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A Roundtrip Mission from Saudi Arabia to Sudan to Protect Humanity amidst the War: A Public Relations Case Study

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Abstract

This case study explored the role of Saudi Arabia in the recent Sudan conflict, specifically how Saudi Arabia's public relations efforts helped shape local and international media coverage of the conflict. The study applied a thematic analysis to examine 60 local and international news articles distributed by the BBC, Reuters, CNN, The New York Times, and Arab News, as well as analyzing individuals' perceptions on the social networking site Twitter (X) about the efforts of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia during the Sudan crisis. Three themes emerged from the analysis—evacuations, humanitarian aid, and mediation processes. The findings revealed that Saudi Arabia successfully shaped media agendas during the Sudan War as local and international news outlets displayed positive coverage and impactful images of Saudi efforts. The study also found that individuals had positive feelings and confidence in the kingdom during the evacuation operations. The study aligns with the assumptions of agenda-setting theory and the value of public relations in shaping public opinion during significant events.

Keywords: Public relations, agenda setting, Sudan war, Saudi Arabia's reputation.

Introduction

The political war between the Sudanese army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Military in Sudan caused a major humanitarian crisis in the Middle East. The clash between the two forces for political gains in mid-April of 2023 caused a tremendous loss of lives and displaced thousands of people. The war led to massive damage to the country's infrastructure and shortages of food, water, fuel, medicine, and medical facilities. Various news media extensively covered the political crisis, as people from different nationalities tried to flee the country (Elbagir et al., 2023; Madowo, 2023a; Goodwin et al., 2023). The United Nations (U.N.) and several countries urgently called for an end to the war, as the situation swiftly deteriorated (U.N., 2023). The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), in particular, was among the first countries to provide assistance and evacuate people stranded amid the conflict as part of its foreign policy (Goodwin et al., 2023; Madowo, 2023a; Abueish, 2023a, 2023b; Saudi Gazette, 2023a, 2023b; Arab News, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; Murphy, 2023).

Therefore, this study aimed to shed light on Saudi Arabia's efforts to mitigate the Sudan conflict from a public relations perspective, rather than focusing on the nature and cause of the war. In particular, it investigated and analyzed communication campaigns' efforts to shape media agendas, media coverage of Saudi efforts, and the perceptions of politicians and governments worldwide, as well as whether such efforts contributed positively to the KSA's reputation. The study also discusses the best public relations practices manifested by Saudi roles during the conflict. This case study may benefit policymakers and public relations practitioners who are engaged in managing and executing communication activities in times of crisis.

Significance of the Study

- This study sheds light on the role of public relations in enhancing reputation and shaping media agendas.
- To the researcher's best knowledge, little or no research has been conducted on the role of KSA humanitarian aid and its relationship to media coverage.

Purpose of the Study

- To examine local and international media coverage of the role of the KSA during the Sudan conflict.
- To explore KSA efforts and their success in generating positive media coverage and impressions among individuals.
- To shed light on public relations best practices manifested during a crisis.

Literature Review

Saudi Arabia's Humanitarian Aid Record

Saudi Arabia is among the leading countries in providing humanitarian aid to low- and middle-income countries. It has provided more than 51 billion US dollars to affected countries and

individuals over the years (GOV.SA, 2023). The country is known as the Kingdom of Humanity, as it provides more than 1% of its national gross income for humanitarian aid and development annually, ranking first among donor countries worldwide. The KSA and its people are known for their support, kindness, and generosity, especially during humanitarian crises (GOV.SA, 2023). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the country provided more than \$7.12 billion in 2021 to people in need. Several Saudi agencies, such as the Saudi Fund for Development, the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center, and the Muslim World League, have been at the forefront of many major crises, helping and assisting displaced people and refugees from several countries (Arab News, 2022; GOV.SA, 2023). Another recent example of KSA efforts was during the earthquake that hit Turkey and Syria in 2023, when the KSA built over 3,000 homes for those affected. The KSA also provided millions of dollars in assistance to both countries via its nationwide campaign “Sahem” (Contribute), which encourages all Saudi residents to participate in helping people in need (Alarabiya, 2023; Nihal, 2023).

According to the Saudi Fund for Development (2024), the KSA has been a prominent contributor to many African countries with developmental projects, infrastructure, schools, agriculture, and water since 1974. In 1982, for instance, the KSA launched the Saudi Well Drilling and Rural Development Program to help many African countries fight the drought crisis and find clean water sources. Since its inception, the program has contributed over \$330 million, with 8,800 water wells serving more than 4.5 million people in 18 African countries (Saudi Fund for Development, 2024).

Furthermore, during the recent Sudan conflict, the KSA used all its resources, including mobilizing Saudi royal vessels and air force fleets to help evacuate people stranded in Sudan (Arab News, 2023a; Saudi Gazette, 2023a, 2023b). As part of its moral, social, and humanitarian responsibilities, the KSA safely evacuated and transported nearly 8,500 people of 110 nationalities from Sudan to the KSA as part of its large-scale evacuation operations, starting on April 24. It also helped other countries to evacuate more than 11,000 people en route to the KSA from their homelands. The KSA received the evacuees with a warm welcome and arranged for their accommodations and all their needs (Saudi Gazette, 2023b). Such contributions gave affected people tremendous relief, comfort, and happiness. As one of the captains who participated in the evacuation process said:

It was an expressive and profound human image, seeing all of their faces shifting from fear and sadness to joy and reassurance when they arrived in the Kingdom after living through the events in Sudan. All of this was mirrored in the happiness of the children, the elderly, and everyone who was welcomed. (Nihal, 2023, para. 7)

Moreover, the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center provided \$100 million in humanitarian aid for people in Sudan via a nationwide fundraising campaign that encouraged all Saudi residents to assist impacted people (Nihal, 2023). Such contributions are not surprising to those who work with the KSA, as the country generously allocates annual resources for people in need, which may attract media coverage, make a positive impression on people worldwide, and help the KSA maintain a positive reputation.

Theoretical Framework

Agenda Setting and Agenda Building

Agenda-setting theory is one of mass communication's best known, most significant and valuable theories (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Coleman et al., 2009). In 1922, Walter Lippmann explained in his book *Public Opinion* that the news media help individuals form their views of the world around them. Fifty years later, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw named this phenomenon agenda setting, and since then, the term has been widely used in many fields, including mass communication, health communication, politics, and business (Coleman et al., 2009). Agenda-setting theory assumes that when the mass media present and cover particular issues more frequently than others, the public perceives those issues to be more critical. It assumes that mass media profoundly impact individuals' perceptions about social and political issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Coleman et al., 2009). Similarly, Mitnick (1980) defined agenda building as "the process by which issues are brought to a formal institutional agenda and transformed into policy intentions" (p. 168). Agenda building examines the players and actors who set mass media agendas (Lang & Lang, 1980). Agenda building means that an actor, such as an individual, group, organization, or country, interacts with the media and conveys certain information to shape media agendas (Ohl et al., 1995). Previous studies have examined the role of various actors in shaping media agendas through various communication tools, such as press releases and news stories, and found that these tactics made remarkable impressions on media agendas (Berger, 2001; Kioussis et al., 2006, 2007; Jain & Winner, 2013).

Therefore, the media significantly shape individuals' perceptions by providing effective messages that include facts, opinions, and stories about current events, largely impacting the public, including governments and policymakers (McCombs & Shaw, 2005). McCombs (1997) described the agenda-setting theory, stating that "Achievement of consensus among the members of a public is the focal point of agenda-setting theory, a social science perspective that attributes significant influence to the news media in the process of achieving community consensus about the most important problems and tasks of the day" (p. 1). This is crucial, as many people, governments, and organizations strongly reacted to the media reports about Sudan and came to a solid consensus that all responsible parties must end the conflict. Various news networks worldwide covered the Sudan conflict extensively, with live reports, images, videos, and stories that showed that the situation had worsened, making it one of the top stories on news networks. As a result of this extensive media coverage, individuals, organizations like the United Nations, and governments from around the world were all involved in trying to mitigate the crisis and end the war (see, for example, Savage et al., 2023; The New York Times [NYT], 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; Goodwin et al., 2023; Ebrahim, 2023; BBC, 2023a, 2023b; Reuters, 2023a, 2023b; Saudi Gazette, 2023a, 2023b; Arab News, 2023a).

The agenda-setting theory has been previously applied in many studies, such as Mazarr's (2006), which examined U.S. foreign policy behaviors during the Iraq War; Christie's (2006), which examined the relationship between White House briefings and media coverage during low

and high public support for the Iraq War; and the study by Wanta and Hu (1993) that found that international news coverage involving intense conflict, weapons and military, terrorism, the U.S., and crime and drugs had the strongest impact. This was evident in many political conflicts and wars, including the Iraq War, the Ukraine–Russia War, and the recent Sudan War, in which local and international media outlets covered these issues extensively with particular agendas (see, for example, Nardelli et al., 2024; Corera, 2023; Pickard et al., 2023). Scholars have also suggested that strategic public relations programs and messaging can shape public and media agendas about objectives, organizations, and countries (Berger, 2001; Kioussis et al., 2006, 2007). In their study examining the role of agenda building and agenda setting in the press releases of 30 countries, Jain and Winner (2013) concluded that the way public relations press releases were written, in terms of tone and language (e.g., positive, neutral, or negative), largely influenced perceptions and media depictions of a particular country. They recommended using positive public relations messages that enhance a country’s reputation to shape media agendas and individuals’ perceptions.

More important is the question of whether the public relations efforts conducted by the KSA shaped media agendas and how the media covered the Sudan War. Such an issue should trigger policymakers and researchers to investigate the role of governments in trying to solve humanitarian catastrophes and how media outlets cover them. Thus, it is imperative to understand how the news media covered the KSA’s efforts, which may contribute positively to its reputation.

Reputation

Reputation has been extensively studied in business. It is defined as stakeholders’ perceptions of a particular organization (Gibson et al., 2006; Eccles et al., 2007). It is further defined as “a perceptual representation of a company’s past actions and future prospects that describe the firm’s overall appeal to all its key constituents when compared to other leading rivals” (Fombrun, 1996, p. 72). Reputation is an organization’s most vital intangible asset (Hall, 1992; Gibson et al., 2006; Helm, 2011). Intangible assets, such as employees’ productivity and dedication, the public’s confidence and trust, the credibility and trustworthiness of management, and public image, can define reputation (Gibson et al., 2006). According to Helm (2011), an organization’s reputation is formed based on stakeholders’ perceptions of its ethical and moral principles. As Helm (2011) states, “Reputation is a social construction that can be based on observations of the consequences of good actions as well as on the observation of the guides used to generate the actions” (p. 4). Hence, an organization should carefully tailor its social responsibility activities based on its size and principal activity to build and protect its reputation (Brammer & Pavelin, 2004). Stakeholders form perceptions about an organization through direct experience and word of mouth, but if this is not possible, indirect experiences, such as news media coverage, can play a vital role (Deephouse, 2000). Media coverage and news stories about a particular organization can profoundly impact its reputation (Eccles et al., 2007). For instance, news stories reported in U.S., U.K., and German media covering incidents and events about British Petroleum (B.P.) between 2003 and 2006 showed that the media could hurt an organization’s reputation (Eccles et al., 2007). Research suggests

that public relations activities and news media coverage are linked to an organization's reputation (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Hutton et al., 2001) and that most stakeholders know about a particular organization through media (Chen & Meindl, 1991; Deephouse, 2000; Schranz & Eisenegger, 2011). Stakeholders, however, need several media exposures concerning a particular issue to form their perceptions (Panico et al., 2014).

Scholars have also suggested that a country's reputation is similar to an organization's reputation, which is a valuable asset that many countries strive to maintain to make a good impression on the public. A country's reputation affects individuals' decisions and perceptions of dealing with that country, such as purchasing merchandise, investing, or traveling there (Passow et al., 2005; Anholt et al., 2006; Gudjonsson, 2005; Nuttavuthisit, 2007). Many countries understand the value public relations can offer in managing reputation through strategic communication activities that help build nation branding (Anholt et al., 2006; Skinner & Kubacki, 2007; Kioussis & Wu, 2008). Agenda-setting theory assumes that public relations programs and activities can profoundly shape media agendas about various issues, including politics, business, and countries (Berger, 2001; Kioussis et al., 2006, 2007; Kioussis & Wu, 2008). Through news stories, press releases, and information, news media help individuals form specific perceptions, opinions, and images about certain countries (see, for instance, Kioussis & Wu, 2008; Wanta et al., 2004). Public relations can use several platforms to communicate about a particular country to international audiences, and news media are among the most effective venues (Jain & Winner, 2013). Consequently, media coverage of a particular issue may help maintain a positive reputation.

Based on the literature review, two research questions were posed:

RQ1: What themes emerged from the media coverage of Saudi roles during the Sudan war?

RQ2: Did Saudi efforts during the Sudan War generate positive local and international media coverage?

Methods

This qualitative study used a case study approach to analyze media coverage of Saudi efforts during the recent Sudanese conflict. Case studies greatly benefit researchers in investigating critical issues and evaluating the communication activities of a particular organization by asking pertinent questions—what, how, and why—to gain in-depth insights (Yin, 2009; Crowe et al., 2011). According to Stacks (2002), a case study is a “historical review of public relations campaigns, the analysis of a situation and how it was handled” (p. 78). Researchers can use several data types to better understand the issue under study (Yin, 2009; Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). In this case study, the researcher incorporated a simple thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) process by searching and analyzing the data and categorizing them into specific themes. A theme is a significant pattern relevant to the research question that emerges from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes mainly rely on the researchers' judgment (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

The researcher analyzed headlines of news articles, texts, and images related to Saudi efforts during the Sudan conflict. The researcher entered “Saudi Arabia evacuation” and “Thanks Saudi Arabia” into Google’s “news” search and collected news articles related to the topic under study. News articles unrelated to Saudi evacuation operations in Sudan were excluded. Articles from prominent international news outlets, such as CNN, BBC, NYT, and Reuters, were included. Local Saudi English news articles from Arab News, the Saudi Gazette, and Al-Arabiya were also included. Other news outlets, such as The National, and The Indian Express, were also included in the analysis. The selected timeframe of the materials included in the analyses was from the beginning of the catastrophe on April 24 through May 31, 2023. The aim was to collect broad media coverage from various news outlets and apply simple data analysis.

The researcher collected 60 articles and read each twice to identify recurrent attitudes toward Saudi Arabia in these articles. All images accompanying the news articles were recorded and analyzed. Images were described by the researcher based on the elements displayed. Additionally, the researcher used a free sentiment analysis software program, Sentiment Viz, to gather data and information across Twitter (X), using the keyword “Saudi Arabia evacuation” to look for contrasts or consistency. The purpose was to obtain a collective picture of the messages related to Saudi evacuation efforts among individuals, news organizations, and governments. Thus, this case study examined how Saudi efforts may have generated positive media coverage that influenced the perception and image of the KSA.

Results

To answer RQ1 regarding themes that emerged from the media coverage of Saudi roles during the Sudan conflict, a comprehensive review of the data collected from various media outlets indicated that Saudi efforts yielded three main themes. The results offered a glance at the overall media coverage of the topic under study.

• Conflicts and the Evacuation Process

Most news articles focused on the evacuation process undertaken by Saudi Arabia, which involved relocating people from the affected areas to Jeddah. The media covered the evacuation process in detail, providing stories about the Saudi efforts to help evacuate stranded people, including their departure and arrival in the KSA. Several news media outlets covered the evacuation process with stories from people who had experienced the conflict and made their way out. For instance, the NYT (2023a) reported the story of a Sudanese student born in the U.K. who felt lucky to board a Saudi ship. Many local and international news media outlets included images and videos of vessels arriving at Saudi ports. Another NYT (2023c) article covered the overwhelming situation in Port Sudan, as thousands of people fled the violence and scrambled to join an evacuation going to the KSA. A BBC article reported the evacuation of diplomats and foreigners from different countries, including the U.S., the U.K., the KSA, France, Germany, and Turkey (Gozzi

& Davies, 2023). Another BBC article reported stories from people who experienced violence and bombings and their relief after boarding a Saudi navy vessel. Many were distressed to have become part of this history and said that such moments would remain forever in their memories (Doucet, 2023). A CNN article described the dire situation in Sudan and the fact that even medical facilities had been targeted during this war. The article also extensively explained the parties and regions involved in the conflict (Elbagir et al., 2023). Another Reuters article described the war's developments and a proposed 72-hour ceasefire agreement between the parties involved as part of U.S. and Saudi efforts to end the war (Abdulaziz & Lewis, 2023).

• Saudi Humanitarian Aid

The second theme that emerged from the analysis was the coverage of Saudi humanitarian aid that the KSA provided to help people in Sudan. For instance, *The National* (Nihal, 2023) reported that a nationwide Saudi campaign on behalf of the Sudanese evacuees was part of its commitment to helping people in need. The campaign encouraged all KSA residents to contribute to these efforts. The campaign, called "Sahem," collected around \$5 million during the first days of the conflict, and the King Salman Humanitarian Aid Relief Center provided aid worth \$100 million to Sudan (Nihal, 2023). Later, the nationwide campaign exceeded \$17 million toward alleviating people's struggles in Sudan. Another CNN article described the pivotal humanitarian roles played by the KSA to help people affected by the conflict, citing a Saudi analyst who said, "The Saudi effort in Sudan was an opportunity to put Saudi's considerable resources in the Red Sea at the international community's disposal" (Ebrahim, 2023, para. 13). Other media outlets, such as CNN, NYT, and Reuters, discussed the issues of food, water, and medical supplies that had been affected by the war and the importance of finding a solution to deliver humanitarian aid to the people of Sudan.

• Mediation to End the War

Another subject that emerged from the data was the mediation process and talks promoted by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates to find proper solutions to the conflict and persuade all parties to reach a political agreement. In addition, many local and international media outlets covered the U.S. and Saudi initiatives that aimed to bring all parties involved to an agreement to stop the suffering of the Sudanese people. For instance, a CNN article titled "Saudi Arabia wants to be a bigger player in the Middle East—this time with diplomacy" emphasized the role the KSA played as a peacemaker with its international and regional partners to find a solution for the Sudan crisis (Ebrahim, 2023). The article cited an official spokesperson for the Saudi embassy in the U.S., who stated, "We will do whatever we can to alleviate this crisis" (Ebrahim, 2023, para. 4). On May 07, 2023, Reuters reported that the U.S. and the KSA continued to urge the involved parties to end the war. The parties

involved in the war were invited to negotiate for an effective ceasefire and humanitarian aid. The initiative aimed to find safe routes for civilians, primarily those affected by the war. The U.S.–Saudi initiative was the first attempt to mitigate people’s suffering in Sudan (Reuters, 2023a, 2023b). The BBC also covered U.S.–Saudi efforts to bring the generals from all parties to Jeddah for a ceasefire. The article underscored the difficulties that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia might encounter and the importance of gaining the confidence of the involved parties to achieve a permanent political solution (BBC, 2023b). However, the article illustrated the complexity of the situation in Sudan and that a single and straightforward solution would be impossible to achieve (BBC, 2023b). The U.S. and the KSA, with regional partners, were in constant contact with all parties involved in the war in their attempts to reach an agreement and stop the war. On April 24, 2023, the U.S. and the KSA successfully persuaded both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) to enter a 72-hour truce deal after intense negotiation and agreement to a ceasefire, which helped countries and international organizations in their evacuation and humanitarian aid efforts (Abdulaziz & Lewis, 2023).

To answer RQ2—whether Saudi efforts during the Sudan War resulted in positive local and international media coverage—news articles and social media were analyzed, including headlines, images, and sentiment analysis on Twitter (X) of individuals’ perceptions of the KSA efforts during the war.

• **Generating Positive News Headlines**

Many prominent news media highlighted Saudi efforts to help evacuate people from impacted areas. Leaders and presidents worldwide thanked Saudi Arabia for its heroic and successful actions. For example, the White House released a statement from the U.S. president addressing the Sudan crisis and thanking the Saudis for their role during the war (The White House, 2023). Furthermore, the analysis of various local and international news media covering the Sudan crisis revealed the positive impression the KSA made during the crisis. Many media headlines referred positively to the KSA as a place of safety, while others reported that leaders and countries applauded the KSA’s efforts. For instance, a NYT headline stated, “Fleeing Sudan, Some Find Saudi Ships ‘a Golden Opportunity’ to Escape” (NYT, 2023a), another NYT headline reported, “Thousands Flee to Sudan’s Main Seaport, Seeking Ships to Safety (NYT, 2023c), and a CNN headline said, “Hundreds of Evacuees Land in Saudi Arabia as Sudan Fighting Enters Third Week” (Mad-owo et al., 2023). Furthermore, leaders from around the world—Japan, France, Germany, the UK, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and others—thanked the KSA for its humanitarian aid and evacuation efforts (See for instance, Arab News, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d, 2023f, 2023g; Indian Express, 2023; Saudi Gazette, 2023c; Saudi Press Agency, 2023). Table 1 lists a range of positive headlines from various media outlets.

Table 1. A few examples of various news media headlines referring to Saudi efforts

News media headlines	Source
“Afghanistan thanks Saudi Arabia for help in Sudan evacuation”	Arab News, (Karokhail, 2023)
“Saudi Arabia ends evacuation operations from Sudan”	Saudi Gazette, 2023a
“Saudi security men greet foreign evacuees in their own languages”	Saudi Gazette, 2023b
Saudi Arabia continues to provide aid in Sudan, as local donations reach \$4.9” “million	.(The National (Nihal, 2023
Sudan evacuations: How Saudi Arabia was prepared for the worst-case scenar-” “io	.(Abueish, (2023b
“Sudanese pin hopes on Jeddah talks between warring factions”	Reuters, 2023b
Saudi-flagged ship evacuates over 1,900 people from conflict-ridden Sudan to” “Jeddah	Al-Arabiya News, 2023
“South Korean nationals arrive in Saudi Arabia after Sudan evacuation”	Arab News, 2023g
“Warring Parties in Sudan to Hold Talks in Saudi Arabia”	(NYT (Wong & Dahir, 2023

• Positive and Powerful Images

Hundreds of images were shared and circulated across both traditional and social media. This has a tremendous impact on individuals, communities, and leaders worldwide. Images of Saudi officers helping evacuate women, children, and the elderly were shared and circulated. Images of vessels full of evacuees, the reception of arrivals at Saudi ports with gifts and flowers, and images of emotional arrivals with smiles of relief (see, for instance, Ebrahim, 2023; Arab News, 2023a; NYT, 2023a; Saudi Gazette, 2023a, 2023b).

• Positive Social Media Sentiment

The analysis revealed that KSA efforts and diplomacy helped generate positive impressions on social media, particularly Twitter (X), among individuals worldwide. The analysis revealed that individuals discussed Saudi Arabia’s evacuation process on social media, often with related topics, including talks in Jeddah, humanitarian aid, flights and vessels, and Saudi ports. The analysis also noted positive sentiments about the KSA evacuation in Sudan, including excitement among people, high confidence in the evacuation process, and gratitude. The analysis, however, showed that few individuals were concerned, anxious, or nervous about the situation in Sudan.

Discussion

Efforts undertaken by the KSA to help in this complicated situation have shown positive reactions from various world leaders. Such efforts may significantly enhance the KSA’s reputation among the populations of many countries and their leaders. Positive media coverage and news stories shared and circulated on major media networks and social media may have helped build

a positive reputation for the KSA. As Eccles et al. (2007) stated, news stories and media coverage can negatively or positively impact any organization. Furthermore, research has suggested that public relations activities and news media coverage may directly influence the reputation of any entity, including countries (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Hutton et al., 2001; Jain & Winner, 2013). This is imperative as the KSA's public relations activities seem to generate massive and positive media coverage of its efforts to help the people of Sudan. This means that the KSA's public relations efforts successfully shaped local and international media agendas by displaying powerful images and stories of Saudi humanitarian aid, mediation efforts, and the evacuation process. Major local and international news outlets, such as the NYT, CNN, Reuters, and Arab News, discussed and covered KSA roles extensively and disseminated powerful images during the Sudan crisis (NYT, 2023a, 2023b; Madowo, 2023a, 2023b; Ebrahim, 2023; Reuters, 2023a).

Previous studies have shown that stakeholders are influenced by news media coverage and narratives that help them form their perceptions about a particular issue (Chen & Meindl, 1991; Deephouse, 2000; Schranz & Eisenegger, 2011). Hence, KSA efforts might have helped build a positive reputation among various individuals and nations. As the agenda-setting theory assumes, news media coverage of a particular issue brings individuals to a consensus, as shown during the Sudan crisis (McCombs, 1997). Furthermore, the analysis of social media, especially Twitter (X), showed that the KSA was able to generate positive sentiment among X users. The data show that the public appreciated the humanitarian aid and felt relieved to learn that people stuck in the middle of the conflict were being evacuated. The study also showed that most local and international news agencies covered humanitarian aid, conflict situations, war developments, evacuation processes, and aid provided by various parties, including the KSA. The emergence and dissemination of powerful and influential images in local and international news outlets, such as CNN, the NYT, and Reuters, of Saudi vessels arriving at ports, aircraft filled with evacuees, and Saudi soldiers helping and welcoming arrivals with flowers were another successful strategy that may have had a tremendous impact on various stakeholders. Keib et al. (2018) advised that public relations practitioners should use effective images when communicating with stakeholders, especially on social media. Effective and emotional images draw people's attention to the content. Thus, communicators should motivate individuals to click on the content after drawing their attention (Keib et al., 2018). Images also evoke positive or negative emotions that trigger individuals to take action. Therefore, public relations practitioners and communicators should use images in all communications, including social media, websites, and emails. Keib et al. (2018) found that most social media news stories integrate images and graphics that induce emotions and behaviors. Thus, the KSA demonstrated its best public relations practices by accompanying positive stories about its efforts with powerful images that may have evoked emotions and behaviors. Such a strategy led many people in the KSA to rush out to support the people of Sudan during the national donation campaign Sahem, generating more than \$17 million (Sahem, 2024).

Interestingly, the data analysis in this study revealed that BBC headlines, unlike those of other media outlets, did not mention the KSA directly or credit it for its role, in contrast with the NYT, CNN, Reuters, Arab News, Saudi Gazette, and Alarabiya, which provided fair and balanced coverage of KSA efforts. Few BBC articles mentioned KSA roles within the body of the article. It is noteworthy that BBC headlines covered news about the evacuation efforts of other countries, such as the U.S., the U.K., India, Nigeria, and Ghana, during the Sudan War. This warrants further investigation into the practice of journalism in some media outlets, such as the BBC, which is perceived to adhere to the highest journalism practices, to understand why it did not cover the Saudi roles as extensively as other news outlets. A quick look at the BBC website, Saudi Arabia – BBC News, shows that most headlines concerning KSA affairs are written in negative tones. Media organizations should adhere to basic journalistic ethics that encourage journalists to be transparent, honest, accurate, objective, and fair, and to abide by high standards when reporting local and global news and events (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014).

Limitations

This study used a case study to conduct a thematic analysis of local and international news outlets and social media sentiment. The findings uncovered only general themes of the news articles collected in this study. Further studies might integrate a quantitative content analysis to get more information and details about the topic under study and perhaps conduct an online survey to ascertain individuals' perceptions of such issues. Another limitation is that the study did not examine the KSA's reputation after the Sudan crisis. Further studies could measure the KSA's reputation over time and provide more insights into the topic under study.

Conclusion

The study examined the role of the KSA during the Sudan war. Public relations strategies can help shape public and media agendas and generate positive media coverage and strong impressions among stakeholders. The integration of powerful images and compelling stories of evacuation, humanitarian aid, and mediation processes during the conflict has helped the KSA to have positive media coverage in both local and international outlets. Hence, the KSA's efforts to render aid to civilians and help promote a peaceful outcome to the Sudan conflict may have greatly enhanced its positive reputation.

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