their insights, the names of the companies and experts have been withheld. The process of selecting interviewees was particularly challenging, as the complex political landscape in Saudi Arabia and the region made it difficult to find participants willing to discuss MBS's brand. The reluctance to engage in such discussions highlights the intricate and often sensitive nature of branding in a politically charged environment. Despite these challenges, the interviews

provided valuable perspectives on how MBS's brand is perceived domestically and internationally, offering a nuanced understanding of his image in Saudi Arabia's ongoing transformation. The interviews mainly focused on *the crown prince's strategic communication choices and image management domestically and internationally*. Another issue is the comparison of the techniques and strategies used by MBS's PR (public relations).

Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has cultivated a distinct personal style that sets him apart from other Saudi and Gulf leaders in terms of his public image and leadership approach. These elements of MBS's personal style and public image are carefully curated to align with the broader goals of Vision 2030, distinguishing him from other leaders in the region and reinforcing his brand as a dynamic, modernizing force in Saudi Arabia. Here are some key aspects:

1. *Modern and Minimalist Attire*: Unlike many Gulf leaders who often appear in elaborate traditional attire, MBS frequently opts for a more minimalist and modern version of the Saudi conventional dress. His choice of a simple white thobe (a traditional long robe worn by men in many Arab countries), paired with a traditional but often understated agal (headband), reflects a balance between tradition and modernity. This sartorial choice aligns with his image as a leader who respects cultural heritage while embracing modern values. This contrasts leaders like King Salman or other Gulf royals, who may wear more ornate or richly adorned versions of the traditional attire, emphasizing their status and adherence to long-standing traditions.

2. *Western-Inspired Suits*: MBS has been seen in Western-style business suits during international engagements, a relatively rare choice for Saudi leaders. This choice symbolizes his efforts to present himself as a global leader comfortable in Western and Eastern cultural contexts. His appearance in suits during interviews with international media outlets or meetings with Western leaders highlights his intention to align Saudi Arabia more closely with global business norms. Gulf leaders traditionally appear in their national dress even in international settings, which makes MBS's occasional adoption of Western business attire notable and a deliberate statement of his global outlook.

3. *Public Image and Relative Accessibility*: MBS has cultivated an image of being more accessible and relatable to the general public than its predecessors. His appearances at public events, such as the opening of entertainment venues or participation in local cultural festivals, show him interacting directly with citizens in a more informal and connected way. For instance, his attendance at the Formula E races in Diriyah (Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince attends Formula E Race final - in pictures, 2023), where he mingled with international celebrities, showcased a different kind of leadership presence – more in tune with global culture. Previous Saudi leaders and many current Gulf leaders maintain a

more reserved and distant public persona, rarely engaging in public events in such an informal manner. This shift in public engagement style signals MBS's intent to be seen as a leader of the people, aligning with his broader vision of a modern and open Saudi society.

4. *Youthful, Forward-Looking Approach*: MBS is often portrayed with a youthful energy that aligns with his ambitious Vision 2030 plans. His active promotion of sports, entertainment, and technology sectors supports this image, particularly appealing to Saudi Arabia's young population. For example, his involvement in the gaming industry, where he has pushed for developing e-sports in the kingdom, further illustrates his alignment with contemporary youth culture. This contrasts with the more traditional, often conservative image of older Gulf leaders, who may focus more on stability and maintaining the status quo. MBS's youthful approach is seen as a strength and a deliberate branding effort to position Saudi Arabia as a forward-looking nation.

5. *Strategic Use of Media*: MBS has been particularly savvy in using international media to project his brand. His interviews with Western media, such as his appearances on "60 Minutes" or in *The Atlantic*, are used to present him as a reformer and a modernizer. The content and tone of these interviews are usually more candid and direct than those of other Gulf leaders, reflecting his desire to communicate his vision personally and directly to a global audience. This direct media engagement contrasts with the more controlled and less frequent media appearances of other Gulf leaders, who often rely on spokespersons or official statements. MBS's willingness to speak directly to the international press is critical to his personal brand, signaling transparency and a break from the past. Despite criticisms, this approach has been practical in shaping global perceptions of his leadership and reforms. However, many of MBS's answers were labeled as hypocritical and even became memes, but as a tactic, his media strategy deserves to be recognized as more or less successful.

6. *Engagement with Global Business Leaders and Celebrities*: MBS actively engages with global business leaders, celebrities, and sports figures through the Future Investment Initiative and the Saudi Sports for All Federation. His efforts emphasize Saudi Arabia's growing influence in the global economy and sports industry. This active engagement is a shift from the more conservative approaches of previous Saudi leaders, who focused primarily on regional partnerships rather than global business and cultural influencers.

7. *Emphasis on Cultural Modernization*: MBS has driven the modernization of Saudi Arabia's cultural landscape by reintroducing cinemas, promoting cultural festivals, and hosting concerts featuring Western stars like Mariah Carey and BTS. These initiatives are part of a broader effort to diversify the entertainment sector. This marks a significant departure from the past when such cultural events were largely restricted. It reflects MBS's

broader vision for a more open and culturally diverse Saudi Arabia.

8. *Humanitarian and Environmental Initiatives*: MBS has launched significant initiatives like the Saudi Green Initiative and the Middle East Green Initiative, which focus on combating climate change, reducing carbon emissions, and increasing green space in the region. These environmental efforts distinguish MBS's leadership from other Gulf leaders, who have traditionally prioritized economic growth over ecological sustainability.

In addition to his domestic reforms, MBS also played a pivotal role in brokering the exchange of war prisoners between Russia and Ukraine, a diplomatic achievement that earned widespread praise from global leaders, particularly in the UK and US, underscoring Saudi Arabia's growing influence on the international stage. This successful mediation further enhanced MBS's reputation as an important global player in diplomacy.

9. *Focus on Digitalization and Promotion of Technologies*: MBS has been aggressively pushing for Saudi Arabia's digital transformation. He has overseen significant investments in technology and innovation hubs and launched the Digital Government Authority to guide the nation's tech-driven future. This emphasis on digitalization, which he frequently discusses in speeches and interviews, highlights his belief in the transformative power of technology for Saudi Arabia's economy and global standing. This focus on technological achievements contrasts with the slower adoption of such innovations in neighboring Gulf countries, positioning Saudi Arabia as a leader in the region's technological advancement.

10. *Emphasis on Physical Attractiveness*: MBS's official portraits and photographs, particularly those taken by foreign journalists, often emphasize his physical attractiveness, portraying him as a virile and charismatic leader. This aspect of his brand is carefully managed to enhance his appeal, adding a dimension of personal magnetism that complements his leadership image. This focus on physical presentation is more pronounced than in the portrayals of other Gulf leaders, who typically emphasize traditional authority and status over personal attractiveness.

A notable aspect of Mohammed bin Salman's brand is the absence of his wife from the public eye, a stark contrast to the visibility of the spouses of other Gulf leaders. This could be attributed to an extreme desire to protect his private life, ensuring his family remains out of the public spotlight. However, it may also be a deliberate strategic move to cultivate an image of MBS as a potentially desirable man, a tactic reminiscent of PR strategies for rock stars and boy bands, described as variations of pop masculinity. This particular phenomenon is primarily described in the book *Pop Masculinities: The Politics of Gender in Twenty-first Century Popular Music* by Kai Arne Hansen (Hansen, 2022). This approach and rumors about his alleged interest in certain Western singers often circulate even in credible tabloids, such as BBC and

Independent (White, 2023), adding an intriguing layer to his public persona. By keeping his personal life shrouded in mystery, MBS's image as a charismatic and virile leader is further enhanced, potentially increasing his allure on the global stage. This calculated ambiguity differentiates him from other regional leaders and keeps public and media attention focused squarely on him, allowing his personal brand to remain dynamic and compelling.

Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) is a figure of significant complexity, with his leadership and personal brand drawing praise and criticism, particularly in Western media. His Vision 2030 initiative, aimed at modernizing Saudi Arabia's economy and society, is often highlighted as a bold and necessary step. However, his leadership is marked by controversial decisions shaped by a background with minimal consequences for bad behavior. This has led to a reputation for ruthlessness, exemplified by the "Father of the Bullet" nickname ("أبو الرصاصية" Abu Al-Rassasa) he earned in his youth after allegedly sending a bullet to a judge who overruled him (Pelham, 2022). MBS's decision-making style – impulsive and at times ruthless – has enabled him to push through changes that previous leaders could not, such as cutting off Saudi funding to overseas mosques that were breeding grounds for jihadism, a move applauded for enhancing global security.

From the regional perspective, there have been speculations that MBS may be sponsoring Iranian anti-regime media, particularly with concerns raised over UK-based Iranian TV channels potentially linked to Saudi Arabia (Dehghan, 2018). This supposed sponsorship is seen as a part of a broader strategy to counter Iranian influence in the region by supporting opposition movements and dissident voices against the Iranian regime. Such involvement could heighten tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, aligning with MBS's efforts to assert Saudi dominance in regional geopolitics. This tactic might also serve as a way to destabilize the Iranian government by amplifying internal unrest.

Nevertheless, Western media frequently scrutinizes the contradictions in MBS's leadership. While he is seen as a modernizer, implementing progressive reforms like allowing women to drive and opening the entertainment sector, these are often overshadowed by his authoritarian practices, including the crackdown on dissent and the alleged involvement in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. These actions have created a mixed perception of MBS, where his modernizing efforts are viewed alongside concerns about human rights abuses and the aggressive suppression of opposition.

Vision 2030 is subject to significant skepticism, with critics questioning the financial viability of its ambitious projects and the potential for social upheaval as the kingdom undergoes rapid change. The Western media's portrayal of MBS and Saudi Arabia's new direction reflects both admiration for his vision and concern over the methods used to achieve it. The focus remains on the delicate balance

between modernization and authoritarian control, raising questions about the long-term impact of his leadership on Saudi Arabia and its position on the global stage.

Conclusions.

In conclusion, Mohammed bin Salman's personal brand has been carefully constructed and maintained through a combination of strategic modernization efforts, media savvy, and historical associations. Domestically, his brand as a reformist leader, rooted in both cultural tradition and forward-thinking Vision 2030 initiatives, has been projected through various channels, including direct engagement with the public, curated media appearances, and the promotion of iconic projects like NEOM. Internationally, MBS has utilized strategic media outlets, global forums, and symbolic recreations of his ancestral ties, such as those with his great-grandfather King Abdulaziz, to reinforce his brand as a dynamic and transformative leader.

This personal brand has played a significant role in consolidating power within Saudi Arabia. MBS's reforms, particularly in the social and economic spheres, have fostered a sense of national pride, contributing to societal cohesion and the promotion of hyper-nationalism. His emphasis on modernization and the diversification of the economy has helped align his leadership with the aspirations of the younger Saudi population, while simultaneously reinforcing the traditional values of loyalty to the royal family and religious identity. By connecting his personal leadership with the narrative of national renewal, MBS has effectively used his brand to strengthen his authority and promote national unity.

On the international stage, MBS's personal brand has been instrumental in reshaping Saudi Arabia's image, positioning the kingdom as a key player in global economic and political affairs. His efforts to diversify alliances beyond traditional Western partners and foster relationships with non-Western powers like Russia and China demonstrate a shift in Saudi foreign policy that reflects his brand of independent and assertive leadership. Moreover, his role in promoting Saudi Arabia as an attractive destination for foreign investment and tourism aligns with the broader goals of Vision 2030, enhancing the kingdom's diplomatic and economic relationships.

Finally, the controversial nature of MBS's personal brand, particularly as critiqued by Western media, contrasts sharply with its perception within Saudi Arabia. While the Western press often highlights the authoritarian elements of his leadership – such as the suppression of dissent and involvement in international controversies – his domestic image remains largely positive, aligned with the aspirations of a modernizing nation. Vision 2030 has been pivotal in shaping this duality, allowing MBS to present a reformist agenda at home while managing the complexities of his international reputation. The contrast between the external criticism and internal approval underscores the careful management of his personal brand as a tool for both national transformation and global influence.

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