

Shaping Saudi Arabia's National Image Under Vision 2030: An Appraisal Analysis of the Saudi Minister of Tourism's Davos Discourse

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[Doi:10.19044/esj.2026.v22n23p1](https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2026.v22n23p1)

Submitted: 22 July 2026
Accepted: 15 August 2026
Published: 31 August 2026

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Cite As:

Ali Alshammari, F. (2026). *Shaping Saudi Arabia's National Image Under Vision 2030: An Appraisal Analysis of the Saudi Minister of Tourism's Davos Discourse*. European Scientific Journal, ESJ, 22 (23), 1. <https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2026.v22n23p1>

Abstract

This study aims to explore the Saudi Minister of Tourism's discourse on the image of Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030. It examines the panel discussion given at the Saudi House pavilion at the World Economic Forum in Davos, 2025, a 17-minute transcript with 53 evaluative tokens. This investigation is based on Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005) and the Attitude system is investigated, which consists of Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation, and employs a qualitative single-case design in which the transcript is coded for attitudinal resources to explore the construction of a national image in evaluative language for an international audience. The analysis revealed that the three subsystems were fairly balanced, with none dominant, and that Judgement was realised mainly as Social Esteem and largely invoked, while Appreciation focused on the value of the sector rather than its sensory appeal. The Minister uses all three subsystems to show Saudi Arabia as an able and ambitious country and presents Vision 2030 as the frame enabling the sector's growth. The study concludes that the marginality of Judgement reflects the consumer-promotional genre rather than tourism discourse itself, with Judgement becoming central in this political-economic context.

Keywords: Appraisal Theory, Attitude, national image, tourism discourse, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

The language of the brochures, travelogues, and other publicity materials associated with tourism, known as tourism discourse, depicts and represents the destinations in a value-laden and ideologically constructed manner (Jalilifar & Moradi, 2019). It is more than a destination sales business. It has the power to filter the information it highlights and thus to frame it, which can alter foreign publics' perceptions of a country, its image, thoughts, feelings, and judgments about it (Boulding, 1959). This is more obvious when this kind of discourse is not communicated through the traditional promotion system, but rather at a high-level political-economic forum, where an international audience of decision-makers links the destination's promotion to the representation of a national image. According to Boulding (1959), national image can be defined as the overall cognitive, affective, and evaluative framework by which a public views a country (pp. 120–121). He did not regard it as a neutral representation of reality, but as a made-up one. The concept of national image is very much related to nation branding, which Fan (2010, p. 101) defines as "a process of creating, monitoring, evaluating, and managing a nation's image to enhance its reputation among an international audience".

At the level of language, it is manifested by frequent, repeated language choices, and the expression of feelings, opinions, and judgements represents the positions in which a country is presented (Liu et al., 2022). Western coverage of Saudi Arabia has long centred on a narrow set of issues, while the Kingdom has worked to build a new image in line with Vision 2030 through its engagement in major international events (Tahat et al., 2025). The Vision 2030 strategy, which was introduced in 2016, sees tourism as a key pathway for diversifying the economy and for changing the country's perception (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Tourism discourse has received limited attention from research on the language of evaluation, and the work that exists has concentrated on written promotional texts (Jalilifar & Moradi, 2019). The Attitude system has rarely been applied to the study of how a national image is created by means of the tourism discourse, especially when it comes to the intersection point between tourism promotion and political communication, which is the case in this study in Saudi Arabia.

The purpose of this study is to understand the construction of Saudi Arabia's national image through Attitude resources (Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation) in the Minister of Tourism's 2025 Davos panel discussion. The following research question guides this study: In what ways does the use of Attitude resources in the 2025 Davos panel discussion by Saudi Arabia's Minister of Tourism aid in the construction of Saudi Arabia's national image?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Appraisal Theory and Tourism Discourse

Appraisal, a framework within Systemic Functional Linguistics, analyses how speakers express evaluation through Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation (Martin & White, 2005). It has been applied extensively across genres, among them academic, journalistic, and narrative discourse, and this body of work has shown such discourses to be value-laden and ideological rather than neutral. Tourism discourse, by contrast, has received scant attention from research on the language of evaluation (Jalilifar & Moradi, 2019). In tourism texts, research has repeatedly found Appreciation to be the dominant category and Judgement a marginal one. Wu (2018) showed that the Hangzhou and London tourism websites used Appreciation to assess the cities, with hardly any expression of emotion, focusing on the places rather than the people.

Similarly, in their social media analysis of tourism branding in Anhui, Du et al. (2026) identified Appreciation as the dominant component and Affect and Judgement as limited components, and Santosa et al. (2026) identified Appreciation in the online heritage tourism texts, while Affect and Judgement were absent in the texts. Other Appraisal-based studies in the field of tourism promotion focus on Appreciation and Affect (Mocini, 2013). However, as Wu (2018) suggested, the object of evaluation in this instance is place instead of people, and this study asks if this lack is part of tourism discourse or is unique to consumer promotional genres in the context of a place where the purpose is not consumer promotion.

Linguistic work on national image has relied largely on word frequency and collocation rather than on evaluative meaning; Liu et al. (2022), by contrast, used Attitude resources to examine how Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons constructed a national image during COVID-19, with Judgement prominent as they defended China's conduct.

2.2 National Image, Tourism, and Vision 2030

National image is the cognitive and evaluative image of a country, both its own and others (Boulding, 1959) and is closely related to nation branding as a state-led process that shapes the construction towards improving the country's image and soft power (Fan, 2010). The present study operates from a linguistic perspective, viewing it as a construction using evaluative language. Vision 2030, launched in 2016, designates tourism a promising sector for diversifying the economy beyond oil and reshaping the national image (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Alangari (2022) notes that representations of the Kingdom in Western media once relied on stereotypical images of camels, Bedouins, and an unchanging desert, and analyses how the Visit Saudi website translates culture-specific items for international audiences, showing

translators foreignising Saudi traditions and food to grant access to the culture. Alfurayh (2025), examining the linguistic landscape of Vision 2030, found language central to how Saudi Arabia communicates identity and heritage while opening to international tourism. Both approached tourism image construction without Appraisal, and through written text rather than spoken discourse.

Appraisal has been applied to national image in political and diplomatic settings. Liu et al. (2022), mentioned above, is one such example, and Li and Zhu (2020) similarly used Appraisal to examine how Chinese political discourse appraises Self and Others, showing that appraisal resources are used, sometimes implicitly, to construct a "Self versus Other" ideological structure. In the Saudi context, Almushayqih (2022) (unpublished MA thesis, which compares UN speeches of Barack Obama and Saudi Foreign Minister Al-Jubeir) found Judgement realised primarily as Social Esteem.

Western reporting of Saudi Arabia has long centred on a thin set of issues, while the Kingdom has worked to build a new appearance in line with Vision 2030 through its engagement in major international events (Tahat et al., 2025). The review identifies a gap at the confluence of three areas.

These strands have developed separately. Appraisal research on tourism has worked mainly on consumer-promotional texts, where Judgement is marginal; research on national image has worked on diplomatic and media discourse, where Judgement is prominent but tourism plays no part; and research on Saudi Arabia's tourism image has approached it through translation and linguistic landscape rather than evaluative language. Tourism discourse addressed to a political-economic audience sits between them, and to the best of the researcher's knowledge, the Attitude system has not been applied to it in the Saudi case, where tourism carries a national mandate under Vision 2030. The present study aims to examine Attitude resources in the Minister of Tourism's Davos speech.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Analytical Framework

The design of this study is a qualitative single case, appropriate for discourse analysis because it is not a matter of 'counting' the evaluative meanings in the Minister's discourse but of interpreting them (Creswell, 2014). In line with Yin (2014), one case has been selected just because it is critical or revelatory and this case is both; it will enable access to high-level discourse in which Saudi Arabia's national image is produced for an international audience under Vision 2030. The study aims at analytical and not statistical generalisation.

The analytical lens of choice is the Attitude system of Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005), the interpersonal resources available for

speakers to express evaluation. Attitude is defined as a combination of Affect (emotional responses), Judgement (assessments of behaviour and character, Social Esteem and Social Sanction), and Appreciation (evaluation of things). Both inscribed (explicit) and invoked (implied) values can be positive or negative (Martin & White, 2005, pp. 35, 42–56).

Based on Martin's explanation of coupling as the way of combining meanings of system networks (Martin, 2008b, as cited in Liu, 2018), the analysis is based on evaluative coupling, which is the association of an attitudinal value with its ideational target (Liu, 2018). This not only documents what is assessed, but also the entity to which the assessment is linked. The operationalisation as applied to the present study does not go so far as to extend to the reader affiliation, which is Liu's wider concern.

3.2 Data

Data were obtained from the transcript of a panel discussion with Ahmed Al-Khateeb (Saudi Arabia Minister of Tourism) at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos (24 January 2025). The conversation lasted 17 minutes and 55 seconds (2,342 words) in English and was broken into five sections related to moderators' questions. The video is from the official YouTube channel of the Saudi Ministry of Economy and Planning and a transcript was created and manually verified for accuracy. The case was chosen because of the role of the speaker and the fact that Davos is a platform where national image is marketed to the international community through Vision 2030. The session was part of the 'Saudi House' stand, which is the official platform of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at Davos.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The transcript was broken into sentences; where evaluative meaning extended beyond the clause, it was divided into the smallest possible units; greetings, repetitions and fillers were omitted; and full grammatical constructions were preserved for context. The evaluative words in the clause were used as the basis for coding, and borderline cases were settled by the use of co-text. Only clauses which contain an evaluative meaning were coded; for example, clauses with a bare obligation or procedural direction, but lacking an evaluative word, were not coded as Attitude. Modal verbs (should, have to, must, can and may) were not coded as Attitude in their own right. Modality is a grammatical resource distinct from lexicalised attitude on the grammar–lexis cline described by Martin and White (2005, pp. 54–55), and such modals function dialogically as Engagement resources that open dialogic space rather than as attitudinal evaluations (White, 2015). Attitude was therefore coded only from lexical evaluative items: where a modalised clause also contained such an item, that item was coded and the modal itself was not. If a

performative sentence had an evaluative word in it, such as "beauty" in "I invite you to explore the beauty of Saudi Arabia", it was coded; plain ritual performatives were not. If one clause contained multiple evaluative items with multiple targets, each evaluative item was coded separately. Each subsystem item was then counted according to the orientation and mode of realisation and read according to the national image it constructs. Each item was evaluated against its ideational target and a recurrent relation between a value and the same target was analysed with respect to the image that it creates. The coding was checked for consistency by a second coder, also knowledgeable in discourse analysis, who independently coded the 53 Attitude instances. Exact percentage agreement was 88.7% (47 of 53); agreement was strongest for polarity (100%) and the broad Attitude domain (96.2%), while the remaining disagreements concerned borderline distinctions between Affect and Judgement, Appreciation and Judgement, and inscribed versus invoked realisation, and were resolved through discussion.

4. Findings

Following coding and based on Martin and White's (2005) appraisal subsystems, the frequencies of the Affect, Judgement and Appreciation resources were determined.

Table 1: Frequency of Attitude Resources

Type of attitude	Positive	Negative	Total
Affect	11	3	14 (26.4%)
Judgement	19	0	19 (35.8%)
Appreciation	20	0	20 (37.7%)
Total	50	3	53 (100%)

The result of the analysis found 53 cases in the discourse of the Minister, as shown in Table 1. Appreciation was the most common subsystem (20 cases, 37.7%), followed by Judgement (19 cases, 35.8%) and Affect (14 cases, 26.4%). While the most common was Appreciation, the balance of the three subsystems was fairly even, and no one subsystem stood out as dominating the Minister's evaluative discourse. The results of each subsystem are presented in detail as shown in the following sections.

4.1 Appreciation

Table 2: Frequency of Appreciation Resources

Subtype	Count	%	Inscribed	Invoked
Valuation	14	70.0	11	3
Reaction	4	20.0	4	0
Composition	2	10.0	2	0
Total	20	100	17	3

The most common resource is Appreciation (37.7% of the cases, 20 instances). Valuation predominates (14 of 20) and is also followed by Reaction (four) and Composition (two), as seen in Table 2. The Minister primarily evaluates the value of the sector, describing tourism as "a very important industry", "a very promising sector" and "one of Vision 2030's pillars". Reaction is about the destination's pull ("beauty of Saudi Arabia", "beautiful Red Sea"), and Composition is about making the journey "seamless." Almost all Appreciation is inscribed (17 of 20) and positive. The emphasis on valuation over Reaction implies that Saudi Arabia is not so much a picturesque tourist spot as an area of economic value and strategic significance.

4.2 Judgement

Table 3: Frequency of Judgement Resources

Subtype	Count	%	Inscribed	Invoked
Capacity	12	63.2	4	8
Tenacity	5	26.3	2	3
Propriety	2	10.5	1	1
Normality	0	0.0	0	0
Total	19	100	7	12

The second most common resource was judgement with 19 occurrences (35.8%). Table 3 reveals that Capacity (12 of 19) takes the lead, followed by Tenacity (five) and Propriety (two), and none of Normality. The Minister primarily highlights the country's capabilities and accomplishments, particularly regarding the "highest growth among all the G20 countries", a "young" and "well-educated" populace and a "high-tech" workforce. The two examples of Propriety evaluate Saudi hospitality ("very hospitable and very welcoming"), whereas the examples of Tenacity refer to resolve and ambition ("a very ambitious nation", "we should be very competitive"). All Judgement is positive, and most of it is invoked (12/19), which typically comes across in information and statistics rather than in direct statements. The focus on Capacity and Tenacity depicts Saudi Arabia as a competent and ambitious nation, where its people are judged on their ability and ambition and not on their moral standing.

4.3 Affect

Table 4: Frequency of Affect Resources

Subtype	Count	%	Positive	Negative
Inclination	5	35.7	5	0
Satisfaction	3	21.4	3	0
Disinclination	2	14.3	0	2
Happiness	2	14.3	2	0
Security	1	7.1	1	0

Dissatisfaction	1	7.1	0	1
Total	14	100	11	3

With 14 instances, Affect is the least frequent resource (26.4%). Inclination is dominant with five, followed by Satisfaction with three, Disinclination with two, Happiness with two, Security with one and Dissatisfaction with one, as shown in Table 4. Most of Affect conveys the Minister's own desires and reactions, not the nation's: a desire to connect with people ("I enjoy talking to the waiters," "I want to see the concert") and to make the trip as seamless as possible for the visitor ("I want to make the journey seamless"). The three negative cases are all instances of resistance to over-automation ("I don't want a robot to serve me," "I don't want to shop in airports"). The Affect is almost entirely positive (11 of 14) and inscribed. It is also very personal, which makes the communications give the impression of person-to-person contact, which is a very important part of Saudi tourism.

4.4 Invoked Realisation

Across the data, there were more invoked realisations than inscribed, most notably in Judgement (12 of 19). The Minister is more likely to imply than assert capability: growth rates, amounts invested and numbers of visitors are evaluated, and the Saudi's competence is demonstrated rather than asserted.

4.5 Evaluative Coupling

According to Liu (2018), coupling is an added component of the attitudinal value and its ideational target; thus, the analysis not only reflects the evaluation of the value, but also the entity to which the value is coupled. Positive evaluation couples are found consistently across speech and used with a small number of targets. Positive Judgement links with Saudi Arabia and its people, bringing together capability and ambition to the country ("we grew by 70%," "a young, ambitious nation"). Positive Appreciation bonds with the tourism industry ("a very important industry", "a very promising sector") and with Vision 2030, bonding worth to the reform agenda ("one of Vision 2030's pillars"). By repeated coupling of these units, positive value is always attributed to the nation, its sector and its reform programme; in this way, the discourse constructs the national image for Saudi Arabia.

Discussion

The three subsystems are relatively balanced (Appreciation 37.7%, Judgement 35.8%, Affect 26.4%) and none is the dominant one. It is different from the tourism pattern, which is dominated by Appreciation and in which Judgement is only marginal (Du et al., 2026; Wu, 2018). Judgement here is

mostly substantial and Appreciation is Valuation: the Minister is assessing the value of the industry and the ability of the country as opposed to the sensory experience of the place. This provides the answer to the question posed in the review: Is Judgement's marginal role built into the discourse of tourism in general or is it a characteristic of the consumer-promotional genres of discourse? The present case indicates the latter: the discourse is directed at a political-economic audience, not at consumers, and hence it lends credibility to Judgement, as the speaker does not comment on consumer objects, but on institutions and the conduct of a nation.

The Judgement resources are almost exclusively Social Esteem and only two of them are Social Sanction (propriety) and no veracity: Saudi Arabia is judged on its capabilities, not on moral behaviour. This is in line with Almushayqih (2022), who identified esteem-dominant Judgement in Saudi political discourse (albeit diplomatic data), and with Liu et al. (2022), whose analysis of political discourse likewise foregrounded Judgement. In both respects, the Davos speech patterns are in the political rather than the promotional register. The majority of Judgement is called upon (12 out of 19) and competence is shown through figures, not stated. Although the least common, Affect is largely the Minister's own, and his is the voice of a person with commitments, not an institutional voice.

The couplings display the interconnections of these resources and repeatedly link positive assessment to the same targets. The Minister's vocabulary also reflects that of the Vision 2030 document, which lists tourism among its "promising sectors" that are to become "new pillars" of the economy (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p. 43); by using this terminology, he is able to meld his discourse with the state's positioning and present the promotion of tourism as the creation of the national image. He also frames Vision 2030 as the scaffolding that enabled this growth to happen, connecting the sector's growth to the reform agenda ("with Vision 2030 we decided to unlock new sectors... since we have been growing very, very fast"). Taken together, these patterns clarify how the Minister constructs Saudi Arabia's national image for a political-economic audience. Rather than selling scenery, the discourse foregrounds the country's competence and ambition (Judgement) and the strategic worth of the sector (Appreciation: Valuation), while personal Affect lends the account a human, first-person voice. Because these positive evaluations are repeatedly coupled with the same targets — the nation, the tourism sector, and Vision 2030 — the image that emerges is that of an able, ambitious country whose tourism growth is underwritten by a national reform agenda. This is what distinguishes political-economic tourism discourse from consumer-promotional texts: evaluation is directed at institutions and national conduct rather than at the tourist experience.

Conclusion

This study analysed the process that the Saudi Minister of Tourism employed to **construct** Saudi Arabia's national image at the World Economic Forum in Davos by using Attitude resources. The distribution was fairly even (Appreciation 37.7%, Judgement 35.8%, Affect 26.4%). Judgement was high and largely in terms of Social Esteem, that is, the nation was able and aspiring, and was almost invariably made by quotation rather than by bald assertion. Evaluative couplings bonded positive evaluation to the nation and the tourism sector, and presented Vision 2030 as the frame enabling the sector's growth. The study provides three contributions: It extends the idea that Judgement is marginal to the discourse of tourism (Du et al., 2026; Wu, 2018) by demonstrating Judgement's marginality to the consumer-promotional genre rather than to the discourse of tourism itself, and how it becomes the central element within a political-economic context. It adopts evaluative coupling (Liu, 2018) to illustrate how the image is established by consistent targets of positive evaluation. Moreover, to the researcher's knowledge, it is the first use of the Attitude system in the context of the Saudi tourism discourse at a political-economic forum. The study only includes one speech by one speaker at one forum, and only the Attitude system was explored, not Engagement or Graduation. Coupling was used in a restricted way as per Liu (2018); no wider affiliation analysis was used. A further limitation is the interpretive nature of Appraisal coding: certain boundaries — notably Affect versus Judgement and inscribed versus invoked realisation — are inherently fuzzy, and these accounted for the small number of inter-coder disagreements. Comparing forums or speakers or expanding analysis to Engagement and Graduation could be done in future work.

Conflict of Interest: The author reported no conflict of interest.

Data Availability: All data are included in the content of the paper.

Funding Statement: The author did not obtain any funding for this research.

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